LEARNing Landscapes

Journal

Towards New Futures of Child and Youth Development: Critical and Sustainable Approaches to Wellbeing in Complex Times

learn

Comments to the Editor: lynn.butlerkisber@mcgill.ca

Table of Contents

Spring 2024, Vol. 17, No. 1 (Issue 28)

Statement of Purpose

LEARNing Landscapes[TM] 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, researchers, administrators, and other educators to reflect upon and develop innovative possibilities within their own practices.

Review Board (Vol. 17)

Editorial

This past year, I have had the privilege of being on sabbatical, a once-in-every-seven-year opportunity to divest from the daily duties of university life to pursue projects and interests for professional development. It has been a rich and productive 12 months. In Spring 2023, with my sabbatical on the horizon, I decided that it would be a perfect moment to invite guest editors to produce our 28th issue of *LEARNing Landscapes*. This allowed me to participate in the background and has provided new voices for our constituency. As you will see, it was a good move.

Bronwen Low is an Associate Professor in the Department of Integrated Studies in Education and Jessica Ruglis is an Associate Professor in the Department of Educational Counselling and Psychology, both in the Faculty of Education at McGill. Bronwen's research interests include the implications of popular youth culture for curriculum theory, literacy studies, and pedagogy; community-media projects and pedagogies; translanguaging and the multilingual Montreal hip-hop scene; and the pedagogical implications of the lifestories of Montrealers who have survived genocide and other human rights violations. Jessica's work centers on participatory, critical race/ethnic, social justice, feminist, and inclusive approaches to research and teaching in the areas of public education, public health, justice, and youth development. Together they have made a wonderful guest editorial team for this important and timely issue. I congratulate them and thank them heartily for their excellent work.

I must take this opportunity to thank Michael Canuel, CEO of LEARN Quebec, who has steadfastly supported *LEARNing Landscapes* since its inception in 2007 and continues to provide the OJS platform and staff support to publish our open-access, peer-reviewed, and free online journal. It has been a pleasure to work with Eve Krakow, our new copy editor who took over from David Mitchell after the 2023 issue. She didn't miss a beat and, like David, has worked diligently and extremely effectively behind the scenes to maintain the quality of the journal. Last, but certainly not least, kudos and gratitude go to Lea Rackley, a recent PhD graduate from the Department of Integrated Studies in Education who took on the role of assistant guest editor and seamlessly managed the myriad of important details to keep the process moving from submission to publication.

I wish you good reading/viewing.

LBK

This issue of LEARNing Landscapes looks "Towards new futures of youth development: Critical and sustainable approaches to youth wellbeing in complex times." Since we launched the call for proposals, these times now also include concurrent global genocides and wars. In response, we have watched movements of young people on campuses across the world protesting as a way of claiming the new futures they want to see: embodied enactments of critical and sustainable approaches, praxes and pedagogies of youth wellbeing—and education—in complex times. Whether we look towards young

people in the United States who have become policy advocates and student activists in the face of mass school shootings, racism as a public health issue, and restrictions for gender-diverse children and reproductive rights; or to university students engaging in popular forms of education, free libraries, collective and abolitionist approaches to care, and resource sharing within the encampment movement, drawing on long histories of transnational liberation movements, young people are engaging in powerful forms of policy advocacy that ask to see, for example, where budgets and investments are being spent and made. Divestment from arms and guns everywhere is a material way to save young peoples' lives. To draw new lines in old sand, youth are engaging with their world in ways that reflect the different worlds that we all will be required to live in, through the one in which they will be finding their ways and selves.

Cases of structural violence against the conditions of life threaten youths' ability as individuals, communities, and collective societies to flourish and stay alive. Young people increasingly live in a world of economic and housing precarity, generalized and increasing environmental hazards and disasters, food insecurity, climate and war refugees, the lasting effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, emerging health issues associated with climate change, and chronic stress. There are rising rates of depression, anxiety, and a sense of purposelessness. Each of these crises change educational systems: new students in new places, school closures and heat-related illnesses for children whose school buildings cannot cope with increasing and protracted heat. These also force young people to ask different questions about what they want and what they *can* do differently, and what they need from adults to support them in getting there. We are also reminded that teachers are a driving force of the working economy, and the same crises that befall students are shaping the lives of teachers and their families. As such, we are invited to dissolve the divide between students and teachers.

Patterns in educational pathways of and towards completion are altering, along with how school is delivered and organized, and youth face new challenges with transitions to employment, training, and further education. Young people are increasingly squeezed between a world that is not their own, one that they don't want to see, and unchanging expectations for what their life ought to be. Through this are questions about what education *is* needed to help youth get to where they want to go. We are invited to think also about education as something broader, something everywhere, and not just located within schools and schooling.

These spatiotemporal demands can be asymmetric to self-determination. What needs to be rethought, redone, reshaped, retimescaped? How might we soften and open up expectations about time to completion, or the age or developmental stage to which post-secondary attendance is tethered? Furthermore, how are we in turn being softened and opened by the present circumstances? How are the parameters of what counts as meaning and purpose, or a life well lived, changing or expanding? What does it mean to be well in the world that we have inherited, created, and continue to make?

Theories and approaches to supporting healthy development of young people might do more to root in decolonial, feminist, queer, critical disability, intersectional, and intersectoral frames to advance structural ways of re-envisioning learning. These ways must account for the reality that a) education is changing, b) the needs of educators and the lives of educators are changing, c) the relationship of

educational degrees to occupational pathways is also changing, and d) housing is education, food availability is education, health is education. The articles in this issue seek to ask questions of and about youth wellbeing and offer transformative ways to rethink how we *do* youth wellbeing—in the lives of young people, families, communities, and teachers.

Papers engage with how to support the flourishing of young people, and how we might conceive of *and* practice (enact) youth wellbeing, what **Noah Asher Golden** describes as a "reframing" of the topic. For **Ramona Elke**, crisis reframes what we consider the problems in education to be, and she notes that youth distress points to new ways of learning. In this way, articles in the collection write against the grain of normative youth development models. They draw upon sociocultural, critical, asset-based, community-led, participatory, and other socially transformative theories and frameworks. They are informed by critical race theory, feminist affect theory, queer theory, and Indigenous epistemologies. Papers also explore dimensions of what thinking about youth wellbeing means as a critical, embodied praxis and pedagogies for the people who work with young people. The articles draw upon a wide range of concepts for challenging and revisioning youth wellbeing, including **Cory Legassic**'s exploration of "collective care," **Melissa Morris**' notion of "compassionate pedagogies," and **Kate McCabe**'s "ecological interdependence" in which we enter the "wild fray of life."

Themes and Throughlines

Our call attracted contributions from a wide range of fields and disciplines, writing genres, and authorial (overlapping) positionalities, including educational and health researchers, poets and visual artists, community organizers and educators. Contributors to this issue also include youth artists, poets and photographers, and community-based practitioners and scholars. There were some strong common threads across contributions.

A significant number feature arts-based research, including via arts methods (e.g., Photovoice, poetry) and form (e.g., Métissage, autoethnography). They also argue for the value that the arts and cultural production (including spoken word and music-making) can have in programs supporting youth in and out of school. This emphasis speaks to the vital role that *LEARNing* Landscapes has played as a home for arts and narrative inquiry, as well as the growing recognition across fields, including public health, that the arts can contribute to our wellbeing as learners, researchers, educators, and people more generally. In a connected thread, many of the pieces theorize from and through stories and counterstories, representing the importance of narrative to identity and meaning-making.

Indigenous epistemologies and teachings are another important throughline in the collection, as Indigenous and Canadian scholars and educators challenge and seek to change colonial ways of doing and thinking about wellbeing and learning in relation to Land, ancestors, and each other. This attention to Indigenous knowledge is both an acknowledgment of and attempt to redress historical harm and ignorance, and speaks to states of crisis, including climate, mental, and geo-political, that colonial modes of being have produced.

A global crisis shaping many papers in the issue is the COVID-19 pandemic, whose impacts on young people's schooling continue to be felt, but which also opened some promising possibilities for doing school and work differently. Crises of health, and family tragedy, are also prompts for some of the most self-reflexive and moving articles in this issue. We see an integration of Black feminist, queer, and decolonial theories as intellectual throughlines forward.

Finally, many of the articles seem driven by a need to also research differently. These include the art-based theme already mentioned, but also the many participatory and community-based studies. And many of the pieces are dialogues between collaborators, a recognition that in this important work, we require each other.

Introduction to the Articles in this Special Issue

This special issue showcases a range of approaches to youth wellbeing, from primarily conceptual explorations to empirical studies grounded in formal and informal sites of education, mentorship, and care.

Pieces which are primarily conceptual include those by Elke, McCabe, and Morris, offering new frameworks and visions of pedagogies for wellbeing. Elke's article, "The Kids Are Alright: Changing Perceptions for a New Wellbeing," is a Métissage weaving together poetry, stories, and Indigenous Knowledges. It urges us to learn from youths' expressions of distress in times of crisis, understanding these expressions as wisdom about the causes of the crisis itself rather than just symptoms of it. Through stories of community healing, Elke helps us imagine education that creates wellbeing. Through a hermeneutic inquiry, in a piece entitled "Come, I Will Walk With You," McCabe invites us to walk in relation to questions around wellness, ecological interdependence, pedagogy, and human/more-than-human belongings that are enlivened by a cancer diagnosis. This pushes these questions into "the wild fray of life," practicing pedagogies that ask what it means to live well in the irresolvable present with youth. Morris offers an autoethnographic exploration, "Reflexive Inquiry's Impact on Mindful Teaching for Student Wellbeing." Through storytelling, Morris explores trauma-informed pedagogy through reflexive praxis, and asks how teachers might develop compassionate pedagogies that are sensitive and responsive to students' experiences of trauma by learning through and reflecting upon trauma sensitivity through their own experiences.

Another primarily conceptual contribution, set within the realm of higher education, is Legassic's "Towards a Theory of Collective Care as Pedagogy in Higher Education." Legassic's framework for collective care as pedagogy in higher education walks through feminist theories of affect toward pedagogies for building affective solidarity. He grounds this conceptual work in the realities of teaching in higher education (and specifically an alternative college or CEGEP program in Quebec) during times of crisis, times that call for deeper understandings of our interdependencies and need for care. Another study of an alternative approach to education is Golden's research on the Conexiónes alternative school program in San Sebastien, California. "Reframing Youth Wellbeing Through Community-Engaged Learning" examines the implications of Conexiónes for youth wellbeing through one student's experience, attending to its community art collaborations in which youth "(re)fram[e] who they have been, who they are now, and who they can collectively become." In turn, Golden invites us to reframe school with students' wellbeing at the center.

Frances Moore and **Peter Gouzouasis** return us to the beginnings of our journeys in formal education, in "An Early Childhood Educator's Learning Story in the Time of COVID." Through autoethnography and a/r/tographic inquiry, they use vibrant narratives to explore the creativity necessary for teaching through the COVID-19 pandemic. Weaving art-based methods in the early childhood classroom with unprecedented teaching conditions, these narratives embody a/r/t/ography as a living practice, exploring its possibilities for pedagogical invention. Also working to revitalize ECE, **Monica McGlynn-Stewart**, **Nicola Maguire**, **Lori Budge**, **Ana-Luisa Sales**, and **Elise Patterson** ask, "How does land-based learning and the mentorship of Indigenous pedagogies change urban early childcare?" Reporting on a study of the work of 20 educators in ten childcare centers, in "Learning From Indigenous Perspectives: Wellbeing in the Early Years," the team examines what happens when Canadian children's earliest experiences in school center Indigenous perspectives and land-based learning. These lasting implications stretch far ahead of us. Also drawing upon Indigenous epistemologies, **Alyssa Mayer**, in "Attuning to Children's Layered Life-Making Through Relational Learning and Assessment," explores the "life-making" practices of Grade 4 children, centering them as knowledge holders. Through storytelling and a humble inquiry alongside Indigenous pedagogies and relational curriculum, she questions curriculum and assessment from the angle of the goals of life-making ("What does it mean to showcase knowledge?"). Mayer argues that children's own knowledges and gifts should shape the schools around them, rather than the other way around. Similarly focused on the lives of children, **Matthew Yanko** explores the importance of playground relationships, in "Maintaining Playground Relationships Through Music During a Pandemic: An Action Research Inquiry." The author examines the pedagogies within youths' maintenance of relationships through music activities and play during the pandemic. Learning from youths' determination to revive peer connections during distressing times, Yanko asks how play and music nurture the students' relational instincts toward their collective wellbeing.

Given the growing recognition of the importance of holistic approaches to wellbeing, it should not surprise that three of the contributions feature physical and/or health education and support. Two of the papers are based in K–12 education. In "School Sport for All: An Inclusive Developmental Framework to Improve Participation," **Lauren Sulz** and **Douglas Gleddie** reimagine a child-centered and wellbeing-centered framework for school athletics, placing comprehensive school health and whole-child education within the aims of school sports programs. **Jennifer Gruno** and **Sandra Gibbons** use the action research methodology "Photovoice" to empower students to share their experiences in nature throughout an outdoor physical education unit. "Nature-Based Physical Activity in Pictures: A Photovoice Unit in (and Beyond) Physical and Health Education" showcases youth photo-and-caption stories of learning survival and life skills such as starting a fire or tying a proper knot and learning yoga together. In this way, the authors highlight the sense of connection students expressed—to themselves, to each other, and to nature—reframing the focus of physical education toward community and belonging. The third paper on this topic, "Seeking Care: Youth's Counterstories Within the Context of Mental Health," is set in the context of mental health care systems. **Jinny Menon**, **Michelle Lavoie**, **Vera Caine**, **Margot Jackson**, and **Holly Symonds-Brown** share counterstories as "touchstones of strength and wellbeing" for youth navigating the racialized and hetero- and cis-normative assumptions of mental health care systems. Through these counterstories, the youth Menon and colleagues work with imagine futures for themselves and fill the institutional gaps in our health care systems with their voices, agency, and calls for better

care. **Mary Frances Buckley-Marudas** and her team (**Rosalinda Godinez**, **Karmel Abutaleb**, **Gray Cooper**, **Margaret Rahill**, **Drew Retherford**, **Sarah Schwab**, **Taylor Zepp**, and **Adam Voight**) return us to a high school setting, in "Why Teachers Integrate YPAR in their Teaching: Cultivating Youth Wellbeing, Student Voice, and Social Justice." This article reflects on Youth Participatory Action Research from the perspective of high school educators who have integrated it into their classrooms. By exploring the teachers' motivations for using YPAR, they urge us to consider how these motivations impact the success of the projects and enhance everyday praxis, shedding light on "how teachers make room for young people as decision-makers and leaders."

Similarly committed to social justice informed approaches to youth wellbeing, our three remaining articles all explore innovative community-based initiatives supporting socially marginalized young people. In "Safe Spaces and Critical Places: Youth Programming and Community Support," **Alexandra Arraiz Matute** and **Emmanuel Tabi** go through Critical Race Theory (CRT) and the narratives of youth to analyze the importance of after-school programming in promoting the wellbeing of Latinx and Black youth in Toronto. They argue for the critical pedagogies of these spaces as a "vital bridge" for youth, helping them realize their own transformative potentials. "Reimagining Educational Success: Lessons on Support, Wellbeing, and Trust from Community-Grounded Research with Black Families and Gender-Diverse Youth" is grounded in a dialogue between two community-based researchers, **Tanya Matthews** and **Jayne Malenfant**, working in support of low-income Black families/youth and gender-diverse homeless youth in Tio'tia:ke/Montréal. It calls for trust-building and community leadership to support youth navigating unwelcoming institutions, and highlights the importance of relational approaches to research. A dialogue between collaborators, "Making With Place: Community Artists Theorizing Change" by **Charlotte Lombardo** and **Phyllis Novak** explores the potential of community arts for worldbuilding, creating new practices of imagination and repair. Through a place-based public art project that engaged QT/BIPOC (Queer, Trans, Black, Indigenous, People of Color)-identifying young people as artist-researchers in a participatory process, Lombardo and Novak follow queerings of place toward new theories of social change.

Finally, our special issue includes three commentaries, two in the form of dialogues and one featuring Chalet Kent's *Que du Love* (Only Love) art exhibit held at the Maison de la Culture Côte-des-Neiges in Montreal in 2023, including photos and poetry. The first dialogue takes place between Cree singer-songwriter **Siibii Petawabano** and artist-educator and researcher **Melissa-Ann Ledo**, entitled "I Would Not Have Made That Leap: Art as the Vehicle to Tell Your Story, Connect and Build Relationships." In this piece, they discuss the development and significance of the Cree School Board's Mik^w Chiyâm secondary school program that Melissa co-founded and Siibii experienced first as a student and now as an artist-in-residence. The second dialogue, between **Karl-André St-Victor**, Executive Director of Chalet Kent, and **Jessica Ruglis**, issue co-editor, is entitled "Airglow: Young People and Wellbeing."

We also include pieces from the *Que du Love* exhibition, which was led by photographer **Amelia Segrera** and Chalet Kent staff, multimedia director **Marilia Beltrame**, interviewer and writer **Fabiana Diaz**, and curator Karl André St-Victor. The five original photographs featured in this issue were taken on 35 mm

film by Amelia Segrera, and each features a young person accompanied by their words about love, which are excerpts taken from their interviews: Loki, Von, Kiara, Gonz, and Lilya. We also include three poems, in French, from student Rania Guerasse, exploring some of the visceral and spiritual intensities of love and heartbreak. For more on the project, see: https://www.instagram.com/qedulovemtl/.

Together, these commentaries give voice to the thoughts, passions, and poetics of front-line youth workers and youth themselves, complementing other forms of inquiry into approaches to youth and wellbeing in complex times.

Acknowledgment

BL & JR

Lynn Butler-Kisber (B.Ed., M.Ed., McGill; Ed.D. 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 the recipient of the 2022 Faculty of Education, Distinguished Teaching award, is past Chair (2021–23) of the Elliot Eisner Special Interest Group at the American Educational Research Association, and the McGill representative (2021–25) on the Advisory Board for English Education to the Ministry of Education of Quebec. Her teaching and research include qualitative research methodologies; leadership; multiliteracies; and professional development. She is particularly interested in arts-based methodologies, more specifically in visual inquiry (collage, photo/film, and visual narratives) and poetic inquiry on which she has written and presented extensively. She focuses on issues of marginalization, equity, and social justice. She is currently working on an edited book for Brill with Janet Richards (University of Southern Florida) and Ron Chenail (Nova Southeastern University) on constructivist collaborative strategies for teaching and learning qualitative research. Her most recent book (2023) is *Narrative inquiry of displacement: Stories of challenge, change, and resilience* (Routledge) with Kelly Clark/Keefe (University of Vermont) and Maggi Savin-Baden (University of Worcester, UK). She is founding (2007) and continuing Editor of *LEARNing Landscapes,* an online, open access, peer-reviewed journal that integrates theory and practice, encourages multimodal submissions and the inclusion of a variety of voices. Current projects include the NEXTschool Initiative and the Climigrant (climate migration) Project. She has done a range of international research and development projects in Dominican Republic, China, Indonesia, Trinidad and Tobago, Turks and Caicos Islands, and in the UK and USA.

Bronwen Low (PhD) is an Associate Professor in the Department of Integrated Studies in Education at McGill. As a community-based researcher and collaborator (including as a board member for the Montreal-based non-profit Avenues), her work supports young people underserved and harmed by traditional schooling models and practices. She has expertise in multi-sectoral partnerships, as well as in community arts and wellbeing, popular poetics and hip-hop education, community music, and youth culture and literacy. Current studies include youth transitions from alternative schools, algorithmic imaginings on #BookTok, and speculative literacy in video game creation. She is working to start a new recording arts high school with Studio4MTL.

Jessica Ruglis (PhD, MPH, MAT) is an Associate Professor in the Department of Educational and Counselling Psychology at McGill University, and an interdisciplinary, community-based participatory researcher, educator, artist, mother, and scholar advocate. Her academic, policy and teaching work focuses on the intersections of health, education, human development, (in)justice and equity: in particular, understanding education as a social determinant of health. She serves on the Board of Directors for Chalet Kent (2017–present), where scholarly efforts in recent years have centered on long-term community collaborations and partnerships for the development of two new community organizations to serve young adults, including the Uptown Institute.

"I Would Not Have Made That Leap": Art as the Vehicle to Tell Your Story, Connect, and Build Relationships

Melissa-Ann Pereira Ledo and Siibii Petawabano

Abstract

Our commentary includes an introduction to, and conversation sparked by, the Cree School Board's Mik^w Chiyâm, a secondary school program that engages in an artist-in-residence model. This is a dialogue between Melissa-Ann Pereira Ledo, settler queer educator/researcher/artist, and Siibii Petawabano, one of the first students who was part of the pilot program in the First Nation community of Mistissini in 2015. In 2021, after making "the leap" to become a professional artist-musician, Siibii returned to the program as one of the artists in residency themselves.

Mik^w Chiyâm

According to the Cree School Board website (n.d.), Mik^w Chiyâm is:

> designed to increase students' interest and attachment to school by providing an alternative space for creative learning. Students are introduced to a variety of artists and will explore themes such as storytelling, expressing personal and collective voice, and spreading personal messages on a larger scale to create effective and meaningful artistic productions.

Alongside two Quebec Cree School Board leaders, as well as Cree community members, students, and leaders, Melissa and two other non-Indigenous artist-educators were invited to co-create this program in alignment with the Québec Education Program and ensure culture relevance. As three non-Indigenous artist-educators, it was imperative that we were *invited* to do this work by the community, and that we did not seek out this work ourselves. At first, we were asked to do this work independently, but we insisted on co-creating the program with community members, staff, and the students that would be part of the program. We approached the work with the ethical framework outlined in Rachel Thorne's (2019) article, "Teaching Through the Four Rs of Indigenous Education," that follows the work of two renowned Indigenous scholars, Verna J. Kirkness and Ray Barnhardt: "The Four Rs—Respect, Relevance, Reciprocity, and Responsibility" (2001). This work helps educators wishing to take action to decolonize their teaching practice. Thorne (2019) further explains these as: 1) Respect First Nations cultural integrity; 2) Provide education that is relevant to First Nations perspectives and experience; 3) Foster reciprocal relationships; and 4) Demonstrate responsibility through participation.

To extend our introduction to this program, we turn to the Advisory Board on English Education (ABEE) brief presented to the Minister of Education, Recreation and Sports of Quebec entitled *Indigenous Education: Walking on Both Sides of the River* (2017). In Section 2 they proposed that:

> Indigenous students would be better served by a more flexible education process and there are examples of innovative ideas that incorporate content and methodology more appropriate to the students' talents and interests. One such idea is an arts-based program developed in the Cree School Board . . . . In a recent evening of exhibition and performance, these talents were clearly in evidence and students' grades and perseverance in school have improved in tandem. (p. 9)

A sign of its success is that Mikᵂ Chiyâm is now part of all Eeyou communities in Northern Quebec. According to Francine Cunningham (2019), one of many artists who were invited to complete multi residencies over the years, students in this program claim the Mikᵂ Chiyâm room as their own "because as they often said, we were a family and this group was our home. During my time teaching the students, we discussed making art around issues that were important to them" (p. 50).

Something happened here. *What was it?* What circumstances were in place that allowed students to feel at home and share their stories/voices? These curiosities lead Siibii and Melissa to take a step back and get curious as to the means and impact of the program, beyond its formal objectives. The dialogue below is shaped from our longer discussion.

Dialogue

Melissa: *How did you become involved in the program?*

Siibii: I met David [Hodges, Music Producer] when he was coming through on his speaking tour that ended up being a mobile production tour and that in itself was a taste of what "organized art programming" was like. And I already knew that I liked music, but I didn't see myself as a singer until I met David and I heard myself in the recording and I was like, okay, "that's, that's like… there's something I can do." That following year my teacher created a Glee club prior to even finding out about Mikᵂ Chiyâm. And I was its only member for most of the year. Then we got wind that you guys were coming and you were looking for a school to put up for the pilot year. So at that point Cassandra said, "We should put on a show to showcase the talent that is in Mistissini so that when the organizers get here, they will know that we want this program and that there are plenty of people that want to participate and support it." It was so cute because we spent weeks prior inviting people to come [and participate in the showcase]. And I'm blown away that this actually happened, but we got shy kids to come and sing a song. And not only sing a song, but do a little tiny choreography with the song and, now when I think about, I'm like, I can't believe we got, without even Mikᵂ Chiyâm being there and the years and reputation of Mikᵂ Chiyâm, we got kids to do that, you know?

Fig. 1: Talent showcase

Melissa: *What did you find compelling about this opportunity?*

Siibii: I just really wanted to be able to access art programming that was comprehensive, that was challenging or at least, that actually built my skills.

Melissa: *When you say skills, you mean technical art skills?*

Siibii: Yeah, exactly! Anything that allowed me to be able to express myself creatively, because otherwise it's just like, outside of this math class, you just have French, English, science, whatever. And you know,

I liked those courses too, but you have no real space for creativity. So I wanted that. So when the art program was accepting applications, not only was I encouraged to apply but I really wanted to [apply] on my own because I just wanted access to art materials, art spaces, and actually be taught technical skills that I could take with me.

Melissa: *What do you feel like you learned from the program, beyond the technical skills piece?*

Siibii: I definitely think for me the biggest thing was seeing that people could make a life for themselves on their art—choosing the path of an artist or choosing the path of a career artist—that I don't think that I fully believed in for myself right away. It showed me that there are people that can do it, that it is possible to live on your art, that it is possible to pursue your life work as an artist and that could be your career. That is what I walked away with. And I'm really grateful for that because if I didn't have that belief, I would not have made the leap when I did, even though it was years after. Yeah. I would not have made that leap.

Melissa: *How have you grown from your experience?*

Siibii: It's really cool because then I went on to do a residency a few years after graduating... I went on to do my own residencies, and I was using the same skills that I was taught in Mikʷ Chiyâm to teach in my residencies. Those were full circle moments to be like, "Melanie [Garcia, Collage Artist] taught me transfers" [packing tape transfers are a technique where toner based or laser print images or text are transferred from printed paper onto clear packing tape for use in various art projects] and that was my favorite activity to do with the kids, even, just the little printer transfers, the little packing tape transfers, and collage, that was also something that we did. Do you know when I went on residency *with* Melanie?! My biggest real-world application in a professional setting is in the contract work that I do now with youth. [So it taught me] not only observing the artists and learning the technical skills, it developed my facilitation skills, it developed my, I'd say speech, public speaking, and my comfort connecting with youth. That was my biggest takeaway of real-world applications that I use now, because I'm [now] an independent contractor for [youth] facilitation.

Fig. 2: Melanie Garcia's residency, with Siibii as a student

Melissa: *How do you feel art functioned as a means for developing relationships in the program?*

Siibii: I think that was the best. Okay, I can speak to this as a student, and as an artist in residence: Your freedom is the content that you bring to that medium. It gives you the opportunity to not only tell something about yourself to the residency artist and connect with them in that way, but it gives the residency artist an opportunity to connect with you and learn about who you are as a person using their medium. So that is beautiful, actually. Like, I remember when I did my story-telling residency in Mistissini: I would never have had the opportunity to just sit with a room full of kids and have every single one of them tell me a story that they experienced in their life, and I wouldn't had the opportunity to share with them as well, you know? Yeah, that was really cool. I already know my

experience as a rez kid, but it was so cool to hear their experiences and be like, I know what you're talking about, like, you're talking about spooky stuff that you experience in the bush, you know? That's really cool. Some of them were my relatives, you know? And again, I probably would never even have connected with them because they're just distant relatives, for whatever reason. But in that classroom, I was there, I was their teacher, and it was a space for them to share what it is that they chose to share. That was really cool.

Melissa: I love that. Art became a conduit for relationship building!

Melissa: *Why do you think youth working directly with artists is important?*

Siibii: I think what's really cool is a lot of artists have their own personal—and you know, of course it's important to have the vetting process—but a lot of artists have their own personal beliefs around politics, around social justice and just, those kinds of topics. And what I think is really nice, or what I really appreciated about the residency artists that I had, was that they encouraged me to speak on my beliefs and opinions, and through art. Voicing those thoughts, and not only for myself but other folks. I remember for the first-ever residency with Chris [Robertson], who was a printmaker, and Jamie [Bradbury, a painter], we had a project making print posters. And there was someone who made up made a poster [about] being silenced around sexual assault, and then there was somebody else who used a quote that talked about the harm that is done by extraction resource extraction. And, like, you ask a 13-year-old or 14-year-old, if they give a F**k about resource extraction, you just assume the answer is no. But we were encouraged to voice those messages. Yeah, I think that that is a really great thing.

Because here's another thing, too: When you're a teacher in school, you're told not to share those things and not to push your personal opinions, or whatever. But as an artist, you have more freedom around it, I'd say, or what I experienced, at least. So, there was a little more freedom around it. I don't know if you're going to use this or not but, [to put it] in context, [in] the history of our government agreements within my nation, there is a history of silencing youth voices, because youth, though they were used as the justification for why we were signing these agreements, a lot of youth opposed them. So in things like AGA [Annual General Assembly of the Grand Council of the Crees (Eeyou Istchee) and/or Annual General Assembly of the Cree Nation Government], they would be asked, when youth would try to go and speak up for their beliefs, they would be purposefully silenced or ignored. So you have that history in your community, in your nation, so why should you, as a youth, care if no one's going to listen to you, right? So in these spaces [Mikᵂ Chiyâm], we were not only encouraged to share those opinions, but that was the whole point was for us, to be able to share the things that we felt or the stories that we needed to tell. And I really think that we weren't going to get that kind of encouragement in the school [outside the program] especially.

The poster project was the culmination of all the techniques that the students learned during their time with visiting artist Chris Robertson. They were able to work as a group and use a combination of processes or focus on exploring one technique as long as they were able to produce at least ten prints. The idea of replication is central to the process of printmaking as it's a way to share an image and an idea with as many people as possible. The central theme for this project rested in the answer to the question, "What would you change or not have change in the community?" As young artists the students are finding their voice in the world, as future leaders and contributors of their community, through art they have the ability to voice their opinion with a wider audience. A work of art can always exist beyond the artist to inform anyone whom it comes in contact with. The hope is that through art an artist can make the world a better place.

Fig. 3: Poster project during Chris Robertson and Jamie Bradbury's residency

Melissa: *What kind of role do you think this program played in the lives of those involved?*

Siibii: Even if art wasn't your thing, it's still a good exercise to practice things that are outside of your comfort zone and learn. Because that was ultimately what it was, each residency is different. In the whole three years that I was in these classes, I never had the same medium, and that forced me to learn new things all the time. It forced me to be comfortable with change, which is a skill that you absolutely need to teach people. I think it also played a part in the [lives of people who] didn't pursue art because, again, it opened the door of being uncomfortable and then learning to go through it. I also think it was a safe space for people who weren't even in the program.

Melissa: *How did the program shape your wellbeing?*

Siibii: I think it really was my safe space in high school. I was going through a lot. I was going through my queer identity stuff; I was dealing with surviving assault within my family. I was dealing with intergenerational trauma. My family was dealing with substance issues. I was dealing with substance issues, and I was also dealing with homelessness. So it was just like I was in a really hard place. And I think, just like a lot of kids in the rez are just going through a lot. So to have this space, to have the space that valued my voice, that gave me all the tools that I needed to express whatever it was that I wanted to express, I think it was incredibly invaluable. There was nothing that I could think about during that period of time that compared, because, I don't think there was any other space like that for me, at least I didn't feel that I had any other space other than Mikᵂ Chiyâm. Which is why even though my attendance was so low [at school], I barely ever missed Mikᵂ Chiyâm. I think art, inherently, and art spaces, inherently can empower us. I don't know if I would have had the motivation to continue going to school. Especially because the [Mikᵂ Chiyâm] requirement was a certain percentage of attendance, right. And I know that I didn't meet that attendance. If Mikᵂ Chiyâm would have been taken away from me because I wasn't meeting that requirement, I would have lost motivation to do it at all and what ended up happening was, I went and I graduated! That's why it's incredibly important to be flexible on policy, especially when you're working with human beings.

Fig. 4: Residency Two, Year One

Melissa: *What role does art play in your wellbeing now?*

Siibii: I definitely use art as a means to connect with myself now. I use art as a means of living, because it's a career. Not only as a professional singer-songwriter, but also as somebody who teaches art. I think that it allows me to connect with myself, because it allows me to connect with the skills that I was taught as a young person and the skills that I'm learning now. It has a role to play in my mental health now, because when I am in a place of being stuck or a place of burnout, or I'm going to say ADHD burnout, I have art to hold me and hold space for whatever it is I'm going through. Especially in music, I use art as a way to tell my stories that I otherwise would not be sharing publicly like this. In my new upcoming album, I'm talking about the grief I experience from the loss of some of the people that I loved. I also talk about witnessing my parents and the struggles that they went through and that they kind of put on each other. I never would tell these stories publicly without art. It's important for me to let other people know [my story] because otherwise, I'm keeping it inside. There's no real other situation for me to be explaining these pieces. I think it's important for other people to hear it. Not only to understand what you're going through as an artist and as a person, but also to give other people the opportunity to connect to your story or the messages that you're putting out there, I think that's what art is beautiful for—being able to do that. You can connect with people across the world over issues that touch so many sands through art.

A good example I can think of is when people who are oppressed . . . create to show the vibrancy of who they are, to show their resilience. I know resilience shouldn't be the word, but it is the word. To show . . . their voices, their outcries, pain that they're suffering, the oppression that they're experiencing. And to also show and identify who are their oppressors. I think that art is incredibly important for that, because it shows that you as a human are experiencing what you were experiencing. It's important for other people to hear that and connect with that and see *you* in it, and also it opens people's eyes to acknowledging that these realities exist. When you see art from and you see [for example] Palestinian art, that's them expressing their joy, their grief, their anger, their oppression, their vibrancy, their resilience, and their will. I think that that's incredibly important for us to witness as people who are not actively part of experiencing what they're experiencing. It's important for us to see and hear their stories, and listen to their music. If we didn't do that, and if they didn't create art, then we wouldn't know it was happening. You need art. You need art to share those stories.
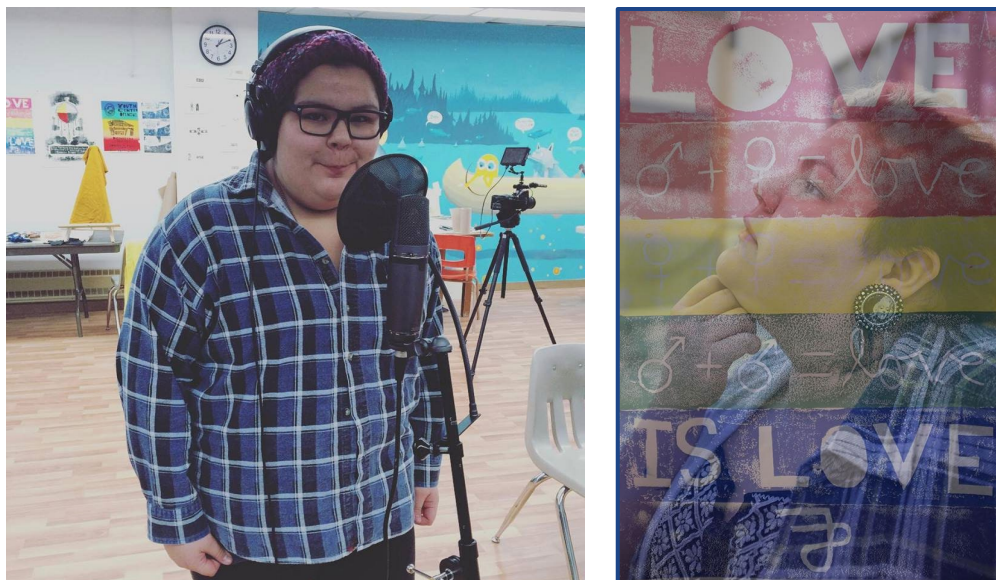
Fig. 5: Siibii Petawabano, 2015

Fig. 6: Siibii Petawabano, 2024

Note

For a taste of Siibii's artistry and voice, check out their work at https://siibiimusic.com.

References

Advisory Board on English Education (March 2017). *Indigenous education: Walking on both sides of the river. Brief presented to the Minister of Education, Recreation and Sports.* https://www.education.gouv.qc.ca/fileadmin/site_web/documents/autres/organismes/17-00091_CELA_Autochtones_ENG_web.pdf

Cree School Board (n.d.). *Mik^w Chiyâm Program.* Retrieved May 20, 2024, from https://eeyoueducation.ca/youth/students/mikw-chiyam-program

Cunningham, F. (2019). Mik^w Chiyam Arts: Innovative highschool program strengthens connections with community, family and nature. *Alternatives Journal, 44*(1), 49+. link.gale.com/apps/doc/A626504575/AONE?u=anon~653d43d2&sid=googleScholar&xid=32c05c20

Thorne, R (2019). *Teaching through the four Rs of Indigenous education.* Classroom Practice, Learning Bird. https://learningbird.com/teaching-through-the-four-rs-of-indigenous-education/
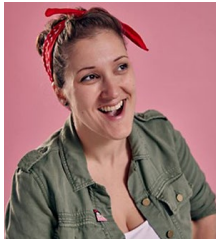
Melissa-Ann Pereira Ledo (she/her/they) is of Azorean settler background, is a proud queer mother, and is an educator/artist/researcher. She has held various roles, including Arts Consultant for the EMSB, co-founder of inPath, course lecturer at Concordia and McGill universities, and a consultant for Equitas. Melissa-Ann is a PhD student at McGill University and her research explores the transformative power of Queer Teaching Artists, with a focus on how to support marginalized youth. Beyond academia, she is a visual artist, and the project manager for exChange, an initiative fostering dialogue within Montreal's English-speaking 2SLGBTQIA+ communities.
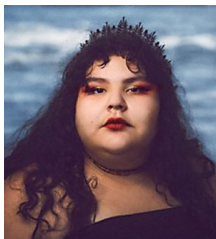
Siibii Petawabano is an award-winning Cree queer, non-binary, Indigenous pop singer/songwriter with over 300,000 streams across platforms. Their music has won top spots on various countdowns, including NCI FM Indigenous Music Countdown and Indigenous Music Countdown. Originally from the Cree community of Mistissini, Quebec, and now based in Montreal, Siibii first started making music through the formation of their early indie-folk outfit, Simple Human Tribe. Ultimately, Siibii's goal is to be a changemaker, noting the responsibility they feel to pursue their talent to create more representation within the industry for those who look and identify as they do.

Airglow: Young People and Wellbeing

Jessica Ruglis and Karl-André St-Victor

Abstract

In this dialogue, Karl-André St-Victor and Dr. Jessica Ruglis discuss the concepts of wellbeing for youth and supporting young people in being well. Karl is the Executive Director of Chalet Kent, while Jessica is an Associate Professor of Human Development at McGill University and a Board Member at Chalet Kent. They have collaborated for the past eight years, and in this commentary, they discuss supporting the wellbeing of young people through two recent community projects: *Que du Love* (Only Love), a multimedia project; and the newly founded Uptown Institute, which aims to support young adults into flourishing lives. The dialogue is facilitated by Dr. Bronwen Low, Associate Professor of Education at McGill University and a long-standing partner and former Board President of Chalet Kent. The conversation touches on aspects of education, relationship building, trust, power, change, art, home, and the future.

Welcome to Chalet Kent (www.chaletkent.ca*), a youth center located in Parc Martin-Luther-King in the vibrant Côte-des-Neiges neighborhood of Montreal. Five days a week, you will find young people between the ages of 11 and 18 playing pool or ping-pong, sitting together around the TV or video gaming station as part of the e-sports team and gaming club, drawing in a manga workshop, making a video for school using the audio-visual equipment and green screen, or creating small toys or keychains in the maker space. If you descend a set of stairs, you will find the martial arts and dance room: join a capoeira class or challenge yourself to "Philo Boxe." You might also hear light beats and vocals from next door. These are the sounds of NBS studio, a free recording studio where young people come for community "musicking," including writing, practicing, and recording music, as well as filming videos, or just hanging out, mentored by top music producers and artists in the city.*

Bronwen Low: Thank you for being here today. Let's begin with each of your definitions of wellbeing.

Jessica Ruglis: Wellbeing is being able to live in one's body in a way that feels best and right and just to that person. Being able to live within your freedoms and choices and desires and commitments. Being able to live with safety and security, with connection and care, with access to housing, food, and nature. I think wellbeing is the ability to grow and change and have access to the things that you need to be well—to *feel* well—physically, emotionally, socially, mentally, spiritually, economically, occupationally, structurally, for each new iteration of the self one becomes. I think wellbeing requires also time and space, and rest. I think wellbeing is something that approaches how it is that we live to our fullest and most flourishing, and what this takes is different for everyone. There isn't a healing *from*. There isn't a recovered. There isn't a healed. There is a living *with*. There is a growing with. There is a healing with. There is a making space for. Making new spaces for. And I think wellbeing is bolstered by harm reduction

and collective, community-based care. And it often requires acceptance and permission to change, in ways that reflect what one needs to be well. And so maybe wellbeing at times requires bravery, and boundaries. And great mentors along the way.

BL: So, Karl, is it the same thing for you?

Karl-André St-Victor: Yes. Basically I think it's the same. But I think also there's sometimes a difference between being a young person and how young people feel about wellbeing, and adults' perceptions of young peoples' wellbeing. I think sometimes young people may not have the vocabulary to express what they want or to talk about feelings the way that they want, or even talk about their feelings. So maybe we need to do a better job of teaching people about their feelings and how to express their needs. So yes, I think it's the same definition of wellbeing. We all want to grow, we all want freedom. We want to be safe. We want to understand what happiness means to us, as an individual. We want to contribute to our community and society. I think there are different levels, but I feel that we all want the same. I think that even when I see people whose path seems very different, at this moment in time they have to make decisions or they have to choose a path that makes sense for their immediate means. Sometimes, there is just survival. Sometimes survival is the wellbeing. But once you pass survival, I think all young people want the same wellbeing, want to flourish, but sometimes they need to first find the tools to survive. If you want to survive, you may have to take risks that from the outside you say, "Okay, it's not worth the risk," but we don't know their circumstances, we don't understand their lives, we don't walk in their shoes, we don't. So it saddens me when I see that, but I understand that it's not the same reality. We can talk about this now, but if your stomach is empty or you have different kinds of stress, you're going to talk about wellbeing differently. You just want to make it to the next state. But once you've made it to the next state, then I think we all want the same. And because we all want the same, I find that what works for us at Chalet Kent is that we don't see youth as "we want to help them," we see youth as equals. And I've always seen them as equal. And I think that's why the impact here is so great. We don't even use a lot of the words that people use in the grant-writing because I think it's wrong. I see all youth as equals every day. I do every single day. There's no difference. What I want for myself is what I want for them, what I want for them is what I want for my kids. This is zero difference. And I think that's really key. And I think everyone in the staff as a team has learned to interact in this way.

And I think when this happened, we built a different type of trust with youth and because they have that trust, it's easier now for us to be able to be there for them in ways that are more demanding, but which reflect real trust and relationship building. They can say exactly what's going on and what they mean. They build that trust and it's difficult in the outside world to create that. Sometimes, as an example, when you grow up as a Black person, you learn to live your life with a shield. So no matter where you go, you can never be yourself. Sometimes it becomes heavy to know that you always have to have a shield, techniques for survival. I see when the youth are together and they're having fun and they don't have that shield among themselves in this space, but when they step out of that circle, they have to have it.

I think that wellbeing is also not having to have an issue every single day of your life because you will be attacked by or discriminated against or judged by the school, by society, by whatever. And it's

unfortunate, but I think that wellbeing is having a space like a shield. Maybe the safety is to know that you don't have to be protect yourself all the time.

JR: And so how do you work with young people with that complexity of structural dispossession and racism, and its embodied costs? How does the work of the organization, in service of flourishing and wellbeing, hold that real form of surviving racism, and the emotional sadness, along with underneath that one needs to also carry a complex life full of joy and beauty and possibility? How does the organization tend to the reality that some people's lives are structurally more difficult than others, yet young people are all striving for the same direction of flourishing and wellbeing? If we hold also that power is a distinction between young people's and adults' definitions of wellbeing, where for example a young person may want to choose a college major, or use a different gender pronoun, but lives and/or attends school or community where they cannot. And that's not to say that that power doesn't enforce asymmetries in adult health just the same, but that idea of how do you deal with that sort of nested and situated responsibility of allowing young people to claim their power and the full complexities of life, while also realizing that there are forces of power structuring the lives of some young people differently than others. And it is these forces that are instrumental to their wellbeing.

KSV: We've learned to be vulnerable with young people with time, and I think it's difficult often in society for people to be vulnerable. As you said, it's maybe that power is important and maybe you seem less powerful if you're vulnerable. I think the youth realize in our vulnerability that we're also just human, and we have our weaknesses and our fears and our insecurities, and if we show them the human aspect of who we are, I think maybe what you're describing as the gap won't be as big because we're closer to them than they think that we are. And I think it's just accepting that we grow with the aspect of being vulnerable in a space with them because we all go through our moments in life the same way that they do, and maybe we have a little bit more wisdom, and we share it, but that's it. I think from the time that we as a staff made a conscious decision to be more present, it made us a stronger organization by far. And also once that happened, I think we have more honesty and more vulnerability and openness from the youth.

BL: What does making that decision collectively to be more vulnerable, to be more open, with the youth look like? How could someone put that into practice in another space?

KSV: Well, sometimes we play a game, for example, and we ask questions in the game. And then everyone in the team, and you, answers the same question; and they begin to see different aspects of the same question. We would ask them, for example, what moments are the proudest in your life? And then we all talk about it. Or, what makes you sad? If we answer the question and they answer the question, then it's a dialogue around the same question. And I think it's really important as well. Just a few days ago, we were asking, "If you were to relive a moment in your life, what would it be?" And then it was interesting because you go back into a happy place, and then you relive it, and then you explain it and why you would relive it. But because we also answer the same questions, I think it allows them to know us better and to see that our lives sometimes are very different but very similar at the same time. So I think it's just being able to have a conversation and then answer the questions as honestly as we can. And sometimes we have questions too. And then real change is possible, in this space of honest and trusting and safe dialogue.

JR: You mentioned earlier that a lot of working with youth is really helping them to understand their emotions and their feelings. And I'm wondering, when you think about emotions that are really guiding young people's visions of their lives, what they're grappling to try to claim as their own emotional realities, is there a word or two or three that really come into your mind for the emotions that they're really working on trying to lead with, to heal their hearts with, to make sense of, to guide their own sense of a life ahead?

KSV: It's been emotional. I think purpose is important. We work a lot on the sense of purpose and what it means as a group. Also as, and for, individuals. Sometimes people talk about wanting to make money. But that's not a purpose. I think, just what kind of purpose? I think it's key, and it takes time to understand the purpose, and that finding this is at the heart of what one wants to do, the life that will sustain one's soul beyond the money one desires. This is wellbeing: being able to know one's purpose, to explore it, to find and figure it out.

I also think your purpose will change with time. When you're 17, it'll be different. The years and wisdom of your life will be different than when you're 25, 40. It's going to change, but you will know how to think about defining the purpose, and how to go about planning for and achieving it. And I think that's something that we spend a lot of time on, really, is the purpose. Because with the purpose, it's really the discussion around who do you want to be versus what you want to do. I found that when we ask youth, "What you want to do?" sometimes they don't know what you want to do. But if you know who you want to be, I think it's the first step for us. I find, definitely one of the first steps we do with young people is to help them figure out, *Who do you want to be*?

And it's in line with the purpose; but going back to your question, the words, I think it's not a feeling or emotion, but I find that [young people] are generous with who they are. They give a lot of themselves with the goal of trying to go further. I think it's difficult to open yourself up because it's not that obvious [either to do so or how to do so] and it's not really a feeling. But I think generosity is really important. I think generosity describes the vision of their futures.

I think with that comes a lot of insecurity, and it's just making sure that it's normal to have those insecurities. And I think in the system sometimes if a young person talks with a school counsellor, they need to have an answer. But sometimes we don't have an answer. So to give young people the space to think about the answer they want to give. But it's really difficult to find the words or the feelings because I think it could be very broad, depending on what they're going through at that time. But I would say for sure *generosity*.

JR: When I hear generosity, so much of what I think of is that the ability to become and be infinitely generous requires a steady sense of love underneath that. Love in all forms; and where, as ever, love requires dignity and justice. To me, generosity that fractals requires some supreme guiding sense of unconditional love and empathy. Like the ability to sustain generosity with yourself and others requires some guidance by a love ethic teaching us to stay open to possibility—in ourselves and in everyone everywhere—always. Thank you for that.

I think something else that is also a gift that Chalet Kent does, and that also is in chemistry with my teachings and work in youth development and wellbeing, is you really front and center an idea that resists what can be really oppressive for young people at this point in their life, which is the idea that *becoming* is a constantly changing thing. In your lifetime, you will be many yous. And instead of a sole weighted impetus on the logic that this choice needs to be the best or most perfect or what will lead to forever, the mindset is instead on the idea that this is the choice for now, with the fullest sense of where and who we are at this time. College is not now or never. It may be never, but it could equally be later. Another time, another place, another part of what might be required to achieve a new purpose. But we're always changing and becoming different things. We're always multiple selves at once. That idea that a life is going to be many lives is really a sage sense of wisdom. And the other thing I think the organization does is really interrupt in this idea that feels tight to young people at this time, and I suppose in an era of supercapitalism and climate disaster, but this idea that time *can be* slowed. The temporal reality is that it may be fast but does not have to be; it is not now or never. That the only way to go through life is in some sort of non-linear sense of time. We want to accumulate growth and transformation and wellbeing as we continually heal from life's horrors and the illnesses and injuries that befall us all, so we are always moving to a new space of flourishing. But within this, there are some days and years that are shit, where our best might be awful; and we must live through these too. These are not lost or unproductive years. They are the years required for joy. I think what the organization really holds about being well is that there's a now, and then there's the next now, and then there's the next now.

This is what we hope for Uptown Institute [www.uptowninstitute.ca]: a community home that people will return to find and be themselves over and over again. And this leads me back to trust. How do you build trust? How do we know when trust is breached? What does it take to trust somebody, knowing that trust and perfection are not equivalent, what does it mean to be trusting and to develop trust in a real way?

KSV: I think we trust them from the beginning. I think that they're going to come here, they're going to enter the space because we offer something that they appreciate and the trust is there. I think it's more for them to trust us and that's when it's a matter of "it takes time." We just have to be present as much as we can and be willing to interact and to see. We need to see them as individuals, and I think it's really for us to do the work, to be trusted more than for us to trust them. For sure.

At some point things might happen and the trust might be breached, but we give them chances. We have guidelines and we have procedures and training, but when it happens, it's key to give them many chances. We all have chances. That's why we are here, it's because we have chances, obviously, and I think it should be the same for everyone. So, we try to build the trust with that. And also to give them a space to express themselves. Self-expression, I think, is important. And we create ways that young people can express themselves when and where they feel comfortable. Sometimes it happens after hours by text message. So, we definitely work a lot with them to able to be present in time and spaces that work for their convenience. And also, when this happens, we have to know when to separate ourselves from the situations because otherwise it becomes overwhelming. So we have to know, "Okay, we can do that," but we can't do it all the time. Because it's too much. But we explain to them that there's a boundary

with what we do in our private life. I believe they respect it and us. But really the trust for us is, really, I find that it's really for young people to trust adults and we have to do the work to be trusted.

JR: So do you think the relational practice of trust building requires some ability to cultivate a consciousness towards self-reflection and accountability, to be able to hear feedback, and a responsibility to try to engage with it?

KSV: Do we self-reflect for ourself? Or do we self-reflect to serve them better? I'm not really sure. Every child is going to be different. And it's just the way that you decide what you're willing to do. And not just hear but really listen fully and act on what you say you're going to do. And it's important, too. And I think for the trust to go ahead, we keep our promises, and that's really important to keep. We keep our promises and that's where we can be different from their experiences in society or school. So we definitely try our best to keep our promises, and that's something that when I think about what we're building, what we're going to give to this generation, I think it's a sense of keeping the promise and having a word. There can be feelings of emptiness in society with social media. But I think that if you're more grounded, it can take you far. We really focus on: if you keep your word the way that we're trying to keep our words, that's a part of trust and purpose.

BL: What is your vision for the Uptown Institute? Could you try to encapsulate it for a new audience.

JR: I think the vision is a space that young people find as a home that supports them to get where they want to go in a holistic sense of what that means for their mind, knowledge, skills, and for their heart and body, their sense of self and community, and their purpose. So that it's a space that doesn't pretend to front-load what a life is, what success is, but rather it helps meet people where they're at. I also have a separate goal of trying to think about creating a comprehensive community-based mental health clinic. I think what I would just add to that is, I'm also imagining a space where dreaming is multifaceted for all the parts of a person; for the larger parts of a pathway.

KSV: I mean, I think all of it was said. I would only add that it's important to have a space for people where they can dream, and to have the tools to be able to dream and the network to support future dreams. I think my privilege in life is really to be able to have the chance to dream. So I'd like to pass that on, though maybe sometimes it's not realistic, but it's just nice to be able to dream. Dreaming is a part of wellbeing. And it's rare for young people I find to have the capacity to dream because sometimes they're just too pragmatic. And I respect that too. I know that youth need to get a job, need to work. But hopefully we can create that environment for youth to be able to have this space to be able to reflect, and dream, and that these capacities will not only help with the parts of life that have to do with work, but with life on the weekend and life skills for the future.

BL: Karl, could you describe what Que du Love [www.instagram.com/quedulovemtl] was for you and staff and youth?

KSV: Well, I don't know what it was for everyone. I can tell you about the project. We were approached by a public health funding agency to create a project to talk about how to prevent violence that's committed by young people. And I wasn't very comfortable to talk about the violence because I thought

that if we talk about violence, it becomes a trigger itself. Just the work can be a symbol of untruth, of misrepresentation, of false stories that are the violence themselves. And also, violence is a language. It's a language and an answer to something. It's more complex than that. And I thought that if we changed that to something different, if we talked about what love means to young people and all their experiences there and all they would like to experience with love. I think it's very different because I think we show a different facet of who young people are. Except instead of talking about violence we talk about love.

And also, I find that it was like that verb that nobody knew how to conjugate. And I think that if we take this time to listen to youth and to their stories—and we couldn't share most of the stories that we heard because it was too deep and it was a lot of them—that can change things. For many of the youth in Que du Love, this was the first time they could talk about their lives. And I think that it's really, really deep, and what it means for me, I think it was important for me to be able to change the perception of young people. Obviously, [the funding agency] came to me with violence because perhaps they think everyone is violent. There's a problem with violence, yet I don't think youth are the cause of it. But for me it was important to see the young people in a different light, to hear them, to feature them in such beautiful light. They were so proud of the process and had such a sense of pride. It's rare to see that as well. To see their photographs in such big format, with so many people who attended the exhibition, and their families who came to see them, their sense of pride was key.

BL: Do you want to say something about the basketball and sneaker exhibition, Airglow, that accompanied Que du Love?

KSV: We were lucky enough to have two floors at the Maison de la Culture de Côte-des-Neiges for the exhibitions (May 6–June 4, 2023). It was important to do something that was very different on the two floors, and sneaker and basketball culture is big in today's generation. Airglow was just a way to showcase youth culture differently, and try to create a beautiful exhibit around what it was as a way to bring the joy of youth, too. And I think it's something that just brought joy to the community, and that was important to just bring joy with an exhibit. And they were honest, and they brought joy, and we were happy, and the team was very… I think the commitment was different because we know we're doing something for the right reason. It wasn't just about the grind. It was, "We're doing something." It featured a number of artists and artwork from the personal collections of the community; including my son, Tristan St-Victor, who made a series of short films for the exhibition.

JR: It was something very, very special. It was sublime.

KSV: And I think that made a difference for us as well. It's good to have the means to do it, but we knew we're doing something that was very different than just a project. And I don't know how many hours of archives that we have; but it's really, really, really a touching project, [with some] unbelievable stories because we would never think of those stories. Even if we've seen movies on something, we never think it happens or it's happening every day. And also to be able to hear what youth want out of life. Nobody asks them what they want out of life. It's good. It's good to be able to have those conversations. Hopefully we can have, I think there's enough material to do many more exhibits. I think we could have one exhibition just about what youth want out of life. We talked about this. I think it's important. And we have a lot of

beautiful poetry, a lot of valuable material. But I think that the most touching part of the exhibition is this: there was a box of messages that we put at the exhibit and we received, I don't know, hundreds of messages that people wrote and they were all very, very touching. So that was nice. Only love.

JR: And what are the things young people want for their lives?

KSV: I think uniqueness. They want to live a life. They don't want to be pressured into a model. I think they really want to be able to embrace their individuality and uniqueness, and I think that's important. They want to be seen for who they are, think they are, and they want to understand what happiness means to them. They want freedom, freedom of expression, and happiness.

JR: In my own teaching, I always remind students that to know something doesn't tell us anything about its inverse. So is there anything young people do not want for their lives?

KSV: They don't want confrontation. They don't want violence. They see stupid stuff happening all around the world and very incompetent people. So they don't want that for sure. They don't want to see their parents struggle. They want equanimity.

BL: We'll end this discussion with words Jessica wrote for the Airglow exhibition (2023), and which reflect the ways in which these two collaborate best. This piece is based upon the work and vision of the youth, artists, staff, curator, and communities collaborating on Que du Love and Airglow.

Airglow

Airglow is a measure of the Earth's luminosity: The brightness of the sky.
With airglow, the night sky is never fully dark. There is always luminescence.
Airglow is caused by the emission of light from different processes in the planetary atmosphere, and appears everywhere surrounding Earth.
Though its view is brightest when one looks just above the horizon.
Airglow commonly appears as blue, but can also be seen as a spectrum.

Young people in Côte-des-Neiges are a measure of our communities' luminosity:
We are the brightness of life.
Youth are always glowing, vibrating: And all people are made of stardust.
The possibilities for connection, transformation and flourishing are caused by different processes, relations and commitments in neighborhoods and cities.
Youth fashion and basketball and sneakers are our airglow.
Contemporary urban culture shows up everywhere all the time, surrounding everything.
Youth culture is brightest just above the horizon.
Like airglow, youth culture is both universally inclusive and infinitely diverse.
We vibrate blue, but are a spectrum too.

Welcome to AIRGLOW.

We invite you to live luminously: With your light forever visible.

(Jessica Ruglis, 2023)

Photo and artwork: DRJR/Jessica Ruglis (2023)

Karl-André St-Victor's journey to becoming a civic innovator embodies a life driven by purpose and a commitment to social change. Motivated by a deep passion for social justice, he champions the voices of marginalized communities and advocates for societal advancement. Through dedicated mentorship and educational initiatives, Karl-André empowers youth, nurturing in them resilience and leadership skills. Known for empathy and unwavering dedication, he inspires positive action and promotes inclusivity. Karl-André's path reflects a belief in individual empowerment, seeing people for who they are, and a mission to cultivate a more equitable world, driven by compassion and impactful contributions to society. For Karl-André, the act of sharing a meal accompanied by good music is the best way to create profound connections with others.

Que du Love

Amelia Segrera, Fabiana Diaz, Marilia Beltrame, Karl-André St-Victor, and Chalet Kent youth and staff

On the following pages are six pieces from the Que du Love (Only Love) exhibition, which was led by photographer Amelia Segrera and Chalet Kent staff, multimedia director Marilia Beltrame, interviewer and writer Fabiana Diaz, and curator Karl-André St-Victor.

The five original photographs featured here were taken on 35 mm film by Segrera, and each features a young person accompanied by their words about love, which are excerpts taken from their interviews.

We also include three poems, in French, from student Rania Guerasse, exploring some of the visceral and spiritual intensities of love and heartbreak.

For more on the project, see: https://www.instagram.com/quedulovemtl/.

Amelia Segrera, Fabiana Diaz, Marilia Beltrame, Karl-André St-Victor, & Chalet Kent youth and staff

Portrait, 35 mm film. Photo by Amelia Segrera.

Loki, 19

"The ego I think… some people got it too high, too high like sometimes you gotta put the pride down, like put yourself in a different place."

Loki is a young artist who moved here from Miami. Although he sees life as a fight, his faith in God reminds him to be the bigger person and focus on what brings him peace, which is good friends and music.

Photo by Amelia Segrera. Digital print from 35 mm film.

Von, 20

"What really helped me find myself was being alone. And then seeing how other people would react or treat me or whatever and like, I don't wanna be treated like this, but I get treated like this 'cause I treated them like this, namsayin', so like, damn, I need to switch things up. I slowly started to change." (Translated from French by Fabiana Diaz)

« Ce qui m'a vraiment aidé à me trouver, c'est d'être seul. Je voyais comment les autres réagissaient ou me traitaient et je me disais que je ne voulais pas être traité comme ça, mais qu'on me traitait comme ça parce que je les traitais comme ça, alors je me disais damn, je dois changer les choses. J'ai commencé à changer petit à petit. »

Von dresses nice, he's got some swag about him, keeps it simple, but never fails to dress for the occasion. When he performs, he's got it, the IT. Von is lyrical, authentic, and loyal to his story. He's a gem of a young artist.

Amelia Segrera, Fabiana Diaz, Marilia Beltrame, Karl-André St-Victor, & Chalet Kent youth and staff

Photo by Amelia Segrera. Digital print from 35 mm film.

Kiara, 17

"You find peace within yourself with what you do… And you accept the things that you cannot change. And you just like, keep moving forward, and you don't let situations just keep you at one spot to the bottom. Like, it's just, you're more free. And you feel relief, you don't feel like you're carrying a burden on you." (Translated by Fabiana Diaz)

« Vous trouvez la paix en vous-même avec ce que vous faites... Et vous acceptez les choses que vous ne pouvez pas changer. Et vous continuez à avancer, et vous ne laissez pas les situations vous tirer vers le bas. Genre, c'est comme si tu étais plus libre. Tu te sens soulagé, tu n'as pas l'impression de porter un fardeau. »
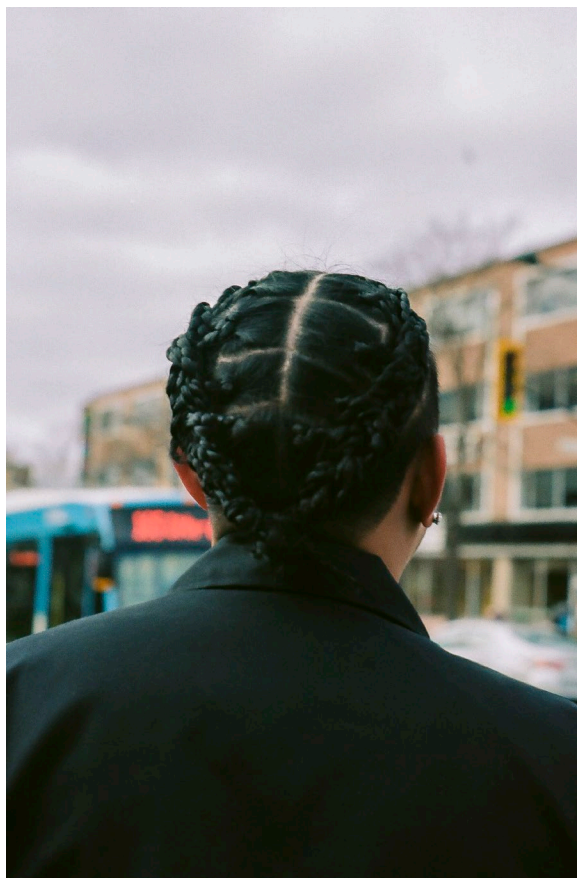
Photo by Amelia Segrera. Digital print from 35 mm film.

Gonz, 24

Gonz (Instagram: gonzhands) grew up all his life in CDN. Already at the age of 12-13, he knew he wanted to be a barber. In fact, at that age, he was already cutting hair. He didn't always have the support from all his friends and community, but he always had his parents close to remind him to follow the right path and right values. Not that he was too good for anybody. On the contrary, he stayed humbled, he understood the struggle, he stayed friends with some guys on the block, but he was determined to make the best of what he had and be the best version of himself.

So he didn't stop. He continued believing in his dreams and now has his own barbershop, La Section Barbershop. In fact, this guy actually never stops. He participates in barber expos and contests, in education, and even creates community events to give back to the kids. In June, he and his team offered free fades and braids to over 100 kids at Chalet Kent. Then, on August 28th, at Chalet Kent as well, he organized a fundraiser to give free school supplies to the kids from the neighborhood. He got together entrepreneurs, caterers, and his barber friends to offer food and free braids to hundreds of kids and youth, and got over $2,000 worth of school supplies, which helped so many families start school the right way.

Honestly, Gonz is one of those sweet souls that tirelessly give back to others. What a light in this world. Thank you, Gonz, for participating in this interview and for everything that you do for others.

Photo by Amelia Segrera. Digital print from 35 mm film.

Lilya, 14

"You have to start with yourself, learn yourself why it's important not to be violent, the benefits of being calmer in life... If you start with yourself and believe it, you'll influence others." (Translated by Fabiana Diaz)

« Tu dois commencer par toi-même, apprendre toi-même pourquoi c'est important de ne pas être violent, les bénéfices d'être plus calme dans la vie… Si tu commences par toi et tu le crois, tu vas influencer les autres. »

Lilya (Instagram: f4iry_luv) is a 14-year-old girl with a lot of self-confidence. She knows what she likes, what she wants and what she's worth. She enjoys chilling out, taking photos, skateboarding, listening to music and walking around the plaza. Lilya is also a spiritual girl, already in tune with the stars, tarot, mindfulness practices and all things witchy. As well as being a cool kid, she's also sensitive when it comes to her friends. She cares a lot. She takes responsibility for herself in all her facets and remains true to herself while being able to see her good and not-so-good points, and take responsibility for her actions. Lilya, thank you for participating in our project.

Poèmes, by Rania Guerasse

I.

J'ai démontré mon amour par mes actions
Mais ce n'était pas suffisant

Mes yeux brillants j'ai regardé la personne
Et partout dans ma tête son nom résonne

À chaque instant elle me manque
Sans elle je suis en manque

Comme un drogué attaché à sa came
Quand je me sépare de toi je fonds en larme

Ne me crois-tu pas quand je te dis **je t'aime !**
Que pour toi je me coupe une veine

Le jour ou la nuit, qu'importe
Tant que tu es dans ma vie, je l'emporte

Je perds mes mots je suis fragile
Déjà brisée et très sensible

Je suis faible face à toi je le sais
Mais de toi je ne peux m'en passer

J'encaisse la douleur, coups après coups
Mais je ne ressens rien

Je préfère quand tu m'attrapes par le cou
Et qu'on fasse semblant d'aller bien

Car comme tu le dis
Tais-toi et souris

II.

Dormir, noyé dans les flots
Aucun mot à la rescousse

Ta voix qui se perd dans les eaux
De ta gorge s'entendent des secousses

Des pleurs sur tes joues
Tes yeux humides et asséchés

Des souvenirs qui te hantent
Et la cadence a augmenté

Tu as de la peine ça se sent
Tu ressens de la haine mais tu te mens

Dormir sur tes larmes t'ont étouffé
Ton sommeil n'a jamais été aussi paisible

De fatigue tes paupières se sont fermées
Tu t'endors sur un bonheur inaccessible

III.

La douleur lorsqu'on t'arrache le cœur de ta
poitrine
La façon dont tu te sens présentement
La manière dont on l'expose en vitrine
C'est une vraie œuvre d'art maintenant

Massacré, bousillé, troué
Des flèches, des couteaux par milliers
Tout ça l'a transpercé
De sorte à ce que cela ne puisse plus bouger

C'est faible et noir
Plus aucune vie en lui
Rempli de désespoir
Seul, dans la nuit

Tu cherches des réponses
Alors que tu les as
Il a trempé sa semence
Et s'en alla

Tu as mal, tu as peur
Au final tu ne veux pas être seule
Quel film, quelle horreur
D'avoir servi d'objet pour sa gueule

Tu as appris, mais c'est fini
Tu as compris, c'est ça la vie
Tu as choisi le sacrifice
Alors assume le supplice

Tu ne manges pas
Tu ne dors pas
Tu ne fais que penser à **ça**

Alors que lui t'a oublié
De cible, il a changé
Tu n'as jamais été une priorité
Tu dois l'accepter

Avec difficulté tu marches, tu respires
Sans ton cœur, tu es solide
De toutes émotions, tu es vide
Car tu ne fais que t'abstenir

Rania Guerasse. Je m'appelle Rania, j'ai 19 ans et j'étudie au Collège Jean-de-Brébeuf. J'entame ma dernière session et la fin de mon parcours scolaire avec une boule au ventre. À la fois enthousiaste, curieuse et persévérante, j'avance le pas ferme et décidé vers mon avenir. J'ai plusieurs passions, cependant, celle qui me définit, sans équivoque, est l'écriture. J'aime composer des chansons, écrire des poèmes et me projeter dans mes lectures. Étant enfant unique, l'écriture a été pour moi une forme d'échappatoire et de liberté. D'aussi loin que je me souvienne, j'ai toujours répondu présente dans de nombreuses activités, autant avec l'école qu'avec le Chalet Kent. C'est en compagnie des autres et en les observant que je peux ressortir le meilleur de moi-même. Je ne crains pas de m'exprimer ou de me mettre en avant et étant sociable par nature, il est facile pour moi de m'intégrer. Néanmoins, je préfère quand c'est la nuit avec le bleu du ciel lorsque je me retrouve seule dans le calme que l'artiste qui est moi déploie son plein potentiel.

My name is Rania, I am 19 years old, and I study at Collège Jean-de-Brébeuf. I start my last session and the end of my school career with a knot in my stomach. Enthusiastic, curious, and persevering at the same time, I am taking firm and determined steps towards my future. I have several passions; however, the one that defines me, unequivocally, is writing. I like to compose songs, write poems, and project myself into my readings. As an only child, writing was a form of escape and freedom for me. For as long as I can remember, I have always been involved in many activities, both with school and with Chalet Kent. It is in the company of others and by observing them that I can bring out the best of myself. I am not afraid to express myself or put myself forward, and being sociable by nature, it is easy for me to fit in. Nevertheless, I prefer when it is night with the blue sky, when I am alone in the calm, and the artist in me unleashes her full potential.

Amelia Segrera, Fabiana Diaz, Marilia Beltrame, Karl-André St-Victor, & Chalet Kent youth and staff

Safe Spaces and Critical Places: Youth Programming and Community Support

Alexandra Arraiz Matute and Emmanuel Tabi

Abstract

In this article we explore the work of two after-school programs in Toronto, Ontario. Our Youth Success (OYS) is a community-based mentoring program dedicated to lowering the push-out rates of students of Spanish and/or Portuguese-speaking descent. In the Youth Speak Program (YSP), community activists use spoken word poetry and rapping as a vehicle for Black students to express their emotional lives. The data we present come from two separate studies which both used ethnographic approaches, focusing on observation and interviews with participants (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2019). Using Critical Race Theory (CRT), we examine interview data on how the pedagogical relationships developed in these spaces promote the wellbeing of Latinx and Black youth beyond academic outcomes. We argue that these spaces provide insight into the transformative possibilities of critical pedagogies for the wellbeing and healing of communities who have long been marginalized from mainstream institutions.

Introduction and Context

While much scholarship has been dedicated to the inequities in education in the US context, less is known about Latinx and Black students in the Canadian context (Parada et al., 2021). However, both communities continue to be marginalized within Canadian education systems (James, 2012; James & Turner, 2017). In this paper, we take up these issues within the context of Ontario, specifically in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA). Moving beyond the discourse on academic outcomes, we extend the story around education, race, and academic achievement to include wellbeing as we speak to the places and spaces that support and encourage the emotional lives of these children and youth who report that school is a difficult place for them to learn (Gaztambide-Fernández & Guerrero, 2011; Schugurensky et al., 2009). Our work aims to de-center the conversation around youth and schools from academic achievement to a more holistic wellbeing that envisions a goal of BIPOC youth flourishing, not just surviving a system (Tabi, 2023; Tabi & Rowsell, 2017). .

We examine two out-of-school programs that operate in Toronto, known for its diversity and multiculturalism: Our Youth Success (OYS) and the Youth Speaks Program (YSP). Toronto is Canada's largest city, with a population over three million people and almost half of the province's population (Government of Ontario, 2023). While one in four people in Canada identify as part of a racialized group (Government of Canada, 2022), in Toronto this number goes up to 55.7% (Toronto, 2022). This rich context means youth navigate a complex web of stereotypes, assumptions, and communities in their daily lives (Guerrero, 2014; James & Turner, 2017; Schugurensky et al., 2009). However, it also provides youth with community supports like the programs explored in this paper.

To frame the value of youth wellbeing, this article explores the pedagogical relationships between youth in two separate programs that are intentional about their centering of care. By pedagogical relationships, we refer to those that develop within the context of pedagogical encounters, which are premised on reciprocity of care and value students' lived experiences and knowledges. These relationships have been shown to foster youth positive development and counter the deleterious effects of marginalization for racialized youth (i.e., Arraiz Matute 2022a, Chavez & Soep, 2005, Valenzuela, 2010). Our Youth Success (OYS) is a community-based mentoring program that is dedicated to lowering the push-out rates of students of Spanish and or Portuguese-speaking descent in Toronto. The Youth Speak program (YSP) is an after-school program organized by community activists who use spoken word poetry and rapping as a vehicle for Black students to speak to their emotional lives, particularly the difficulties they experience in schools. Through this programming, these activists developed strategies to help students navigate the difficulties they experience within the K–12 education system. As shared by our participants, the relationships built in these two programs are a key reason that participants continue to stay involved year after year; they provide youth a space in which to feel vulnerable and develop trust in each other. In this paper, we focus on how these relationships promote the wellbeing of Latinx and Black youth beyond academic outcomes. We began by providing context for the communities with whom we work. The following section presents some of the literature around barriers Black and Latinx youth face in Canada and how community-based programming has been shown to provide support for youth. The subsequent section speaks to the methods and theoretical framework used in this paper. The final section speaks to three overarching themes that resonated in our work with youth. We end with the lessons learned on the radical possibilities for healing and transformation in these critical spaces.

Literature Review

Blackness in Canada

Unfavorable attitudes toward Black folks in Canada founded on hateful, racist, and stereotypical ideologies around Blackness continue to influence how Black folks are understood, talked about, and referred to within Canada's social imagination (Austin, 2013). This anti-blackness is foundational to the history of Canada (Campbell, 2012), and continues to influence the social and political outcomes of Black lives in Canada, often marginalizing and displacing Black individuals, communities, dreams, and futures through polite yet often covert means of racial discrimination (Campbell, 2012), which in turn negatively influences Black realities and geographies in Canada (McKittrick, 2002). Black youths, particularly Black male youths in Toronto's K–12 education system, continue to experience isolation and marginalization (Dei, 2006; James, 2012; Tabi & Gosine, 2018). Many of these youths use their cultural production as a means to navigate the complex emotional realities of these painful experiences (Gosine & Tabi, 2016; Tabi, 2023).

Latinxs in Canada

The Latin American community in Canada has been characterized by waves of immigration dating back to the 1940s. These waves of migration have been shaped by the sociopolitical context and conflicts in South American and Central American regions (Mata, 1985). This has resulted in a very heterogeneous community, representing over 20 nationalities and with varying degrees of political and civic engagement (Veronis, 2006). Legacies of colonialism and white supremacy embedded in Latin American societies have also shaped how Latinx navigate the racial landscape in Canada (Cahuas & Arraiz Matute, 2020; Veronis, 2010). While we speak about a single "Latinx community," it's important to keep in mind that the experiences of youth who identify as Latinx are varied and complex.

Educational Barriers for Latinx and Black Youth in Canada

In framing our exploration into alternative ways of engaging with and creating spaces for racialized youth, it is useful to understand the current context in public education. According to data from Ontario's school boards, both Latinx and Black communities face lower graduation rates than their peers (R. Brown & Tam, 2017; Peel District School Board, 2021). Black student graduation rates have been growing at one of the fastest rates compared to all other ethno-racial groups in the Toronto District School Board (TDSB) (R. S. Brown & Parekh, 2019). However, overall Black student graduation rates are still some of the lowest when compared to other ethno-racial groups in the Board (R. S. Brown & Parekh, 2019; R. Brown & Tam, 2017). In addition, students from both communities are less likely to be prepared for post-secondary options (Robson et al., 2018). Latinx students are less likely to meet provincial standards in standardized measures like the EQAO or be successful in the Ontario Literacy Assessment in secondary (Yau et al., 2011). They are also less likely to apply to post-secondary school (R. Brown & Tam, 2017).

Inside classrooms, the curriculum Black and Latinx students receive is also not reflective of their experiences, histories, or cultures (Turner Consulting Group, 2015). Latinx youth often must overcome stereotypes about Latinxs, perpetuated by the media and the invisibility of Latinxs in the curriculum in Canada (Gaztambide-Fernández & Guerrero, 2011; Simmons et al., 2000). Additionally, Latinx youth face lowered expectations from teachers in addition to a lack of support in the classroom (Mogadime & O'Sullivan, 2017). Latinx students don't see themselves represented in their peers or teachers, and face culturally insensitive environments in the classroom (Parada et al., 2023).

We also see evidence of institutional and systemic discrimination through processes of special education and school discipline. Black students continue to be overrepresented in behavioral exceptionality categories and special education classes at the school board level (Spence & Cameron, 2019; Tam & Armson, 2022). Similarly, while Black students make up 11% of the TDSB school population, they represent 33% of suspensions and expulsions (Zheng, 2020). Systemic exclusion impacts how learners see themselves and how engaged they are in their education. According to school climate surveys, Black students feel school is a friendly and welcoming place less than other students in the school board; they report feeling less likely to get the help and support they need, have a lower sense of school belonging, and claim to enjoy school less than other students (Akuoko-Barfi et al., 2023; Cameron, 2020; Yau, 2017). Similarly, Latinx youth reported feeling that school staff provided very little support in

navigating the school system and helping students succeed (Parada et al., 2021). All of these findings point to the need for additional supports for Black and Latinx students. Often times, this support has come in the form of community-based programs organized outside of school.

Pedagogical Relationships and Community Support

Community-based support programs have a long history, particularly in the US, where programs to serve Black and Brown communities have been around since the 1960s (Kantor & Lowe, 1995). Since then, a growing body of literature has demonstrated the importance of these programs to marginalized youth (i.e., Baldridge et al., 2011; Mahoney et al., 2005; MacLaughlin, 2000; Lakin & Mahoney, 2006). While there are differences in programing and methods between programs, this literature suggests that relationships are an important part of their success (Yu et al., 2021; Newcomer, 2018; Baldridge et al., 2011; Lakin & Mahoney, 2006). These positive relationships with trusted adults have been shown to increase engagement, self-esteem, and ethnic pride (Newcomer, 2018; Yu et al., 2021; Erbstein & Fabionar, 2019). We seek to build on the conversation of how these community-based programs promoted youth wellbeing by moving beyond academic achievement as measures of success and looking instead at the possibilities of transformative pedagogies as a cite of healing.

Methods

The data presented in this article comes from two separate studies. In both studies, we used an ethnographic approach, focusing on observation and interviews with participants (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2019). Field notes, interviews, rap lyrics, and poetry were then transcribed and coded. We used both narrative and discourse analysis to analyze the transcripts and develop themes (Blommaert, 2005; Blommaert & Bulcaen, 2000; Riessman, 1993). In this paper, we use data from interviews with participants, as well as youth rap lyrics and poetry from one of the programs. We occasionally draw on some of our observational notes for context.

The OYS program consists of youth (grades 1–college) and their mentors—some of the mentors are also university students. The mentoring pairs get assigned at the beginning of the school year and work together for the entire year; sometimes they continue to work together for many years. In the data, we present perspectives shared by both youth and their mentors; given the reciprocal nature of their relationships, having both perspectives was an important part of the study. The mentors in the YSP program are individuals with varying levels of academic achievement; however, they all have experienced a great deal of oppression and marginalization within their K–12 journey. Some of the mentors dropped out of high school, others dropped out and then returned; however, they created these after-school programs to address the needs that they had in the K–12 education system, and they wanted to create a safe space for young Black children and youth to work through the difficulties they were experiencing.

Both authors are people of color (one identifies as Latinx, the other as Black). We come to our work from a shared commitment to social justice, grounded in an ethics of care for the communities we work with.

Alexandra is an immigrant to Canada and has worked with community organizations for over 10 years in family advocacy around the education system. At the time of this study, she had been working with the West Community Hub (WCH) for a few years in the OYS program, first as a volunteer mentor and then as a staff member designing programming for parents and youth. She was therefore a familiar face to the staff, parents, and youth in the program, who felt comfortable to speak about their experiences. Emmanuel was born in Canada to a Grenadian mother and is a community educator, advocate, musician, and spoken word poet. At the time of the study, Emmanuel was an important contributor to Toronto's arts scene. Through these activities, Emmanuel built relationships with other community educators and activists who contributed to the study.

Through discussing the findings of our separate studies with similar community-based programs in the same city, we realized that our participants had articulated very similar experiences. We then decided to go back and look at our data through this shared lens of thinking about these spaces as transformative and conducive to healing. This paper is the result of this joint endeavor, to talk with each other through our communities' experiences and to dream together of a better world.

Theoretical Framework

In our analysis we utilize Critical Race Theory (CRT), as this framework continues to be instrumental in the documentation of how racial identities are conceptualized and (re)produced (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). As such, CRT is operationalized within qualitative research paradigms, as it centers on and speaks to the many ways race and racism are systemically rooted within society, as well as the manner in which racialized individuals and communities negotiate racist representations and navigate oppressive barriers (James, 2009; Lopez, 2000; Parker & Lynn, 2002). CRT stands against historic and current racial inquiries by drawing from other epistemologies and disciplines "to guide research that better understands the effects of racism, sexism and classism on people of color" (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002, pp. 26-27). Most importantly for our work, CRT gives us an epistemological lens through which to understand the lived experiences of racialized youth and how the intentional spaces of OYS and YSP push back against marginalization.

To further center the wellbeing of BIPOC youth in these programs, we mobilize bell hooks' work on healing to conceptualize the work that relationships do within these critical spaces. Through her words, hooks reminds us that teaching is a practice of freedom that requires that educators see their students as unique beings, requiring that we are willing to engage with the humanity in each of us, to establish relationships that recognize each other's spirit as well as our minds (hooks, 1994). This engagement with students is not one-dimensional; it is a bidirectional relationship predicated on authenticity and self-actualization. It is through this intentional relationality that education can become a site of healing and of freedom (hooks, 1994). Furthermore, this site of healing is one that happens in community with others, not in isolation (hooks, 2001). We see this intentional relationality as a key characteristic of these "critical spaces" that we describe in our data. These spaces are premised on the transformative potential of these relationships and creating a site of healing. This is particularly important in our case as we, the authors, explore how these programs that are run by and for communities, become sites of healing and

transformation for youth. We want to move beyond the narratives of Black and Latinx youth as statistics and disengage with the normative assumptions of academic achievement. Instead, our work here highlights the impacts of relationships on youth's wellbeing by focusing on the ways in which they heal from the deleterious effects of the public school system. In the next section, we focus on the ways in which participants narrated their experience of these spaces, before we expand on their possibilities. We will do so by focusing on three themes that emerged from this work. Firstly, we will speak to how building strong community bonds and relationships has proved to be beneficial for both the youth in the programs and their mentors. The following two sections will highlight the importance of not only looking at the academic outcomes of our students, but also continuing to support their holistic selves and wellbeing.

Safe Spaces and Critical Places

In this section, we lay out the themes which describe the safe spaces and critical places that the two programs we worked with foster for Black and Latinx youth in Toronto. These spaces were characterized by important positive relationships that saw youth in a holistic manner and, therefore, conceptualized wellbeing beyond academic achievements to picture youth as thriving.

Importance of Relationships

Remy, a community educator and rap artist, created the YSP after-school program in the neighborhood he grew up in because he saw the disconnect between the youth at the community center he worked at and their parents. This disconnect reminded him of his relationship with his mother. Due to her many jobs, she was often at a loss for why Remy would often get in trouble; there was a disconnect between Remy's reality and his mother's expectations. For Remy, it was vital to build strong relationships with the youth that he served, and that their basic needs were met before he could offer them advice about their academic achievements or general life choices. Youth enter these formal and informal educational spaces as complex and holistic beings; as such, a great deal of empathy and care is needed when supporting them, particularly youth who are often marginalized (Kirkland, 2013; Winn, 2013). Remy's empathy towards the youth he supported grew from being a young Black boy who had to make sense of the poverty, neglect, hunger, and precarious housing he experienced. It is often the youth that are most disenfranchised that are blamed for "depression, hopelessness and suicidal tendencies" (Ginwright & James, 2002, p.31) that they often have to navigate.

For Tania, one of the youth mentors in OYS, the reason that she has continued in the program for six years is simply due to her mentees and the relationship they have developed over five years together. She mentions how every year there is a conversation about coming back to her students:

> [The program directors are] like, "You need to come back!" I want to do it, I mean I want to keep working with the program because I still very much believe in what it does. But certainly, if not for [the youth]—because my schedule is so manic—I probably would have stepped back from it but they've kept me going with it.

The mentees themselves also point to the relationships in the program as reasons to continue attending. Anne Marie has been participating in Our Youth Success for seven years, and she says, "They're really friendly, too, so that helps a lot. I feel comfortable there. . . . It's like I just belong there. It's not like you feel weird walking in because everyone's watching you. And I've gotten to know people." While she attends the program for help with English, it isn't this academic help that motivates her to wake up early every Saturday morning. Rather, it is the "friendliness" of the program, how the relationships she has built in this space afford a sense of belonging that is not usual for academic spaces.

In both spaces, we observed relationship-building as the primary force drawing youth in. At times when both Black and Latinx students (and their families) are framed as "disengaged" (Edwards & Parada, 2023; Schugurensky et al., 2009), both OYS and YSP saw consistent attendance and continued engagement. Mentors and mentees felt a responsibility to one another, to the transformation that happens in community rather than in isolation (hooks, 1994). The focus on intentional relationships fostered a space where the youth's whole being was welcomed and valued. Therefore the focus of growth went beyond academics, to a more holistic understanding of success. We explore this theme in the next section.

Going Beyond Academics

For Efe, a community educator, activist, and poet in Toronto, providing a safe space for youth who navigate difficult socio-emotional realities was a driving force in why he created YSP after-school programs throughout the Greater Toronto Area. Efe would often have to move with his family so they could secure work. By the time Efe graduated from high school, he had attended 17 different schools. Efe was very much aware of the difficulties he faced as a young Black man, constantly moving, not able to call a school community home for very long. Efe wanted to create a space that he would have benefited from, a space where he could best prepare the youth in the program for the many unpredictable life experiences they may face. Efe explains that:

> Over a 20–30-week period, we would build a performance arts training intensive, but it is also a life skills training intensive and it is twofold because in the creation of art, you have to create life, you have to reflect on life, so we are addressing themes that are causing youth maybe in their mind to write but really they are healing, really they are building upon themselves, building confidence.

Efe's after school programs would be a space where students who would often miss their academic classes would still attend his program. Efe understood that the academic classes did not provide students with the emotional support they needed and often sought out. Efe created a space where students felt safe to attend and work through some of the difficult emotional realities they lived with, a space where they could foster healing as a community and share their stories through poetry and other forms of cultural production. Such practices are what Marc Lamont Hill (2009) refers to as *wounded healing,* a process in which pain is released and worked through as youth share their lived experiences, trauma and hopes as a method of healing, producing "new possibilities" (p. 249).

Anastasia articulated her favorite part of being a student in OYS: "Being there in a way and just talking because the thing is, I don't only talk about work. We talk about other things like things that are going

on around the world. We talk about our opinions." This was significant for her because it stood in contrast to her experience in school, where "you don't really get to do that." In her tutoring sessions, she is able to talk about her opinions without being dismissed as "a kid, a student, like you don't know much." She elaborates how the kind of relationships she has with her tutor means she "get[s] to talk and be heard." This extends beyond academic subjects, to encompass current social and political events:

> Even social issues like things that we feel, our opinions on some things. [My tutor] makes you feel like your opinion's valid. It's not like you're just a kid and don't know any better, she actually listens so I like that about her.

Many times, tutor mentors saw their role going beyond academic outcomes. The mentoring relationship often meant that tutor mentors saw themselves as "role models" who could help mentor their students around education much more broadly. Tania, for example, hopes that she had:

> instilled in them that they're looking at education as having value. And not that they didn't at the time that we started, but I think that now they see it a little more deeply. . . . it's really more about mentoring and showing them a positive role model, showing them that education has value, I think that's what it is. Because it really is about forming the personal relationships when you're paired with the same people over and over again.

Both Anastasia and Tania's narratives highlight the ways in which the work of the program transcends academic work. Anastasia shows the way in which she feels heard and seen as a person, standing in stark contrast to how she feels in school. The importance of this is backed up by the literature on student engagement and wellbeing (Akuoko-Barfi et al., 2023; Klem & Connell, 2004). It is significant that Anastasia puts her experiences in OYS in direct opposition to her experiences in school classrooms.

Creating spaces where students can speak to their emotional life, participate in communal healing, and prioritize their socio-emotional wellbeing is vital in supporting and validating the lived experiences of our youth. OYS and YPS provide youth with the space where their ideas and lived experiences are not dismissed, but centered. This kind of engagement with the whole student as an important piece of the work OYS and YSP do. We delve more into this in the next section.

Seeing Students for Their Whole Selves

To teach for liberation, education "must name and link the issues that schools have difficulty addressing, including racism, poverty, gang violence and drugs" (Mahiri & Sablo, 1996, p. 178). Such issues deeply impact the youth that Efe supports. Efe explains that if the curriculum does not address the issues that deeply effect the students, how are the students going to believe that the curriculum was created with them in mind? Efe created a space where students can come with their whole selves and collectively theorize and make sense of the socio-political factors that most impact their lives. As Efe explains:

> These spaces are impactful because these youth can come with their full selves, who they are, be their authentic self. They are not too loud, but loud enough; they don't take up too much space, but enter a space made for them; they are not complained about, but shown compassion.

For Efe, it is imperative that if healing is to take place for youth who are often marginalized by the institutions that claim to serve them, to facilitate healing and freedom, these youth must know that this after-school program was created for them by someone who shares many of the lived experiences that they do; someone who sees themselves in these youth, who has lived many of the difficulties they currently face. It is imperative that if we are going to support historically marginalized youth, we must engage in a pedagogy that centers how these youth speak to, seek, and make sense of freedom (hooks, 1994).

For Maria, OYS provides a place of belonging as well: "There is a sense of finding a place, a spot where I feel comfortable. I feel all right. Not comfortable as in lazy comfortable, but like… I can contribute some things here." As an educator, she finds this space different from other teaching spaces she has been in before—where she didn't feel that she quite fit in. Maria goes on to speak about how this is significant for the work she does with youth. She sees herself in her students through her own history of schooling, specifically around mental health:

> I saw myself in all of them in that they are so anxious . . . . They all started off super anxious about school. I would always tell them, "Listen, I was so anxious about, like, we're going to break it down" and I'd be like, "See, you did that. If you can do that, you can do this" and then when I'd finally get them there or we would get them there, I'd be like "told ya."

Through her own experience of struggling with mental health and schooling, Maria forged an initial connection to begin developing a relationship with her students. It also provided her with the perspective of how to approach teaching and learning with her students in order to address that anxiety. This experiential knowledge informed her own pedagogy in her tutoring sessions, and allowed her to address not only their academic needs but also their personal wellbeing, to reduce their anxiety and increase their confidence about school.

In some cases, the way that mentors identified with the situation their mentees were in created safe spaces for youth to explore the experiences of being marginalized in the school system together. John was one of the OYS mentors who gave his personal number to his students, so that they could be in touch if they needed to be—extending their relationship beyond the tutoring session into their personal lives. He explains:

> I saw a little bit of myself in them because, you know, I'm in academia now, but in high school I had awful grades. Like if you told me I was going to end up in a Master's program, I wouldn't believe it. So I understand that position of being unfulfilled in high school and unmotivated and just having no desire or sense of direction, sense of purpose. I know that gets better. . . . I saw that in them . . . I wanted to empower them and help them get there.

Through his own experience as a young Latinx man in the school system, who had low expectations thrust upon him of what his post-secondary options would be, John understands in an embodied way how this affects the motivation for students in the system. In both programs, mentors' practice was centered on understanding and compassion for what mentees may be experiencing. In the narratives shared, we see a preoccupation with understanding Black and Brown youths' lives outside of the classroom/program space—and a validating of those experiences and feelings. Through this practice, we witnessed spaces that centered success and wellbeing in ways that moved beyond surviving a violent academic system. In the next section, we explore the lessons learned about the radical possibilities of healing and transformation.

Conclusion

Youth Well-*Being*: Moving from Surviving to Healing and Transformation

In looking through the narratives for both programs, we reflect here on lessons learned about healing. Through the narratives of youth, we see that relationships emerged as the most critical factor in their experience. Following hooks' (1994) call for seeing relationality as a site of healing, we see that youth cite the strong relationships they develop as a critical aspect of their involvement with Our Youth Success and the Youth Speak Program. Mentors' own journeys trying to navigate the systems that marginalize them, whether successful or not, lead them to try and change that experience for others. The experience of navigating such violent systems impacts the way that youth feel about themselves as learners and how they come to engage with educational institutions (Delgado Bernal, 2006). It is not surprising then, that mentors' schooling experiences have impacted the ways in which they think about learning, drawing them to programs for youth like them. They then develop these caring relationships with students who in some way they feel a kinship with. Through their narratives, we see that this kinship is founded on seeing themselves in their students. Through developing these relationships, they hope their mentees can avoid those same negative experiences, as they themselves heal from their own.

Returning to Hill's (2009) concept of *wounded healing,* this exchange of experiences, and at time strategies, is reflective of a process of exchanging stories and creating moments of catharsis and opportunities for critical engagement that provides new ways of knowing and being. We see, through the narratives of participants from both programs, how these sites of healing support conversations around overcoming barriers within schools and extended to thinking about the wellbeing of youth in the entirety of their lives. Such work allows those who participate in this exchange to express their emotional lives, creating a space where "what we feel within and dare to make real... our fears, our hopes, our cherished terrors" (Lorde, 1984, p. 373) are acknowledged, believed, and cared for. It is in this way that mentors continuously saw youth for their holistic selves—not just who they were in school. Their relationships often extended beyond the program, to provide support to youth in their personal lives as well. Whether this was to navigate personal relationships or make personal decisions, the trust and compassion that mentors showed their students created a space where youth felt comfortable to discuss these aspects of themselves. In part, this was driven by the mentors' own experiences of marginalization and belonging.

Moreover, the schooling experiences of the mentors deeply informed their "pedagogical desires" (Britzman, 2006) to participate in OYS and YSP as well as develop these relationships with their mentees. In their stories, the young mentors position their mentees as reflections of themselves in their past schooling experiences; they are now the figure of mentorship that they wished they had had, or that they had in some opportunities. Therefore, their own participation in spaces like OYS and YSP, marked as they are by the cultural and racial identifications that these youth often experience as stigmatizing, provide a space for them to enact a pedagogy they didn't experience. Through a pedagogical relationship based on trust, care, and respect, mentors can symbolically rewrite the negative schooling experiences of the past.

In this sense, our second learning from looking at how these programs worked was the reciprocity of healing. The relationships that were built in the program enabled healing not just for mentees but also for mentors. This was significant because many of the mentors were also youth who were in university. Therefore, we see that these sites of healing and transformation impacted youth on multiple levels; and speak to the transformative potential of community-based programs as "critical places" for marginalized youth.

Community-based education programs for marginalized youth like the ones explored in this article, offer a vital bridge between formal and informal educational settings. Formal educational/schooling settings are an important part of youths' lives, but, as shown, they fall short of meeting the needs of their diverse students. Community-based programs, on the other hand, possess the flexibility to adapt programming and methodologies to resonate with the lived experiences of these youth, fostering a deeper engagement with learning and, by extension, promoting their wellbeing. By leveraging the strengths of both formal and informal settings, these programs can create holistic learning environments that empower marginalized youth to navigate complex social, economic, and cultural landscapes. A more collaborative relationship between formal institutions and community-based initiatives can facilitate the exchange of resources, expertise, and insights, ultimately benefiting students and educators. Exploring partnerships with post-secondary institutions and school boards enhances program access while also working against deficit narratives (Arraiz Matute, 2022b). Similarly, the critical pedagogies work of community-based programming can inform best practices for educators working with all youth. Moving beyond seeing students as their academic narratives to see each other as fully human, as bell hooks implores us to do, is transformative for all youth.

References

Akuoko-Barfi, C., Parada, H., Gonzalez Perez, L., & Rampersaud, M. (2023). "It's not a system that's built for me": Black youths' unbelonging in Ontario schools. *Review of Education, Pedagogy, and Cultural Studies*, *45*(5), 458–480. https://doi.org/10.1080/10714413.2023.2240686

Arraiz Matute, A. (2022a). Testimonios of community: Empowering Latinx and Portuguese youth in a Toronto-based academic program. *Race Ethnicity and Education*, 1–16. https://doi.org/10.1080/13613324.2022.2069743

Arráiz Matute, A. (2022b). Growing through the cracks: Community-engaged education and countering school disengagement. *Journal of Community Engagement and Scholarship.15*(1). https://doi.org/10.54656/jces.v15i1.475

Austin, D. (2013). *Fear of a Black nation: Race, sex, and security in sixties Montreal.* Between the Lines.

Baldridge, B. J., Hill, M. L., & Davis, J. E. (2011). New possibilities: (Re)engaging Black male youth within community-based educational spaces. *Race Ethnicity and Education*, *14*(1), 121–136. https://doi.org/10.1080/13613324.2011.531984

Blommaert, J. (2005). *Discourse: A critical analysis*. Cambridge University Press.

Blommaert, J., & Bulcaen, C. (2000). Critical discourse analysis. *Annual Review of Anthropology*, *29*(1), 447–466. https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.anthro.29.1.447

Britzman, D. P. (2006). Chapter Six: Monsters in literature. *Counterpoints*, *300*, 107–122.

Brown, R. S., & Parekh, G. (2019). *Graduation and post-secondary pathways over a generation: Toronto Board of Education long-term trends*. Canadian Society for Scholarship in Education Conference, Vancouver, BC.

Brown, R., & Tam, G. (2017). *Grade 9 cohort graduation patterns, 2011-16*. [Fact sheet 2, November 2017]. Toronto District School Board.

Cahuas, M., & Arraiz Matute, A. (2020). Enacting a Latinx decolonial politic of belonging: Latinx community workers' experiences negotiating identity and citizenship in Toronto, Canada. *Studies in Social Justice*, *14*(2), Article 2. https://doi.org/10.26522/ssj.v14i2.2225

Cameron, D. (2020, January 30). *Use of data for equity*. Asian Network for Global Cities Education Network Symposium, Creating Equitable School Systems: Learning from Toronto and Ontario, Toronto, Ontario, Canada.

Campbell, M. V. (2012). "Other/ed" kinds of blackness: An Afrodiasporic versioning of Black Canada. *Southern Journal of Canadian Studies*, *5*(1–2), 46–65.

Chávez, V., & Soep, E. (2008). Youth radio and the pedagogy of collegiality. *Harvard Educational Review, 75*(4), 409–434. https://doi.org/10.17763/haer.75.4.827u365446030386

Dei, G. J. S. (2006). "We cannot be colour-blind": Race, anti-racism and the subversion of dominant thinking. In W. Ross & V. Ooka Pang (Eds.), *Race, ethnicity, and education* (pp. 25–42). Praeger.

Delgado Bernal, D. (2006). Mujeres in college: Negotiating identities and challenging educational norms. In *Chicana/Latina education in everyday life: Feminista perspectives on pedagogy and epistemology* (pp. 77–79). State University of New York Press.

Edwards, T., & Parada, H. (2023). *Black youth disengaging from Ontario's educational system: Grounded theory of their educational experiences*. https://doi.org/10.32920/23541492.v1

Erbstein, N., & Fabionar, J. O. (2019). Supporting Latinx youth participation in out-of-school time programs: A research synthesis. *Afterschool Matters*. https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ1208384

Gaztambide-Fernández, R. A., & Guerrero, C. A. (2011). *Proyecto Latino Year 1—Exploratory Research. Report to the Toronto District School Board* (p. 103). Centre for Urban Schooling Department of Curriculum, Teaching & Learning; Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE), University of Toronto. https://www.oise.utoronto.ca/oise/UserFiles/File/ProyectoLatinoReportJan2011.pdf

Ginwright, S., & James, T. (2002). From assets to agents of change: Social justice, organizing, and youth development. *New Directions for Youth Development*, *96*, 27–46.

Gosine, K., & Tabi, E. (2016). Disrupting neoliberalism and bridging the multiple worlds of marginalized youth via hip-hop pedagogy: Contemplating possibilities. *Review of Education, Pedagogy, and Cultural Studies*, *38*(5), 445–467. https://doi.org/10.1080/10714413.2016.1221712

Government of Canada. (2022, October 26). *The Daily—The Canadian census: A rich portrait of the country's religious and ethnocultural diversity*. Statistics Canada. https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/daily-quotidien/221026/dq221026b-eng.htm

Government of Ontario. (2023). *Ontario Demographic Quarterly: Highlights of first quarter*. Government of Ontario. http://www.ontario.ca/page/ontario-demographic-quarterly-highlights-first-quarter

Guerrero, C. A. (2014). *Rethinking Latin@ student engagement: Self-identification, community engagement, and transformative learning through youth participatory action research* [Doctoral Dissertation, University of Toronto]. https://tspace.library.utoronto.ca/handle/1807/68130

Hammersley, M., & Atkinson, P. (2019). *Ethnography: Principles in Practice*. Routledge.

Hill, M. L. (2009). Wounded healing: Forming a community through storytelling in hip-hop lit. *Teachers College Record*, *111*(1), 248–293.

hooks, b. (1994). *Teaching to transgress*. Routledge.

hooks, b. (2001). *Salvation: Black people and love*. William Morrow Paperbacks.

James, C. E. (2009). Masculinity, racialization and schooling: The making of marginalized men. In W. Martino, W. Kehler, & M. W. Hightower (Eds.), *The "boy problem": Interrogating issues of masculinity and schooling* (pp. 102–123). Haworth Press.

James, C. E. (2012). *Life at the intersection: Community, class and schooling*. Fernwood Pub. https://fernwoodpublishing.ca/book/life-at-the-intersection

James, C. E., & Turner, T. (2017). *Towards race equity in education: The schooling of Black students in the Greater Toronto Area*. York University. https://edu.yorku.ca/files/2017/04/Towards-Race-Equity-in-Education-April-2017.pdf

Kantor, H., & Lowe, R. (1995). Class, race, and the emergence of federal education policy: From the new deal to the great society. *Educational Researcher*, *24*(3), 4–21. https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189X024003004

Kirkland, D. E. (2013). *A search past silence: The literacy of young Black men*. Teachers College Press.

Klem, A. M., & Connell, J. P. (2004). Relationships matter: Linking teacher support to student engagement and achievement. *Journal of School Health*, *74*(7), 262–273. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1746-1561.2004.tb08283.x

Ladson-Billings, G., & Tate, W. F. (1995). Toward a critical race theory of education. *Teachers College Record*, *97*(1), 47–68. https://doi.org/10.1177/016146819509700104

Lakin, R., & Mahoney, A. (2006). Empowering youth to change their world: Identifying key components of a community service program to promote positive development. *Journal of School Psychology*, *44*(6), 513–531. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jsp.2006.06.001

Lopez, I. (2000). The social construction of race. In R. Delgado & J. Stefancic (Eds.), *Critical race theory: The cutting edge* (pp. 191–203). Temple.

Lorde, A. (1984). *Sister outside*. Berkeley, CA: Crossing Press.

Mahiri, J., & Sablo, S. (1996). Writing for their lives: The non-school literacy of California's urban African American youth. *Journal of Negro Education*, 164–180.

Mahoney, J. L., Larson, R. W., & Eccles, J. S. (Eds.). (2005). *Organized activities as contexts of development: Extracurricular activities, after school and community programs*. Taylor & Francis Group.

Mata, F. (1985). Latin American immigration to Canada: Some reflections on the immigration statistics. *Canadian Journal of Latin American and Caribbean Studies*, *10*(20), 27–42.

McLaughlin, M. W. (2000). *Community counts: How youth organizations matter for youth development*. Public Education Network. https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED442900

McKittrick, K. (2002). "Their blood is there, and they can't throw it out": Honouring Black Canadian geographies. *Topia: Canadian Journal of Cultural Studies*, 7(1), 27–37.

Mogadime, D., & O'Sullivan, M. (2017). Latino-Hispanic student voices and self-representation through digital storytelling. *Canadian Journal of Action Research*, *18*(1), 20–33.

Newcomer, S. N. (2018). Investigating the power of authentically caring student-teacher relationships for Latinx students. *Journal of Latinos and Education*, *17*(2), 179–193. https://doi.org/10.1080/15348431.2017.1310104

Parada, H., Escobar Olivo, V., & Limon Bravo, F. (2023). "I Just Want to Belong Somewhere": Latinx youth's experiences in the education system in Ontario, Canada. *Journal of Latinos and Education*, *22*(4), 1524–1537. https://doi.org/10.1080/15348431.2021.1996366

Parada, H., Olivo, V. E., & Bravo, F. L. (2021). Latinx youth's experiences in the Ontario education system: Race, invisibility, and capital. *Canadian Ethnic Studies Journal*, *53*(1), 69–88.

Parker, L., & Lynn, M. (2002). What's race got to do with it? Critical race theory's conflicts with and connections to qualitative research methodology and epistemology. *Qualitative Inquiry*, *8*(1), 3–126.

Peel District School Board. (2021). *Directive 9: Annual equity accountability report card: Baseline data on the equity gap in student outcomes*.

Riessman, C. K. (1993). *Narrative analysis.* (Vol. 30). Sage.

Robson, K., Anisef, P., Brown, R. S., & George, R. (2018). Underrepresented students and the transition to postsecondary education: Comparing two Toronto cohorts. *Canadian Journal of Higher Education*, *48*(1), 39–59. https://doi.org/10.7202/1050841ar

Schugurensky, D., Mantilla, D., & Serrano, J. F. (2009). *Four in ten: Spanish-speaking youth and early school leaving in Toronto.* Latin American Research Education and Development Network (LARED) and Transformative Learning Centre, Ontario Institute for Studies in Education of the University of Toronto (OISE/UT).

Simmons, A., Ramos, D., & Bielmeier, G. (2000). *Latin American youth in Toronto: Identity and integration issues* [Administrative Report].

Solórzano, D. G., & Yosso, T. J. (2002). Critical race methodology: Counter-storytelling as an analytical framework for education research. *Qualitative Inquiry*, *8*(1), 23–44. https://doi.org/10.1177/107780040200800103

Spence, J., & Cameron, D. (2019). *Tensions and complexity inherent in the research policy relationship: Use of evidence and data as a means to refine and improve public education* [PowerPoint presentation]. Toronto District School Board.

Tabi, E. (2023). "You write because you have to": Mobilizing spoken word poetry as a method of community education and organizing. *Comparative Education Review*, *67*(4), 803–819. https://doi.org/10.1086/726620

Tabi, E., & Gosine, K. (2018). Neoliberalism, Black masculinity, and Black male youth: The value of transdisciplinary studies to urban educators. *World Futures: The Journal of New Paradigm Research*, *74*(7–8), 525–541.

Tabi, E., & Rowsell, J. (2017). Towards sensorial approaches to visual research with racially diverse young men. *Studies in Social Justice*, *11*(2), Article 2. https://doi.org/10.26522/ssj.v11i2.1574

Tam, G., & Armson, S. (2022). *Trends in Toronto District School Board special education data: 2016–2022*. Toronto District School Board.

Toronto, C. of. (2022). *Census backgrounder: Immigration, ethnoracial, mobility, migration, religion.*

Turner Consulting Group. (2015). *Voices of Ontario Black educators: An experiential report*. Ontario Alliance of Black School Educators.

Valenzuela, A. (2010). *Subtractive schooling: U.S.–Mexican youth and the politics of caring*. State University of New York Press.

Veronis, L. (2006). *Rethinking transnationalism: Latin Americans' experiences of migration and participation in Toronto*. Joint Centre of Excellence for Research on Immigration and Settlement—Toronto.

Veronis, L. (2010). Immigrant participation in the transnational era: Latin Americans' experiences with collective organising in Toronto. *Journal of International Migration and Integration / Revue de l'intégration et de la migration internationale*, *11*(2), 173–192. https://doi.org/10.1007/s12134-010-0133-9

Winn, M. T. (2013). Toward a restorative English education. *Research in the Teaching of English*, *48*(1), 126–135.

Yau, M. (2017). *Student and parent census: Some key findings about Black students*. Toronto District School Board.

Yau, M., O'Reilly, J., Rosolen, L., & Archer, B. (2011). *Census portraits: Understanding our students' ethno-racial backgrounds. Latin American students*. [Research and Information Services]. Toronto District School Board.

Yu, M. V. B., Liu, Y., Soto-Lara, S., Puente, K., Carranza, P., Pantano, A., & Simpkins, S. D. (2021). Culturally responsive practices: Insights from a high-quality math afterschool program serving underprivileged Latinx youth. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, *68*(3–4), 323–339. https://doi.org/10.1002/ajcp.12518

Zheng, S. (2020). *Caring and safe schools report 2018 –2019*. Toronto District School Board.

Alexandra Arraiz Matute, Assistant Professor, Institute of Interdisciplinary Studies, Carleton University, is a passionate community educator and organizer. Her research and pedagogical interests lie at the intersections of identity, culture, race, and migration. Past research has focused on the importance of relationships in teaching and learning as a site of healing and resistance for marginalized communities in the mainstream education system. Her approach to teaching is grounded in anti-oppression, equity, and feminist theories; she believes in honoring diverse knowledges while pushing ourselves out of our comfort zone to learn from each other.

Emmanuel Tabi, Assistant Professor, Department of Integrated Studies in Education, McGill University, completed his doctoral degree in Curriculum, Teaching and Learning at OISE/University of Toronto. He has also successfully completed a post-doctoral appointment through the Black Child and Youth Studies Network at the University of Windsor. He holds an M. Ed degree in Human Development and Applied Psychology. His intersectional Black Studies frameworks, strong arts-based and community-engaged scholarship with/in Black communities, and his wide experience working with school boards to address issues of equity, position him at the cutting edge of crucial education conversations and school-community-university collaborations.

Why Teachers Integrate YPAR in Their Teaching: Cultivating Youth Wellbeing, Student Voice, and Social Justice

Mary Frances Buckley-Marudas, Rosalinda Godínez, Karmel Abutaleb, Gray Cooper, Margaret Rahill, Drew Retherford, Sarah Schwab, Taylor Zepp, and Adam Voight.

Abstract

In this article, the authors share what they learned from considering a collection of narrative reflections written by six high school educators, all co-authors, who have integrated youth participatory action research (YPAR) into their instructional practice. Taken together, the written reflections shed light on teachers' reasons not only for pursuing YPAR but also for persisting with YPAR in their particular school context. The authors found that all teachers shared a commitment to social justice, yet their individual purposes for engaging with YPAR varied. Drawing on the teachers' written reflections, the authors delve into teachers' motivations for integrating YPAR into their teaching practice in order to conceptualize teachers' reasons for facilitating YPAR in school.

Introduction

Youth participatory action research (YPAR) supports youth in identifying, researching, and addressing pressing issues they see in their schools and communities (Cammarota & Fine, 2008). It is a collective activity led by youth and supported by adult allies. Procedurally, YPAR involves the selection and critical examination of an issue in participants' lives, systematic inquiry to generate new knowledge about the issue, and the use of that knowledge to inform change. There is evidence that doing YPAR in school improves attendance, engagement, agency, and wellbeing of participating students (Ozer & Douglas, 2013; Taines, 2012; Voight & Velez, 2018), can improve school climate and culture (Giraldo-Garcia & Galletta, 2015; Ozer & Wright, 2012; Voight, 2015), and can make schools more equitable (Christens & Kirshner, 2011). Because of the documented benefits of YPAR, a growing number of schools have integrated YPAR into the school day (Rubin et al., 2017).

Implementing YPAR in schools, however, is not always a straightforward task. YPAR's emphasis on student decision-making, critical analysis, and structural change often conflicts with the historically top-down organization of schools (Brion-Meisels & Alter, 2018). Although there is a growing body of literature on students' experiences and student outcomes with school-based YPAR, we do not know much about the motivations of teachers who facilitate YPAR in school or teachers' perspectives on why they facilitate school-based YPAR. Moreover, as shared by Chikkatur (2023), we do not know the impact of YPAR on teachers, including the professional learning opportunity YPAR offers adults (Means et. al, 2021). This can partly be explained because school-based YPAR is often the initiative of an innovative

teacher who finds a creative way to integrate it into a course (Anderson, 2020), or a university-based researcher who has initiated YPAR in partnership with a teacher or school leader (Caraballo, 2017). In the YPAR literature that considers teachers, the focus is primarily on the steps teachers take to implement YPAR, the challenges they face in enacting YPAR, and/or how they navigate those challenges (Brion-Meisels & Alter, 2018; Buttimer, 2018a; Ozer et al, 2013; Call-Cummings et al., 2020; Rubin et al., 2017). How teachers find ways to navigate challenges to implement YPAR is essential, but we do not have much insight into the unique backgrounds, traits, and pedagogical beliefs of teachers who choose or are selected to facilitate YPAR in school. Our aim with this conceptual article is to develop a better understanding of what compels full-time high school teachers to not only pursue but also sustain this work in schools.

Given the potential of teacher-initiated YPAR for youth wellbeing (Ozer & Douglas, 2013), we believe it is critical to deepen our understanding of YPAR teachers' motivations for this work and the various ways that current YPAR teachers conceptualize and frame this work in their own classroom contexts. Our team approaches this work with the belief that there are various attributes and pedagogical stances that could contribute to being a successful YPAR teacher.

In this conceptual paper, we present a compilation of narrative reflections written by six high school teachers in the greater Cleveland area who have found a way to integrate YPAR into their classroom or school. Whether as an elective, extracurricular activity, or an integral part of a core content class, each teacher has integrated YPAR into their own school setting. Our intent is to explore the six teachers' perspectives, as represented in their writings, to help us conceptualize YPAR teachers' motivations for facilitating YPAR. Taken together, the teachers' stories shed light on the range and variation of reasons these teachers have pursued and persisted with YPAR as part of their instructional practice. All six teachers are participating in a federally funded, multi-year project dedicated to implementing YPAR in public high schools in Ohio. Not surprisingly, we found that YPAR resonates with all of the teachers' individual social justice philosophies, which are tied to uplifting and cultivating affective relationships with their students. The narratives illuminate the connection teachers see between YPAR teaching and teaching for social justice. Our team explores the teachers' reflections to deepen our understanding of the dynamic relationship between social justice and YPAR and tease out different enactments and interpretations of social justice teaching. YPAR's principles align closely with teachers' ongoing efforts to cultivate student voice, foster social and emotional wellbeing, and increase youth civic engagement. When we looked at the individual teacher stories, the purposes were unique and wide ranging. Teachers' purposes for integrating YPAR are diverse and comprehensive, ranging from Gray's emphasis on student empowerment to Maggie's innovative approach to reconstructing traditional classroom expectations, Taylor's dedication to social-emotional growth and mindset, Drew's commitment to organizing and taking action on pertinent issues, Sarah's exploration of relationships with students and critical thinking, and Karmel's perspective on YPAR as a powerful tool for advancing social justice. Although the teachers are drawn to YPAR for distinct reasons, we noticed a consistent connection between YPAR teaching and the pursuit of social justice across the teachers' written reflections.

Literature Review

YPAR, whether conducted in school or out of school, stands out from other modes of youth involvement due to its emphasis on collective identity, research, and effecting fundamental change by tackling underlying causes of issues (Diemer, Voight, & Mark, 2011). YPAR guides youth through a systematic process: they identify a problem within their community, gather and scrutinize original data to deepen their understanding of the issue, and leverage this newfound knowledge to drive tangible change. Through YPAR, youth cultivate research acumen and hone presentation skills, enabling them to amplify their voices and forge essential ties within their community.

There is evidence that when YPAR has moved into school, the actions that derive from the students' YPAR projects may produce positive changes in school climate and culture, including teacher-student relationships (Giraldo-Garcia & Galletta, 2015; Ozer & Wright, 2012), changes to school policies and practices related to discipline (Christens & Kirshner, 2011), and social norms of empathy, trust, and cooperation (Voight, 2015). And while changing settings and social structures is a central goal of YPAR, there are also documented benefits to the wellbeing of individual youth who participate in YPAR, including a greater sense of ownership over their school (Voight, 2015), more agency and power in school decision-making (Giraldo-Garcia & Galletta, 2015; Ozer & Wright, 2012), connectedness to school and confidence as scholars (Taines, 2012), critical consciousness, empathy, trust, and cooperation (Ozer & Douglas, 2013), attendance (Voight & Velez, 2018), and higher standardized test scores and graduation rates (Cabrera et al., 2014). Given the potential of YPAR for fostering youth civic engagement, academic and research skills, and the development of youth voice (Buckley-Marudas, 2018; Cammarota & Fine, 2008; Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008; Irizarry, 2011; Mirra, Garcia, & Morrell, 2016; Ozer & Wright 2012), a growing number of schools are integrating YPAR into the curriculum.

Despite our evidence on students who engage with YPAR, we don't know much about the outcomes for teachers who facilitate YPAR (Chikkatur, 2023). With its roots in community organizing and an emphasis on challenging inequities, YPAR does not fit neatly within the structures of most public schools, which are often hierarchical and adult-led (Irizarry, 2011). Thus, YPAR requires a unique relationship between adults and young people. Adults are co-facilitators, and teachers must become students' allies in decision-making processes, allowing students to come to their own conclusions (Mirra, Garcia, & Morrell, 2016). This challenges teachers to allow students a sense of "ownership" while supporting the development of students' research skills (Ozer & Wright, 2012). YPAR positions students as co-researchers and aims to center youth perspectives, yet power relations in schools can be deeply entrenched (Buttimer, 2018).

Although we understand the nature of the necessary relationship between teachers and students and that school-based YPAR requires a reconceptualization of typical teacher roles, we do not have a clear understanding of the range and variation of professional motivations of teachers who implement YPAR in their classrooms. Few studies have focused on teachers' experiences (Buttimer, 2018) or the impact on the adults involved (Chikkatur, 2023). Buttimer's study shares insights into how two teachers navigate the institutional challenges of schools to implement YPAR in core content areas. In "Equity by Design" (Gonzales & Hong, 2022), the authors identify "critical and curious" as core traits required for an

educator to facilitate YPAR. The authors also highlight two action steps: doing "identity work" and building a classroom culture that honors students as knowledgeable and engages in regular discussions around social issues. Chikkatur offers a case study of one YPAR teacher in the Midwest to show the "transformative potential of YPAR on the adult facilitators' view of youth as experts and of themselves as agents of change." All three studies help us think about the teacher in relation to YPAR. Still, we need more information on teachers' perceived value of YPAR and the connections teachers see between YPAR teaching and their professional learning. As YPAR efforts expand in K-12 schools and are integrated into teacher education programs (Bertrand, 2018; Irizarry, 2011; Ozer & Wright, 2012; Rubin et al., 2017; Valenzuela, 2016), it is critical to develop a more nuanced understanding of YPAR teachers' motivations, especially given that the impact of YPAR projects depends on adults who are willing to take young people's ideas seriously. Drawing on teachers' written reflections on why they facilitate school-based YPAR, this paper offers insights into why teachers engage in this work and shares some of the possible outcomes and benefits for teachers who initiate and facilitate YPAR in schools.

University–High School Partnerships: Situating Teachers in the Collaboration

This article stems from an inquiry that is part of a larger longitudinal and mixed-method collaboration of the Cleveland Alliance for Education Research (CAER), which is dedicated to implementing and documenting YPAR in schools to improve student academic achievement, engagement, and school climate. CAER comprises research-practice partnerships between the Center for Urban Education (CUE) at Cleveland State University, Cleveland Metropolitan School District (CMSD), and the American Institute for Research (AIR). Our team of authors (six high school teachers and three university-based educators) has extensive experience designing, implementing, and evaluating school-based YPAR. The nine of us are part of a larger team that includes teachers, university-based researchers, high school students, and graduate students working together to design and implement YPAR in public high schools in Cleveland and across Ohio. The larger team is in the middle of a multi-year project focused on integrating YPAR in four high schools in Cleveland and another multi-year project focused on implementing YPAR in 30 districts in Ohio.

The teachers co-authoring this article work in five different public high schools with different content-area specializations (see Table 1). All teachers have more than two years of experience with YPAR. Karmel Abutaleb has taught YPAR in her Math and Computer Science classes, Gray Cooper has integrated YPAR in his English class, and Maggie Rahill has embedded YPAR in her ninth-grade English class. Drew Retherford and Taylor Zepp work in the same high school and have taught YPAR in multiple settings: their classroom, as an after-school/lunch program, and during a collaborative English and Social Studies class they taught together. Sarah Schwab has taught YPAR as part of a school-wide YPAR curricular integration for all ninth graders. All six teachers came to YPAR at different moments and for different reasons. Some, like Maggie and Karmel, learned of the opportunity to join this larger YPAR team through a professional learning meeting and took the initiative to indicate their interest. Maggie had learned about YPAR during her undergraduate work and, prior to joining the team, had been integrating YPAR into her English Language Arts class. Taylor and Drew were recommended by their principal for the project. For

Sarah, YPAR is embedded in the school's curriculum, and any full-time content-area teacher could be asked to teach YPAR. Finally, Gray was invited to engage in the school-based YPAR work after several years leading YPAR with the First Ring Leadership Institute in Northeast Ohio, which is a program sponsored by the First Ring Schools Collaborative that guides over 100 high school students through YPAR as a way to encourage student voice and making change.

Table 1

Backgrounds of YPAR Teachers.

This table offers a biographical snapshot of the YPAR teachers in this project.

Teacher	YPAR Experience	Content Area	School	District
Karmel Abutaleb	3 years teaching YPAR in her Math and Computer Science classes.	Math & Computer Science	Facing History New Tech High School	Cleveland Metropolitan School District
Gray Cooper	2 years teaching YPAR in English and 1 year supervising a group of student leaders as they completed a YPAR project.	English	Lakewood High School	Lakewood City School District
Maggie Rahill	3 years teaching YPAR in English classes.	English	John Marshall School of Engineering	Cleveland Metropolitan School District
Drew Retherford	4 years teaching YPAR in extracurricular clubs, cross-curricular government classes, and his public health course.	US History, World History, and Public Health	Lincoln-West School of Science and Health	Cleveland Metropolitan School District
Sarah Schwab	Involved in YPAR for 6 years, teaching it for the last 2 years.	Spanish teacher	Campus International High School	Cleveland Metropolitan School District
Taylor Zepp	4 years teaching YPAR in an extracurricular club, cross-curricular government classes, and in a senior capstone course.	English	Lincoln-West School of Science and Health.	Cleveland Metropolitan School District

HighKEY Meetings and Teacher Perspectives

Our team of authors has convened monthly for the last three academic years for what we call "HighKEY Design Team meetings." The meeting objectives change monthly, but the overarching goal is to delve into various facets of YPAR, from lesson planning and reflection on school-level implementation to building an online resource hub and analyzing data for the larger study. Our discussions have spanned the entire YPAR process, including its phases, challenges, and the practicalities of implementing it within school contexts, including specific core content areas. Drawing on practitioner inquiry traditions during our team meetings, we've introduced dynamic "write-ins" that one author brought to the team from her experience with the National Writing Project. With the write-in protocol, teachers respond to thought-provoking questions, fostering reflective discussions on their experiences. Write-ins allow all of us to engage in individual writing in a collaborative setting. The write-in prompts are tailored to the group every month and are intended to be responsive to the moment. The narrative writing generated during these write-in sessions, along with collaborative reflection, formed the basis of our team's presentation at the 2023 National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) Annual Convention, titled "Amplifying Youth Agency, Expanding Community Connections: Designing, Enacting, and Evaluating School-Based YPAR in Classrooms and Schools in Ohio."

In preparation for this conference presentation, during one of our HighKEY meetings, each teacher contributed written responses to a series of questions, all of which prompted teachers to delve into why they chose to integrate YPAR into their teaching practices. We engaged in this writing because we were genuinely interested in understanding the teachers' motivations and because we hoped our presentation could highlight teachers' perspectives on why they think YPAR is valuable. As a group, we made a long list of the core ideas and issues that, generally, came to mind when we thought about what, from the lens of a teacher, we wanted to communicate about YPAR. From there, we created a set of questions. These included: "Why YPAR? Can you please share with us why you were drawn to YPAR and why you have decided to implement YPAR in your classroom/school?"; "How has engaging with and teaching YPAR changed you?"; and, "YPAR is really about teaching social justice and prioritizing social justice and social change as part of the work that happens in schools. How do you see this YPAR work as social justice work?"

Using the write-in protocol, individual teachers responded to the question that resonated with them. After some silent writing time, we came together as a group to elaborate on the ideas in conversation. We encouraged everyone to continue to think and write about their chosen topics. In their responses, teachers explored the professional and educational value they perceive in engaging with YPAR. We draw on reflective writings to help us map out the different reasons why teachers embrace and persist with YPAR in their context. For our inquiry group, it was important to create space for teachers to name, in their own words, why this work has mattered to them and why they chose to engage with YPAR.

Below, we present written versions of what teachers shared during the NCTE conference. These case examples serve multiple purposes: they are narratives of their YPAR teaching experiences, reflections on their teaching practice and process, and advice to others who want to implement YPAR in schools. As you will see, teachers' responses included examples that emphasized the ways in which teaching YPAR

was meaningful for their own professional growth and learning, as well as ways that they believed it to be meaningful for their students. While each teacher spotlights individual examples, the overarching narrative reveals commonalities, overlaps, and connections, providing a comprehensive view of our collective experiences with YPAR. Given the aims of YPAR to support youth agency and social change, it was not surprising to find that a thread that runs through all of the teachers' perspectives relates to social justice. However, these teachers' stories offer new details related to why teachers find meaning in the work and how they feel a sense of purpose in and through their commitment to YPAR, even though YPAR implementation at schools is met with administrative pauses (like testing), expectations to follow traditional classroom management practices, and constraints as well as curricular challenges (i.e., meeting subject-based standards), and student absenteeism.

Gray's Words

> "Student demotivation is experienced as pain—for students, for us, for everyone."
> (Stuart, 2023, p. xii)

Engaging in YPAR with students certainly leads to student empowerment, but it also empowers and rejuvenates teachers. As a 15-year educator, I know fully well the feelings of burnout, exhaustion, frustration, and demoralization that plague our profession. It's soul-crushing to stand in front of unmotivated, disinterested students day after day and try to reignite their love of learning. Learning should be a joyful endeavor. Anyone who has spent time with an inquisitive, curious 5-year-old should recognize that humans have an innate will to learn. So what happens between ages 5 and 15 that so many of our students find school to be joyless and boring? Certainly, schools do not deserve all the blame for this, but we should avoid wasting time focusing on things outside our control. What happens within our classrooms is still (mostly) within our control, and YPAR is something I believe any teacher can implement in their classroom to increase student motivation, belonging, and empowerment—necessary ingredients for reigniting the will to learn.

Unfortunately, many students do not feel engaged, valued, seen, or important in school. They experience school as something being "done to them." YPAR is an antidote to this problem. Empowering students to engage with issues that are important to them breathes life and joy into a classroom. When students are given the freedom to engage in learning that is authentic and relevant to them, it results in meaningful academic joy. When students realize they have power and agency, it's incredible to see how that changes the "vibe" of the classroom. As a teacher, it's invigorating to watch students reignite their curiosity and love of learning.

The act of student empowerment is messy. To empower students, we must honestly assess and reevaluate power dynamics within our classrooms. To empower students, educators must lean into the discomfort of ceding some of their own power. Teachers must be willing to move from the role of "captain of the ship" into the role of "lighthouse" as students navigate their YPAR projects. This will likely lead to discomfort, missteps, and obstacles, but how can we expect our students to adopt a growth mindset without modeling it ourselves? Take a risk. Give students the freedom to leverage their learning into something they care about. Empowered students are engaged and motivated. In my experience, working with engaged and motivated students has brought joy back into the classroom.

Maggie's Words

If an outsider entered my classroom during our YPAR unit workday, they would encounter a classroom that looks (most likely) very different from their notion of what a classroom looks like. They'd see students in groups, talking loudly (sometimes over one another) with their next idea. They may hear one group discussing which interview question best fits their goals, another group looking up the best beat to make their rap song to, and another group with puzzled looks on their faces as they try to make their school-wide poster designs come to life. All the while, they may see me, the classroom teacher, sitting at my desk, working on my project, contributing to various groups when I can, or simply watching my students work. Sitting at my desk, I often reflect that if I had been observed in this lesson, I might not have met all of the expectations of our evaluation process, specifically regarding classroom management. This classroom is loud and spirited, and from an outsider's point of view, it may seem out of control because, as a matter of fact, it is out of control. As the teacher, I am no longer seeking to control everything happening, and that is where YPAR becomes a revolutionary tool in education.

The notions of classroom management and control of students' behavior and learning are deeply ingrained in our modern educational policies, theories, and practices. This idea that if teachers can control students, then they can teach them is nothing new. This focus on controlling students has resulted in our school designs today. While most would say control is a necessity to facilitate learning, many fail to recognize the harmful impacts this power imbalance has on students in general, particularly students of marginalized identities. Schools where students of historically marginalized communities make up the majority of the population have long suffered from extremely disciplinarian policies. Students of color have often been most subject to the model of sitting still, listening, and producing work as quietly and quickly as possible. If this expectation is not met, students of color are at a far greater risk of extreme disciplinarian policy such as suspension or expulsion. The school then uses the power of discipline to control students' behaviors. This model loses the freedom of thought, expression, and agency of learning.

YPAR is the exact opposite. It allows students the opportunity to take their learning into their own hands. It provides space for marginalized groups to be the researchers rather than the researched. So rather than me as a native English speaker who teaches English assuming I know what is best for my ESL [English as a Second Language] students, I saw the data a group of my students collected on the treatment of ESL students within our school, from a group of students who, at one point or another, had all been ESL students. Instead of attending PDs [professional development] or sessions on anti-racist teaching presented by professionals detached from the power dynamics of being a student, specifically a student of color, we learn from the experiences of students of color through projects like "How Interpersonal Racism Impacts the Classroom." Through these projects, students can take the power of learning into their own hands. They can learn how they want, about what they want, and have the freedom and agency to do something about the issues they see within their lives daily. In these moments, we begin the revolutionary shift of power-seeking control over students to creating power and agency for our students to not only engage in the most relevant type of learning possible, but also give them the space to teach us how to better educate, understand, and work alongside them.

Taylor's Words

When I first heard the term YPAR, I had no clue what it was. I was a fifth-year teacher adjusting to a brand-new school building during a global pandemic. I wasn't exactly eager to add anything extra to my plate, but I was interested enough to learn more. Throughout my time using the YPAR framework, I have used it in English 2 courses and an extracurricular club in my school. Though this work has only been happening for three years, it has made a significant difference in my students and myself.

One of the ways that I have seen this work benefit my students is in their social-emotional growth and mindset. If we look at the CASEL framework for SEL [social and emotional learning], it pairs perfectly with the work students do in a YPAR cycle. Through doing this work, we are asking students to work together, develop self and social awareness, and build empathy. Recently, I asked some of my students what impact they felt YPAR had on their high school journeys, and I was surprised at how many of them brought up points that fall under the lens of social-emotional learning. One of these students, who is usually quiet and sticks to themselves, said, "It made me feel like I had a voice in something. I felt smarter, and my grades went up." Another student, one who was initially hesitant to work in groups, said: "I had to work with a person I didn't like, but I still got the project done. It teaches you how to work with people." These statements really made me see the fundamental impact of this work. Not only are we empowering students, but we are helping them build the skills they need to collaborate and work with others in the larger world.

While the social-emotional benefits are significant, they do not happen overnight. The way I have seen the most positive outcomes is through the synergy between project-based learning and YPAR. When this is paired together, the SEL benefits come naturally. YPAR, at its core, is a form of project (or problem) based learning (PBL). By definition, PBL is a framework for students to develop skills and knowledge while working on a project collaboratively for an extended period of time.

In the English Language Arts classroom, I make this work through the lens of argumentative reading and writing. Over the course of a few weeks, students set their own contracts, conduct research, and make plans of action. While for the students, it may seem fun, and to an outside eye, the classroom may look chaotic, they are deeply engaged with reading and writing standards. Through sustained inquiry in a group setting, they are growing academically and socially. This work is just one piece to help them enter the world as engaged and action-minded adults. As one of my students said, "I like how it brings us together and brings new ideas. You see kids actually try to fix problems from a younger perspective. It shows you that we can really come together and fix stuff."

Drew's Words

I became a Social Studies teacher because I want to save the world. I mean that sincerely. I want to instill a value of citizenship in kids beyond the superficial activities of voting and watching the news; I want to give students the skills and the desire to organize and take action around issues that affect them on their own behalf. I wouldn't say I succeeded in doing those things before I started YPAR. In fact, the two most impactful moments of my teaching career occurred this year, and both came from students who participated in YPAR. The first was receiving a card from Kandah at her high school graduation in which she said that she was going to commit to fighting for human freedom. The second was running into Issac, another YPAR student of ours, in the hall and having them tell me that I taught them about power and how to challenge power. These two instances were the first time in my seven years as a social studies teacher that I felt I had done my job successfully. The first-ever confirmation that I may be able to save the world, and I think YPAR has tremendously helped me have that impact on kids.

Sarah's Words

As a Spanish teacher who strives to keep the target language at the forefront of my classroom, I sometimes struggle to get to know my students in those deeper ways. I know what sports they play or their favorite foods, but I'm always a bit envious of the deep conversations my colleagues in the English and History departments get to have. At our school, YPAR is a stand-alone class, and so when I was presented with the opportunity to teach two sections, I jumped at the opportunity. YPAR breaks down so many barriers not only between teachers and students, but also among the students themselves.

The issue identification and exploration in YPAR can be a very soul-baring process for both teacher and student, and so I find that I often have glimpses into deep fears and passions, frustrations, and fascinations, with opportunities to discover what truly drives my students because they are honest in ways they aren't or can't be when pushed by a curriculum. As a bonus, students benefit in the same way in their relationships with each other—and good relationships almost always lead to good learning. Because we are ultimately changed most by knowing people deeply, it is my students, through the YPAR experience, that have changed me.

Another very exciting part of facilitating YPAR is that it engages students in such a way that they learn *how* to think on their own. It pushes students to think critically—beyond what they see and hear in the next TikTok video. Along those lines, I think even in programs and curricula that try to be student-centered, teachers often assume that we know what our students care about or how they will care about it. However, YPAR has helped me reach that uncomfortable place where I can push them to think critically while they maintain their voice and their moral core.

When schools allow students to voice concerns, I think we often push directly to take action. The YPAR cycle asks students to use their own lived experiences, but then to carry out real and original research, think critically about it, and only then take action. It's those two middle parts of the cycle that I think are so often overlooked and yet lead to the best kind of action. One group of students last year had identified police brutality as their issue and were very fired up to "get all the cops fired." However, after going through the process of surveying their community members and doing some observing of the police in their community, they decided, instead, to focus on finding ways to repair and enhance the relationship the police have with the community. On those days when kids aren't feeling motivated or are getting frustrated, I remind them that the research they do is one-of-a-kind—they are truly the only ones asking those questions and talking with those people. Once they have experienced YPAR, they will have a cycle that they can return to over and over again in their life to be change-makers in their communities.

Karmel's Words

"I'm for truth, no matter who tells it. I'm for justice, no matter who it is for or against. I'm a human being, first and foremost, and as such I'm for whoever and whatever benefits humanity as a whole." Malcolm X

In an era marked by democracy, freedom, and social justice, it's reasonable to expect a prevalence of unbiased perspectives. Unfortunately, this is not the case. Some people are still fighting to this day to be seen as human beings and treated equally. YPAR, as a revolutionary and impartial instrument, eradicates bias from the heart while guiding the mind with evidence-driven data.

By granting students the opportunity to investigate current social justice issues at school, in the community, and around the world through YPAR, we are preparing tomorrow's productive citizens in the pursuit of a more equitable society. Teachers plan by providing unbiased resources, facilitating content learning, teaching data analysis techniques, supporting discourse, and promoting critical thinking to find resolutions. On the other hand, students unbiasedly research, explore, analyze, interpret, discuss, discover, recommend, and resolve. The power shifting and power-sharing prepare students to grow where unity and equality triumph over any differences. With YPAR, the marginalized can confront oppression by sharing a data driven narrative with the world.

Over the last two years, a recurring theme in my classes' YPAR projects has been enhancing the school experience for students. The students have candidly expressed their concerns, providing me with valuable insights into the challenges they face. Their voices illuminated the school's deficiencies, such as a lack of motivation, engagement, and inspiration. The absence of clubs, afterschool programs, and sports further contributed to a disconnect, leaving students without a sense of belonging or school spirit.

In response to these identified needs, I undertook a Computer Science training, successfully passing the state exam. This paved the way for a groundbreaking initiative: the introduction of a Computer Science elective course at the school. This course not only addressed students' desire for more enjoyable electives but also offered them the opportunity to earn a Tech Seal and college credit. The impact of YPAR extended beyond academic offerings. The school's staff organized motivational trips based on students' recommendations to foster achievement encouragement. YPAR became a catalyst for radical improvements, particularly benefiting students from minority backgrounds with low socioeconomic status. This transformative change represents a significant achievement in social justice.

In the current academic year, the central theme of YPAR projects revolves around promoting social justice and equity, both within the school and on a global scale. While we often focus on instilling a sense of citizenship in our students within their communities, it is crucial not to overlook our responsibilities to the broader world. Quoting the words of civil rights leader Martin Luther King, who emphasized that "A threat to justice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere," we recognize the interconnectedness of justice. As someone of Palestinian descent with a lineage marked by refugees escaping genocides since 1948, my empathy extends to all historically marginalized communities, including Indigenous peoples and people of color. In this context, I foresee the transformative power of YPAR in helping shape my students, instilling in them the courage to seek truth, embrace fair perspectives, and advocate for the liberation of oppressed groups. The goal is not merely the absence of tension, but the promotion of peace through disseminating justice, and YPAR stands as the key to achieving this noble aspiration.

Discussion

Taken together, the collection of teachers' perspectives as facilitators of YPAR in their classrooms provides insights into their motivations for teaching YPAR as part of their teaching practice. The narrative reflections also shed light on teachers' reasons for committing to this work. We found that the open-ended nature of this reflective writing provided an opportunity for all six teachers to elaborate with some detail on their personal and professional commitment to YPAR. Teachers had the freedom and flexibility to focus on the aspects of YPAR that were meaningful to them. Keeping in mind that our aim in this article is not to analyze teachers' writing as empirical data but, rather, to explore the writings as case examples

of why teachers engage and persist with YPAR, we offer the following discussion around some of the themes across these case examples. Given our intent to understand the range of teachers' motivations for and persistence with YPAR, we pay attention to the synergies and differences across teachers' stories.

We found that the focus areas across teachers' written reflections are diverse and comprehensive, ranging from Gray's emphasis on student empowerment to Maggie's innovative approach to reconstructing traditional classroom expectations, Taylor's dedication to social-emotional growth and mindset, Drew's commitment to organizing and taking action on pertinent issues, Sarah's exploration of relationships with students and critical thinking, and Karmel's perspective on YPAR as a powerful tool for advancing social justice. Although focal areas overlap, they are unique to each teacher.

Gray, for example, elaborates on how many of his students who do not feel engaged, valued, seen, or important in school are empowered by engaging with issues that are important to them, bringing "life and joy into a classroom." We noticed that the perceived value of YPAR for Gray as a teacher is YPAR's capacity to spark students' interest in school. His story illuminates an example of a teacher who is committed to embedding YPAR in their instructional practice because it invites young people, especially youth who may feel disconnected from school, into meaningful and challenging academic work. For Gray, this work resonates with him because of the learning environment that it fosters for *all* students.

Maggie's story offers another perspective on the perceived value of YPAR for teachers. Maggie describes how YPAR allows for reconstructing traditional classroom expectations, changing a classroom from being "managed" and students from being "controlled." For Maggie, a teacher who sees collaboration and respect as critical elements of her classroom, the core tenets of YPAR are well-aligned with her pedagogical approach. YPAR's emphasis on teachers and students as allies in the learning process supports Maggie's interest in positioning students as knowledgeable generators and challenging the typical scripts for teachers and students. In Maggie's story, we see a telling case of a teacher who is motivated to integrate YPAR because of the priority YPAR places on positionality and power. Maggie persists with YPAR, given the synergy with her pedagogical beliefs. In Taylor's case we see a similar synergy between YPAR and her pedagogical commitments, but the focal points for Taylor are different. Taylor's story shows how her students benefit from YPAR socially and emotionally. As such, students feel like they have a voice, improve academically, and develop a sense of togetherness. YPAR matters to Taylor because of the benefits and outcomes she observes in her students. YPAR has provided a pathway and a framework for Taylor to address the increasing emphasis on students' social and emotional learning.

Drew's story offers another case example of why YPAR matters to teachers. Drew shares how his former students expressed his influence in becoming students who challenged power and took action for justice. For Drew, the value of integrating YPAR is tied to the professional joy and pride he feels when his students recognize and act on their ability to make social change as young people. In Sarah's example, we see that she values YPAR because of the priority YPAR places on building relationships with students. Sarah, a veteran Spanish teacher, illustrates how the nature and focus of YPAR naturally allow teachers to get to know students in different ways than in non-YPAR classes. Sarah sheds light on the significance and the value for teachers to be able to relate to and come to know their students in and through their research, especially through the kinds of problems they care about and how they think about the

problems. Finally, Karmel's story illustrates how, through YPAR, students become leaders who focus on social justice and who can make tangible changes in their school community. For Karmel, YPAR matters to her personally and professionally because YPAR provides her with the framework and the tools to teach math for social justice. In her case, we see how integrating YPAR has also supported her, in collaboration with her students, not only to navigate but also to change some of the problems she faced at the school.

These identified themes encapsulate the range and variation in teachers' commitment to integrating and persisting with YPAR in school-based contexts. As we elaborate, teachers' purposes for engaging with YPAR are unique and varied. Across all of the cases, however, we found a commonality. All of the perspectives shared by our group of teachers illustrate teachers' intent to foster social justice through education. This teacher-driven commitment finds tangible expression through the implementation of YPAR. Each teacher, in their distinctive approach, is dedicated to instilling in students leadership qualities, empowering them to articulate and address societal injustices. Undergirding the teachers' efforts and perseverance in enacting YPAR is a commitment to young people's social and emotional wellbeing, both now and in the future. They know their students' stark realities, including poverty and structural inequalities. They are dedicated to effecting tangible change in students' lives, as guided by students. Karmel, Gray, Maggie, Drew, Sarah, and Taylor are actualizing their intentions through their YPAR pedagogies, everyday actions, and interactions as they converse about pressing issues affecting students' lives. The overarching aim is to cultivate a sense of agency within students, fostering the understanding that they possess the capacity to effect positive change (through critical discussion, advocacy, and action research) within their communities and the broader society.

These educators recognize the importance of acknowledging and addressing the power dynamics embedded in the traditional educational system. For example, they diligently work hard to deconstruct traditional teacher-student roles and relationships, forging new dynamics and prioritizing open and candid dialogues. They have open dialogues, allowing students to articulate their concerns and perspectives on various social and school-based issues. And they do so in a way that works towards creating an atmosphere where students feel heard, respected, and valued. Furthermore, they establish genuine connections with their students by breaking down hierarchical barriers. These connections create an environment where honest conversations can flourish, creating meaningful relationships that are heartfelt. It is evident from the teachers' narratives that this work is not easy or without challenge. Gray's experience highlights this as he first implemented YPAR outside of the school day with a group of selected students because they had been identified as leaders. Now, engaging YPAR as a teacher in the classroom, he recognized that there is more legwork on the front end to set all kids up to see themselves as leaders and to build and manage relationships between students and administrators.

Teachers' efforts for social justice are not perfect and happen amid challenges. Yet, they find avenues and spaces for YPAR to unfold in various contexts (during after-school clubs, lunch, and in multiple courses they teach). They have found that teaching YPAR also involves explicitly addressing school standards, navigating administrative relationships, re-formatting curriculum objectives, and balancing the dynamic process of designing and implementing studies co-guided by students and led by students. It's

a delicate balancing act that requires educators to play multiple roles—educators, participants, researchers, collaborators, peers, and advocates. In this intricate dance, teachers in YPAR must discern when to steer the ship, bring students back to focus, step back, and recognize when students have taken the lead and completed their part of the journey. This builds on Chikkatur's (2023) idea that school-based YPAR requires "a willingness of adults to let themselves be transformed through deep listening and letting go of the idea of control" (p. 10). This collaborative and nuanced approach ensures that YPAR is a shared venture where students actively contribute to shaping the research agenda and steering the course of inquiry. The teachers' purposes offer important ideas for thinking about how and why teachers might be able to work with students and, importantly, not only honor their ideas and action steps as legitimate and credible but help them connect with key stakeholders and take action, especially when the action steps may challenge the decisions or policies of building or district leaders.

Ongoing Collaborative Inquiry

Our collaborative inquiry into teachers' motivations for doing this YPAR work in schools and understanding what it means for teaching, learning, and young people's wellbeing is ongoing. In this section we share what we learned when we paused to look at teachers' motivations as a collective because this shared look is important to our work as an inquiry group. Although the majority of this work has focused on our reflection on the individual writings of the six YPAR teachers, it is also important to understand that we are doing this as part of a larger community of teachers across the region. In this way, we spent time thinking about how we might represent our work as a collective. We opted for a visual collage given its capacity to allow us to work together on one item.

Given our belief in the potential of arts-based inquiry to connect our motivations for engaging YPAR in school, we wanted to engage in collaborative creative composing to offer one visual representation of what it means to us—individually and collectively—to engage with YPAR in schools. Drawing on the shared composing tools available in Canva, our team created a collage (see Figure 1) to visually represent the ideas from the written narratives that surfaced as most salient to us. Similar to the teachers' written reflections, this work was completed during a HighKEY Design Team meeting, although this meeting was virtual. From behind our individual screens on a synchronous Zoom meeting, we composed this collage in response to the following prompt: 1) What sense do you make of our team's collection of teachers' narratives? Like DeHart's (2022) "poetic encounters" approach, we reflected on the narratives to artfully and playfully capture our individual thoughts in the shared space. Slowly, we juxtaposed words and images on the blank template to visually represent the themes we noticed within and across the collection of teachers' narratives.

Similar to the explanation by Doerr-Stevens et al. (2023), the artistic inquiry and creativity embedded in this composing process created room for imagination and professional agency. The result was a collage combining images, words, and phrases highlighting agency, vision, and justice. There are images that reflect a spirit of collaboration and teamwork and represent concepts such as equity, advocacy, and justice. The collage also includes images of graphs and charts, reflecting the centrality of research, and pictures of megaphones, speakers, and protest marches that reflect students sharing, raising, and

amplifying their voices. Building on the written narratives, this collaborative collage showcases the interrelationship between YPAR and social justice, particularly regarding teachers' commitments to YPAR. This collaborative composition offers our team's perspective on how the teachers' individual motivations and purposes for integrating YPAR are tied to their commitment to students.

Fig. 1: Collaborative collage. Our team created the collage using shared composing tools to visually represent teachers' motivations for implementing YPAR in school and the value teachers see in YPAR for student learning and wellbeing.

Closing Thoughts

This collection of teachers' perspectives offers six detailed cases on why YPAR matters to them. YPAR teachers can come to the YPAR work for different reasons, and it will fuel different aspects of their professional goals and identities. The examples are helping our team map out why teachers are driven to enact and sustain YPAR as part of their teaching practice. The detailed accounts of why YPAR matters to these teachers and the value of pursuing YPAR point us toward understanding the potential professional learning and outcomes for teachers. We hope this work will inform school leaders and teacher educators who are promoting YPAR in schools and districts. We also hope that sharing what we learned from inquiring into teachers' motivations for YPAR opens a larger and much-needed conversation around why teachers commit to this work in their classroom, what the benefits, according to teachers, are for those who commit to this activist-oriented work, and what value current YPAR teachers think it has for young people.

By sharing examples of multiple teachers currently enacting YPAR in different schools and different content areas, we hope to extend existing conceptualizations of school-based YPAR teachers. Our emergent conceptualization of teachers' motivations for facilitating YPAR is important for several reasons. First, given the reciprocal nature of YPAR work, and the necessity for teachers and students to work together, the new insight on teachers' motivations helps us tease out more information about why teachers would be willing to engage in this work. This will be helpful in thinking about who is a good candidate for teaching YPAR in schools and, especially in encouraging candidates who may not be the most obvious choice. We found that our teachers really do have a wide variety of reasons for being drawn into this work, and that it serves them in different professional ways. Second, it is becoming clear that we need to know more about teachers' motivations because oftentimes the success of a YPAR project hinges on how teachers make room for young people as decision-makers and leaders. This inquiry helped our team realize how critical it is for teachers to see the ways in which YPAR enhances and develops their own professional and personal learning and identity. All the YPAR facilitators are motivated by the student outcomes associated with YPAR, but this inquiry illustrates how it shapes, drives, and enhances their professional commitments. We believe this is critical for teachers' and students' wellbeing. Finally, this emergent conceptualization of YPAR teacher motivations is critical to the conversation around implementing YPAR in school because the trajectory and success of students' projects and in turn, student outcomes, depend on working with adults who are willing to listen to young people.

Notes

All of the authors are part of the YPAR Teacher Inquiry Group.

References

Anderson, A. J. (2020). A qualitative systematic review of youth participatory action research implementation in U.S. high schools. *American Journal of Community Psychology, 65*, 242–257.

Bertrand, M. (2018). Youth participatory action research and possibilities for students of color in educational leadership. *Educational Administration Quarterly: EAQ, 54*(3), 366–395.

Brion-Meisels, G., & Alter, Z. (2018). The quandary of youth participatory action research in school settings: A framework for reflecting on the factors that influence purpose and process. *Harvard Educational Review, 88*(4), 429–454.

Buckley-Marudas, M.F. (October 2018). Amplifying voice, facilitating agency: Engaging youth participatory action research in an urban, public high school. *English Leadership Quarterly, 41*(2).

Buttimer, C. J. (2018). The challenges and possibilities of youth participatory action research for teachers and students in public school classrooms. Berkeley Review of Education, 8(1), 39–81. https://doi.org/10.5070/B88133830

Buttimer, C. J. (2018). *What happens when YPAR moves into the classroom? A study of teachers' understanding of the epistemology of Youth Participatory Action Research.* [Doctoral dissertation, Harvard University.]

Cabrera, N. L., Milem, J. F., Jaquette, O., & Marx, R. W. (2014). Missing the (student achievement) forest for all the (political) trees: Empiricism and the Mexican American Studies controversy in Tucson. *American Educational Research Journal, 51*(6), 1084–1118. https://doi.org/10.3102/0002831214553705

Call-Cummings, M., Sheanáin, U.N., & Buttimer, C. (2020) School-based YPAR: negotiating productive tensions of participation and possibility. *Educational Action Research*. https://doi.org/10.1080/09650792.2020.1776136

Cammarota, J. & Fine, M. Eds. (2008). *Revolutionizing education: Youth participatory action research in motion.* Routledge.

Caraballo, L., Lozenski, B. D., Lyiscott, J. J., Morrell, E., & Meiners, E. R. (2017). YPAR and Critical Epistemologies: Rethinking Education Research. *Review of Research in Education,* 311.

Chikkatur, A. (2023). Being in "Their house": Impact of youth participatory action research on adult learning at a rural high school. *Thresholds, 46*(3), 387–398.

Christens B.D., Kirshner B. (2011). Taking stock of youth organizing: an interdisciplinary perspective. *New Directions for Child Adolescent Development, 2011*(134), 27–41. https://doi.org/10.1002/cd.309

Diemer, M. A., Voight, A. M., & Mark, C. (2011). Youth development in traditional and transformational service-learning programs. In T. Stewart & N. Webster (Eds.), *Problematizing service-learning: Critical reflections for development and action* (pp. 155–173). IAP Information Age Publishing.

DeHart, J. D. (2022). Poetic and visual explorations in pandemic teaching. *LEARNing Landscapes, 15*(1), 129–140. https://doi.org/10.36510/learnland.v15i1.1064

Doerr-Stevens, C., Layden, T., & Goss, S. (2023). Collaboration beyond words: Using poetic collage to cultivate community with students and colleagues. *LEARNing Landscapes*, *16*(1), 145–159. https://doi.org/10.36510/learnland.v16i1.1094

Duncan-Andrade & Morrell (2008). *The art of critical pedagogy: Possibilities for moving from theory to practice in urban schools*. Peter Lang Inc.

Giraldo-García, R. & Galletta, A. (2015). "What happened to our sense of justice?": Tracing agency and critical engagement in a youth participatory action research project. *Journal of Urban Learning, Teaching and Research, 11,* 91–98.

González, T., & Hong, J. (2022). *YPAR for the classroom: A guide for the critical and curious educator. Equity by Design.* Midwest & Plains Equity Assistance Center (MAP EAC).

Irizarry, J. (2011). Buscando la libertad: Latino students in search of freedom in school. *Democracy in Education, 19,* 1–10.

Means, D., Blackmon, S., Drake, E., Lawrence, P., Jackson, A., Strickland, A., & Willis, J. (2021). We have something to say: Youth participatory action research as a promising practice to address problems of practice in rural schools. *The Rural Educator, 41*(3), 43–54. https://doi.org/10.35608/ruraled.v41i3.1074

Mirra, N., Garcia, A., & Morrell, E. (2016). *Doing youth participatory action research: Transforming inquiry with researchers, educators, and students*. Routledge.

Ozer, E. J., & Douglas, L. (2013). The impact of participatory research on urban teens: An experimental evaluation. *American Journal of Community Psychology, 51*(1–2), 66–75. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10464-012-9546-2

Ozer, E. J., & Wright, D. (2012). Beyond school spirit: The effects of youth-led participatory action research in two urban high schools. *Journal of Research on Adolescence, 22*(2), 267–283. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1532-7795.2012.00780.x

Ozer, E. J., Newlan, S., Douglas, L., & Hubbard, E. (2013). "Bounded" empowerment: Analyzing tensions in the practice of youth-led participatory research in urban public schools. *American Journal of Community Psychology, 52*(1/2), 13–26. https://proxy.ulib.csuohio.edu:2096/10.1007/s10464-013-9573-7

Rubin, B. C., Ayala, J., & Zaal, M. (2017). Authenticity, aims and authority: Navigating youth participatory action research in the classroom. *Curriculum Inquiry, 47*(2), 175–194. https://doi.org/10.1080/03626784.2017.1298967

Stuart, D. (2023). *The will to learn: Cultivating student motivation without losing your own. Corwin Teaching Essentials.* Sage Publications.

Taines, C. (2012). Intervening in alienation: The outcomes for urban youth of participating in school activism. *American Educational Research Journal, 49*(1), 53–86. https://doi.org/10.3102/0002831211411079

Valenzuela, A., Ed. (2016). *Growing critically conscious teachers: A social justice curriculum for educators of Latino/a youth.* Teachers College Press.

Voight, A. (2015). Student voice for school-climate improvement: A case study of an urban middle school. *Journal of Community & Applied Social Psychology, 25*(4), 310–326. https://doi.org/10.1002/casp.2216

Voight, A., & Velez, V. (2018). Youth participatory action research in the high school curriculum: Education outcomes for student participants in a district-wide initiative. *Journal of Research on Educational Effectiveness, 11*(3), 433–451.

Mary Frances (Molly) Buckley-Marudas, PhD, is an associate professor in the Levin College of Public Affairs & Education at Cleveland State University. Her research interests include youth-led research, adolescent literacies, digital literacy, and English education.

Rosalinda Godínez, PhD, is a postdoctoral fellow at the Center for Urban Education at Cleveland State University. She received her PhD in Social and Cultural Studies from the University of California, Berkeley, and a bachelor's degree in Sociology from Washington State University. As an education ethnographer, Rosalinda is committed to establishing collaborative and action-based partnerships that document and honor people's everyday life and community, movement, and education practices.

Karmel Abutaleb hails from Palestine but was born and raised in Jordan. She is a secondary Math educator at Natividad Pagan International Newcomers Academy in Cleveland, Ohio. Kamel has implemented YPAR in her classes for the past three years with a focus on social justice. Hoping for a more equitable world for all humanity, she helps the students find their voices and challenge the system through research and actions. She believes in YPAR as an invaluable tool to pursue her research interests: social justice in education, student engagement and motivation, and school attendance and its impact on performance.

Gray Cooper is a high school English teacher at Lakewood High School in Lakewood, Ohio. His research interests include student motivation, teacher development, authentic learning, and educational leadership.

Margaret (Maggie) Rahill teaches ninth-grade English at John Marshall School of Engineering in Cleveland, Ohio. She is deeply interested in understanding how YPAR can serve as a tool to enhance student agency, teacher practices, school and community climate, and restorative practices.

Drew Retherford is a secondary Social Studies teacher at Lincoln-West School of Science and Health in Cleveland, Ohio. He is deeply committed to serving the people of Cleveland through ensuring their children receive a high-quality public education. He has implemented YPAR for the past four years in both classroom and student club settings. He has a background in labor and anti-war organizing and sees YPAR as a method of empowering students and passing organizing skills on to younger generations.

Sarah Schwab teaches World Languages (Spanish) and serves as an International Baccalaureate Coordinator at Campus International High School in Cleveland, Ohio. Her research interests include school culture, world language instruction, and, of course, YPAR.

Taylor Zepp is a secondary English teacher at Lincoln-West School of Science and Health in Cleveland, Ohio. Her research interests include project-based learning, social-emotional learning, and YPAR as a vehicle for student empowerment.

Adam Voight, PhD, is an associate professor in the Levin College of Public Affairs & Education at Cleveland State University. His research interests include school climate, youth civic engagement, and urban education.

The Kids Are Alright:[1]
Changing Perceptions for a New Wellbeing

Ramona Elke

Abstract

This work is an Indigenous Métissage weaving together poems, stories, scholarship, and images. It suggests that the distress, educational struggles, changes in traditional educational pathways, and other behaviors of current youth in response to social challenges offer ways out of these crises rather than being symptoms of them. This work offers pathways to learn from the wisdom of distress, and ways to create healing futures for ourselves, the land, waters, ancestors, and All Our Relations.

How I Came To Be Here: Introductions

To Me and All My Relations[2]

Aanii. Tansi. Boozhoo kina wiya. Ramona Elke ndi-zhnikaas. Saskatchewan, Canada ndoo-njibaa. Mission, British Columbia, Canada ndi-daa. Anishinaabe/Métis-kwe endaaw. Enknoomagenh ndaaw. Hello, everyone! I am from Saskatchewan, Canada. I currently live in Mission, British Columbia, Canada, as a grateful, uninvited guest on the unceded ancestral lands and waters of the Sto:lo peoples. I am Anishinaabe/Métis on my late mother's side and Celtic/Germanic on my father's side. I have been a high school teacher for over 22 years in a rural high school in Maple Ridge, British Columbia, where I teach both Indigenous and non-Indigenous students. I am a PhD student in Arts Education at Simon Fraser University, focusing my inquiry on how to create spaces of honoring for all beings. I am a poet, a grandmother, a painter, beader, drummer, and singer. Each of these pieces of me has influenced how I walk in the world as a student, as a teacher, mother, grandmother, partner, and relation. It is important that, as an Indigenous scholar/searcher, I introduce myself, as I have been taught, through the scholarship of such folx[3] as Absolon & Willet (2005), Archibald (2008), Kovach (2021), and Wilson (2008), to connect myself, relationally, to people and place and spirit. Through this introduction, I situate myself in relation and reciprocity, creating connection between you, me, and all beings and Ancestors around us who bring us teachings and prepare us to walk together in this learning journey/conversation.

My work calls me into spaces through vision, ceremony, making, listening, and witnessing to teach me how to be most useful to children and youth and All My Relations. I have learned, over the many years of trial and error, that the answers to our worries are not to be found in the same, colonial ways of viewing *wellness*; rather, they are to be found in the dis-ease manifest in the behavior of the youth. The distress many children and youth exhibit are not the issue. They are pointing us in the direction of the solutions, and we ignore them at our peril. Through Indigenous ways of being, knowing, and doing, and arts-based

education/making practices, we have an opportunity to listen to the teachings[4] of the youth and to collaborate with them to create meaningful change for ourselves, our ancestors past and future, the planet, and All Our Relations.

To the Work

Through this discussion, I invite you into wondering: What if our definitions of *wellness/disease* and systems (educational systems, mental health/wellness systems, economic systems) are insufficient for the youth and, through their non-completion of outdated educational pathways, their non-compliance in a soul-crushing workforce, and refusal to buy into the old mythology of home/land ownership, they are showing us the way out of the crises we are currently trying to survive, rather than being distressed within them? What if their distress is not about the demand to live in the old systems but an invitation for us to step outside of worn-out systems, into inclusive, spirit-forward futures where all beings are honored as they are (particularly Indigenous youth, Black youth, youth of color, and LGBTQIA2S+ youth)? I would suggest, after over two decades of walking with *challenging*[5] youth in all these communities, the youth are opting out of these old capitalist/colonial/heteropatriarchal systems because, perhaps, the systems are in distress, not the youth who are fighting to resist them.

This work reflects upon these questions through Indigenous Métissage, sharing my poetry, stories, and photographs. Métissage, as a methodology of inquiry, has been taken up by Indigenous and non-Indigenous scholars as an invitation to weave many strands of knowing into a whole (Kelly, 2021; Hasebe-Ludt, et al., 2009). Papachase Cree scholar, Dwayne Donald (2012), teaches that Indigenous Métissage, specifically, seeks to create community and connections through the weaving together of seemingly disparate pieces into a whole that reaches for ethical relationality to honor difference rather than trying to eliminate or shy away from it (Donald, 2012, p.535). Indigenous Métissage brings ethical relationality into the arts-based/ar/t/ography-based methodology of Métissage from an Indigenous understanding of connection and relationality between the pieces being braided. The experience of the re-searcher, as specific to the teachings of their nation/Elders/life ways informs the work, so that the inquiry is not pan-Indigenous, but, rather, deeply specific to the teachings of the person doing the work.

This work weaves together three strands: the strand of my story as a *teacher,*[6] the strand of my experience as a mother of a young man who is struggling to find his way in these days of post-COVID teachings, and the thread as a poet/artist who has found medicine to these current dis-eases through the power of making and living in the transformational offerings of art. I offer, in this weaving of story, image, and poetry, an invitation into a conversation around the possibility that youth are showing us the way to better futures where, perhaps, their distress and dis-ease may become medicine for us all.

Strand #1

Learning the Hard Way: Teacher as Student

Until the imbalances in our society's current ways of living are addressed, people will continue to experience symptoms and behaviors that call for movement towards good relationships, healing, and social and environmental justice. These difficulties are not considered pathological but rather as important sources of knowledge and wisdom. (Fellner, 2019, pp. 161–162)

Fellner's Teaching Story: *Iskotew and the Crow*[7] (2019)

Fig. 1: "The Crow" by cheddar. Licensed under CC BY-SA 2.0.

One of the most resonant teachings I have received, and found profoundly helpful, is Dr. Karlee D. Fellner's (Cree) story *Iskotew and the Crow* (Fellner, 2019, pp. 143-150). In her story, Fellner offers a Métis/Cree perspective of dis-ease and distress as the pieces of ourselves that offer a way to be connected to All Our Relations, our own inner medicine (that which heals, sustains, strengthens, and connects my body, mind, heart, and spirit to my web of relations so that I may walk in a good way for the good of All My Relations), our own healing journeys, and our ancestors past and future. Through the story, Fellner offers "a conversation that is shifting paradigms of pathology that are dis-empowering and dominating toward Indigenous counternarratives of survivance, resilience, and resurgence" (Fellner, 2019, p. 151). The story offers alternatives to colonial approaches to dis-ease and illness and, thus, offers a new definition or understanding of wellness, not exclusively for Indigenous folx but for us all. Within our wounds lives the knowledge of how to heal and the wisdom of how to create spaces where healing is offered for the wounds of others. Fellner shares this teaching as *trauma wisdom:* "the personal and collective medicine that emerges through direct, vicarious, collective, or intergenerational traumas" (Fellner, 2019, p. 156). Coming face-to-face with the teachings of *trauma wisdom* has helped shift my view of the struggles youth present as "behaviors" to an invitation to reflect upon the possible solutions these behaviors are asking me to address.

The past 22 years have been an education in surrendering to the hope that how I walk in the world, alongside youth, creates communities where love, spirit, and creation are at the center—where youth are able to be themselves in their fullness. Over half of those two decades have been spent in the role of a support teacher for youth who were labelled as *challenging*, with one educational psychological diagnosis or another, who struggled to be seen as *successful,*[8] and struggled to experience success in the colonial educational sense of the word. The youth with whom I walk live in complex worlds of disengagement from and weariness of classrooms and curricula that do not see them, their lives, or communities. They are Indigenous, non-Indigenous, racialized, and LGBTQIA2S+. Many come from poverty, from homes where addiction lives alongside them and their siblings, from lives where racism, sexism, and homo/trans/queer/phobia are everyday realities. These young ones often find themselves in trouble with teachers, administrators, and the law—fighting authority, fighting friends, family, and

themselves. Mental and physical health crises are very real in their lives, from school avoidance, anxiety, and life-threatening depression.

During the early years of my career, I suffered, deeply, alongside them, in their struggle to walk their walk. My view of their struggles was deeply rooted in the "dominating Western colonial strategies aimed at symptom reduction, such as . . . behavior management techniques. . . and these strategies did not adequately address the difficulties these children were facing, particularly in a long-term, meaningful way" (Fellner, 2019, p. 153). I was even on a school district *behavior* team designed to help classroom teachers manage challenging classroom behaviors[9] in secondary schools. My experience, observation, and reflections on my own practice created in me a deep knowing that "these interventions merely exacerbated symptoms" (Fellner, 2019, p. 153), especially for Indigenous youth. This is no surprise considering that the so-called *behavior management* strategies were (and still are) deeply rooted in "settler colonial ways of knowing, being, and doing that have themselves contributed to the traumas and symptoms being expressed in the first place" (Fellner, 2019, p. 153). I had come to know, through much of my training, that "all behavior [was] meaning" (Connect Parent Group training, The Maples, Vancouver, BC) but the view I had of the behaviors was rooted in pathology rather than *trauma wisdom* (Fellner, 2019, p. 156). In the past few years, I have come to know the work of scholars, such as Dr. Karlee Fellner (2019) and Drs. Marya and Patel (2021), all of whom suggest that the behaviors I have spoken of above, are invitations to examine the dis-ease from a social justice/healing perspective, rather than pathologizing the distress. When I leaned into Indigenous ways of being, knowing, and doing, I came to hear the teachings of not only the wounds of my students, but also the wounds of my children, my partner, myself, and my ancestors.

Living the Teachings

The best example I have of this teaching comes from November 2022, after an incident at our school called my attention to the damage COVID has done to the youth, my colleagues, the school community, and to me. A group of boys, identified by many frustrated colleagues as a "problem" for the past two years, acted out against several LGBTQIA2S+ youth, prompted by a conflict which occurred outside of school the day before. One of the LGBTQIA2S+ youth had had enough and took it upon themselves to retaliate in the community by punching one of the "bullies" in the face. The next day, in school, the peers of the person who was punched found the friends of the "puncher" in a classroom at lunch and tried to push past a young teacher to get into the room for pay back. The young teacher held her ground, called administration, and protected the youth in the room by not letting the angry group past her.

Colleagues were, justifiably, horrified and furious with the behaviors of the youth involved in the altercations (who became known by these colleagues as "bullies"). I was too—but the first question I asked was: if folx knew the youths had been a "problem" for two years, why had no one stepped forward to offer them guidance? Through the lens of *trauma wisdom,* I was invited to consider that these "behaviors" were a deep, painful yearning for belonging and community which required Indigenous ways of being, knowing, and doing to help us all heal from the conflict because colonial ways, rooted in punishment and separation, were not sufficient for healing the *whole* community. My classes and I held

a drumming circle, offering a pathway to healing the rifts in our school community. I also offered the ceremony of smudge and circle work, in the hopes that these Indigenous medicines might help soothe the wounded spirits of my colleagues and friends and myself. We had all been wounded in this conflict— "victims," "bullies," and those of us who cared for both.

I had learned that one of the Grade 11 students with whom I had been walking for the past three months was at the center of the conflict. He had just recently shared with me that his grandfather was a dissident in Romania when Nicolae Ceaușescu was president. His grandfather was a political prisoner, tortured by government police at a time when Ceaușescu was torturing and murdering millions of Romanians. He shared how his father was beaten and abused by his grandfather after he was released from prison and how the whole family felt the hurt and anger of the generations before because of the traumas of their ancestors.

At the time, I knew, instinctively, that the traumas experienced by the young men in the group of "bullies" was driving their intolerant behavior of others. Children and youth have a gift that allows them to, as Shirley Turcotte says "'pick up the trouble so that the troubled aren't as troubled, and . . . can therefore function better than they would if the child did not pick up the trouble'" (Turcotte in Fellner, 2019, p. 157). Those boys were showing our school that there were gaping holes in our community, through which they were falling. They were not being guided by safe adults to learn how to be in a good way in a community—how to be understanding, compassionate, and accepting—because no one had been this way with them. In the absence of a welcoming, caring community, they created one of their own with their own rules of engagement, acceptance, and definition of what community is. They taught me that COVID ripped apart an already threadbare school culture that was in dire need of repair, restor(y)ing, and reinvention in a way that would allow for the growth of truly inclusive school communities.

Fellner reminds us that healing is not linear and that we are continually in a web of relations made up of our families, communities, the natural world, spirit world, and All Our Relations (Fellner, 2019). What this also suggests is that in this web are our past and future ancestors who call to us to prepare spaces to heal them in spirit or make ready spaces which are centered in wellness, wholeness, and justice for All Our Relations. Fellner reminds us "from an interconnected Indigenous perspective, these symptoms and behaviors may have emerged solely because an ancestor was trying to communicate through them about how balance, wellness, and healing were needed in that environment" (Fellner, 2019, p. 158). In these times, in Fellner's experience, "when honored and listened to, the wisdom that emerges through these conversations moves the child and all of her relations towards balance, wellness, healing and social and environmental justice" (Fellner, 2019, p. 158). The young ones are showing us what needs to be done to create healing spaces where they can become who they were born to become. We just need to have the courage to listen and honor their offerings—even if we are uneasy with what is being offered.

seeking

Shel Silverstein's fractured circle—
searching for its missing piece;[10]
as if one
            single
                      thing
could fill a thousand years of empty
or 500 years of heartbreak.

this longing to do good by souls
so far lost in the darkness of their forests,
even glow-in-the-dark breadcrumbs
can't lead them out of my despair.

leaning into faith-filled places pliant with hope,
like mercury on mirrors;
separating in my grasp if I hold it too tightly—
like them.
like me.

like me and my missing piece.

Fig. 2: Our powwow drum. Ceremony in June 2021
at our school after the recovery of the 215 children
outside of Kamloops Residential school. Photo from
the author's collection.

Strand #2

Learning From My Children: Parenting a Twentysomething Post COVID

> Some suffer far more than others, but none of us is immune to pain, and hopefully none of us ever becomes inured to pain because pain is a reminder that life is complex and mysterious, never to be taken for granted. In the tangled midst of the events, experiences, and emotions of each day's living, we need to be careful that we do not perceive the world as fearful only. (Leggo, 2011, p. 118)

I am deeply blessed to have three children, all of whom have found their own ways in the world. My two oldest children (nearly 30 and in their early 30s), have found themselves in successful careers, have established themselves in homes and relationships; one has begun a family of his own, while the other is blossoming in her new relationship. Both have Master's degrees, careers, and both are well on their way in the world, "successfully," as defined by the pre-COVID world of capitalism, environmental crisis denial, and heteropatriarchy. Both are social justice/environmental justice-minded, both are generous, kind, and supportive of all kinds of folx. They make me proud every day with the ways they choose/have chosen to walk in the world.

My youngest son is 21. He is ten and eight years younger than his older siblings and has taken a decidedly different path in his life, so far. I have asked for, and been given, his permission to share pieces of his story as a teaching to understand, more deeply, what I have been talking about in this work. He, unlike his brother and sister, was diagnosed with a learning disability in Grade 8, struggling with reading and writing his whole life. He is, however, verbally gifted, designated as a "gifted child" at the same time as his dyslexia and learning disability diagnoses. He walked through his schooling very differently than his brother and sister. For his brother and sister, success in school seemed to come so easily. Not so much for him. He excelled in discussions and complex, abstract thinking (like decoding poetry or stories), and has been an empath since he was a little boy. He feels the world very deeply—the feelings of humans and the more-than-human. His struggles in colonial school structures were excruciatingly painful for him and for us, as his family. He rarely felt seen by his teachers or the curriculum he was forced to engage in and, as an extremely gifted spoken word artist/storyteller, his gifts were devalued and shut down, especially in elementary school where he was often in trouble for talking to his neighbor or talking too much in class.

He carried the wounds of his school experience through high school. Even though he made good friends and found teachers who cared a great deal for him, lifted him up, and celebrated his gifts, he could see no future pathway to postsecondary education. In his view, "Why should I pay for something I can learn on my own from people who really do what I want to do [personal communication]?" He does not feel the need to chase educational outcomes pre-determined by the same school system that did not see him in the first place. I can't say that I blame him. Why would he want to engage, at a "higher level," the same systems that traumatized him from the very beginning?

I introduce my youngest son here because he is one of those young ones who have found themselves in a world where mental distress, challenges with transitions to employment and further education, housing, health and environmental crises have become the foundation of his early adulthood. He chooses art over what he understands to be the capitalist lie, intuitively understanding that "the arts act like this mighty medium that also allows for the intimate conversation between the soul of the world and the human soul" (Kelly, 2010, p. 97). Like Anishinaabe/Métis scholar Dr. Vicki Kelly, my son has come to a knowing that "'making' needs the soil of the soul to enact its active alchemy" and "in its unfolding it renders or transforms us, makes us available or resonant to the world around us" (Kelly, 2019, p. 19). He intuitively knew/knows that through his art, he is made more, becoming the human he was born to be.

My youngest son and I have often spoken of the future, of which he has great anxiety because he has chosen not to take the same route as his brother and sister. He has chosen to reach toward a world where folx work together to create in community and to create communities where capitalistic ways are challenged. He and his friends want a world where traditional educational pathways are challenged, where learners of all kinds may follow their Learning Spirits[11] (Battiste, 2010) to the places and spaces they long to be so that new worlds may be born out of the ashes of the old ones. He longs for worlds of social and environmental justice where diverse learners, thinkers, and gendered folx may have space to bring to bear the changes our ancestors are demanding of us.

I used to worry about him and his pathway through life. I used to worry about his friends and others from his generation who are opting out of taking the same pathways as his brother and sister and all the other older brothers and sisters. I used to worry about how they would all make their way, that their refusal to attend postsecondary, to fall into jobs they hated, to even be disinterested in getting a driver's license would impede their abilities to travel to the futures they want for themselves. For a while, I viewed their pathway as distress, as pathology. I don't see it that way anymore. Now, I lean into the different ways of my youngest son, and I try to learn from what he is choosing to do. What is he asking of me? What are they asking of us? What are they asking for us to open up so they may come through and bring their teachings? How could our shifting focus invite stories of survivance (Vizenor, 2009), especially for our Indigenous and LGBTQIA2S+, Black and other racialized folx? How could we invite teachings from our present and future ancestors by listening to the ways our children are choosing to navigate the world right now? (Fellner, 2019) What if we learned from Iskotew's story to guide the young adults, like my son, shifting from "trauma as individual pathology to the wisdom of the past-present-future self in relation to the natural and spirit worlds"? (Fellner, 2019, p. 157) We could find the solutions we seek to the crises we are feeling in our families, schools, communities, and among All Our Relations.

Fig. 3: My youngest son as a wee boy. He has been reaching for the light his whole life. Photos from author's collection.

I am profoundly grateful to my youngest son and to the generations of youth with whom I am currently walking. They have helped me root myself in the teachings of my ancestors, encouraging me and calling me to bring them into educational spaces as antidotes to the "trauma of erasure and separation" (Snowber and Bickel, 2015, p. 67) currently experienced by children, youth, and adults as spirit-forward, empathetic, and artistic as my youngest son.

star child

little sunbeam chaser
reaching to catch and hold fire—
like Icarus
but not like him at all:
your wings won't melt,
made of prayers instead of wax…
and the dreams
your Ancestors built for you,
millennia before you were born.

making your way from the other side of the sun,
you remembered how it sounded:
the stars singing to you as you fell to earth—
taking the opening in our wounded lives
so soon after your sibling chose to return to the stars.

makes me always wonder why you chose me—
us—
with your wise spirit
and wild ways—
to teach how to step so gently in the wildest places,
keeping us true North;
facing the stars that call us home
to the places on the other side of the sun
where they sing our names so many times,
maybe we'll remember them ourselves.

Strand #3

Learning From Making: The Medicine in Indigenous Poiesis

Why does the practice of Indigenous Poiesis and the honouring of our Indigeneity matter today? It is because it creates human beings that are porous to the teachings of Creation and the circle of life. It allows us to fully participate, through our Indigeneity, in the ceremony of living with 'All Our Relations'…it creates an organ of imagination in which dwells the living signature or essence of being that we are gifted by Creation. (Kelly, 2019, pp. 24-25)

Fig. 4: Smudging with sweetgrass at my writing table. Photo from author's collection.

Amid the crisis and chaos youth walk in and face, where do they find the hope and strength to move forward, face to the light? Where do they look to for ways to, like Iskotew, find the medicine within themselves to keep standing? In my experience, as a *teacher,* mother, and artist, I have found my medicine in Indigenous ways of being, knowing, and doing. Through making practices, I have found ways to make, unmake, and remake myself and have offered these practices to my students, my children, and my grandchildren as ways to connect themselves to these healing ways as well. Practices and pedagogies such as weaving, beading, drumming, singing, the practice of smudging,[12] and talking circles have been offered in my learning communities as ways to calm the anxious heart and reconnect youth to the voices of their spirits. Fellner (2019) reminds us "the smudging, talking circles, and traditional teachings make a profound difference in the classrooms. The energy shifted towards greater harmony and balance, fostering learning, and increasing student engagement" (p. 165). I too have noticed the same shift in my learning spaces. Youth have reflected to me, through discussion and written reflection, that they feel calm, safe, and seen in our space because when they are allowed to weave, bead, or draw when they listen to lessons/teachings, they feel more connected to what they are learning. They have also shared that they appreciate having "making days" built into our week. Every Friday, the youth work on any making practices they have been engaged in. Some folx are working on crochet or knitting projects, some bead earrings or decorative pins for friends and family, some draw or paint, and some choose to use the time to work on homework, do puzzles, or play games with their friends.

Fig. 5: Samples of projects from our classroom. Tiles, woven bags, and painted feathers as gifts for Elders in our community.

What I have learned, is that these days are the days of connection for our community. They sit together and check in on one another. I am permitted time to build stronger relationships with youth, especially those who show me, through their actions, that they need to feel seen. In the old days, I would have seen those youth—the ones who are *challenging*—and tried to diagnose their behaviors. They have taught me to pay attention to what is being asked for and, during these quiet times, I am able to show I am available to them and whatever it is they are asking me to learn about what they need. It is so much easier to connect, to slide into difficult conversations, when we are beading, weaving, or sitting together over a card game.

When we engage in Indigenous pedagogies such as walking on the land, beading, weaving, drumming, singing, circle work, and smudge, not only do the youth and children have an opportunity to listen to and learn from their trauma wisdom, but the adults working with them do as well. Those of us who have worked with students, whose journeys are difficult ones, may suffer vicarious trauma[13]. We need medicine, too, to be most useful and available to the children and youth and what they are asking of us. Like Fellner, I have also observed/experienced "teachers who were vicariously picking up and carrying some of the difficulties the children were facing were able to let go of those difficulties with the help of the circle and land-based practices" (Fellner, 2019, p. 161). If you are in the circle, doing ceremony, you cannot help but be healed by it, too. That is the nature of the work, this is the work of ceremony:

> We are born spiritually perfect, but once we experience trauma in our lives, we begin to spiral away from that state of perfection. Ceremony helps us reverse that spiral by dealing with our traumas in healthy ways, and it helps us to start spiralling in a better direction. Through ceremony, we can create a relationship with Spirit: it will love us back, feed us with good energy, and help push us forward. (George, 2023, p. 79)

Not only does ceremony offer ways for youth to return to the pathways to becoming who they were born to be, it also offers "culturally rooted coping mechanisms that would help them face challenges throughout their lives" (Fellner, 2019, p. 165). When youth and children learn early how to cope with crisis and the pain of their trauma, present and past, they have choices which will, potentially "serve as a critical role in the prevention of health and social issues which is not often addressed in current health systems that are designed primarily to react to existing concerns" (Fellner, 2019, pp. 159-160).

Fig. 6: My medicines: smudge, tobacco, and drum.

Photo from author's collection.

only through ceremony

Ceremony will save us,
bring us back alive from the brink of extinction
in a grand plan cast upon us like a net made of nettles.

Ceremony will lift us up out of tar pits
and denial of all who we are in Spirit and love—
from the mouths of Ancestors,
holy songs are sung to us,
to free our pain and bring us hope
but we can only find them through ceremony.

Reminders From Crow: Why These Teachings Matter

Over the past twenty-two years, I have walked alongside children and youth, observing the challenges and callings many of them have taken up. I have watched my own children walk into this uncertain future, filled with pride as they have made their way to the places and spaces they have needed to be to become the people they were born to become. Two out of three of my children have found ways to step into the roles and responsibilities created for them by a system they could work within. For my youngest son, these systems did not offer him what he needed to help him become who he is called to be in these days of environmental crisis and social injustice. For him, and for many of my students, the challenges of transitioning into colonial educational pathways, meaningless employment, and the adoption of the capitalist/heteropatriarchal definition of "success" is not what he/they are looking for. Their mental, physical, emotional, and spiritual distress is not a deficit. These are feelings calling them to demand different options for their futures—options beyond the ones that have gotten us into this mess in the first place.

As the adults in the lives of these young ones, we are called to hear their trauma wisdom, to shift from "colonial deficit narratives toward Indigenous narratives of survivance, resilience, and resurgence … from patronizing to honouring, from reactive interventions to prevention through good relationships … and from pathologizing 'symptoms' to listening to and engaging wisdom, knowledge, and resilience" (Fellner, 2019, p. 165). Within their "distress" lives the answers to the crises and chaos they/we are living.

Through the ceremony of making, smudging, drumming, singing, and working together in learning communities of care and honor, we offer medicines which help us spiral back to the source of our spirit connection to All Our Relations, where the healing begins and the re-emergence of our true selves can be found (George, 2023, p. 79). Finally, like Dr. Vicki Kelly, I wonder, and seek to answer the following questions so that I may prepare spaces for youth to find their way, and to learn from them in their trauma wisdom, because our futures depend upon it:

What process and practices can we gather in our medicine bundles as we walk bravely into the future amidst the climate crisis and the crisis of relations with our human relatives? … Will we find a way to transform our systems of education and justice to restore ecological sustainability? And how can we transform ourselves such that we are useful to this task? (Kelly, 2021, pp. 142–143)

Chi miigwech, kina wiya! (Thank you very much, everyone.) Thank you for walking with me and reflecting with me in this work.

Notes

1. A nod to The Who's 1965 single.

2. *All My Relations* is a term used by many Indigenous communities/people as a statement of connection to our human and more-than-human relations. It encapsulates our acknowledgment that there are more relations to us than merely those of the human world. This includes the physical and spiritual worlds as well.

3. Below is an excellent explanation and source for the use of the word "folx":
   Overall, research around the usage of "x" in language shows that there are generally five reasons it's used, says Norma Mendoza-Denton, PhD, linguistics expert and anthropology professor at UCLA.
   1) To avoid having to assign gender within a word.
   2) To represent trans and gender non-conforming people.
   3) As a variable (such as in algebra), so it acts as a fill-in-the-blank term for each person. For example, in the use of "xe" or "xem" in neopronouns, a category of new pronouns that can be used for anyone, regardless of gender.
   4) For many colonized communities—whether Latinx, Black, or other Indigenous groups—the "x" also stands for all that has been taken away from them by colonizers. For example, communities in Mexico call themselves Chicano/Xicano/a/x as opposed to "Mexican" because it signals identification with Indigenous roots.
   5) The "x" also comes into play specifically in Indigenous languages that have always had or have lost their third gender. For example, the community in Juchitan, Mexico, is reclaiming and celebrating their third gender "muxe."
   All of these reasons reference the desire to escape binary language as well as colonization. In reclaiming language, it's easier to pave the way for a more inclusive system.
   https://www.shape.com/lifestyle/mind-and-body/latinx-folx-womxn-meaning

4. Indigenous teachings encompass ways of knowing, being, and doing that are actively practiced or learned. Teachings is the English word used to describe the process of sharing knowledge or original Indigenous methods of educating. Original practices and teachings are distinct to each diverse Indigenous group and continue despite centuries of legal and extralegal oppression and demonizing such as forced assimilation laws, policies, attitudes, beliefs and practices rooted in genocide that are inflicted on Indigenous Peoples (https://cass.ab.ca/indigenous-education/teachings/).

5. I have italicized this word because it is the label placed on students whose behavior is viewed as unacceptable or challenging in a colonial view of what classrooms should be. These are the students who would have been labelled as having behavior or mental health issues such as anxiety, depression, aggression, non-compliance, and many more. I do not see these young ones in this way. I try to view their behavior as a form of communication, calling me to see them more fully and understand what needs they are asking me to meet.

6. I have chosen to italicize the word *teacher* because I feel that this term is laden with all kinds of baggage of power that I do not feel particularly comfortable with. I am a student of life and All My Relations who happens to hold the title of *teacher*. It is very important for me, as an Indigenous searcher, that folx understand my discomfort with the history of the term and the colonial power issues it holds.

7. For a complete telling of the story, see her chapter in *Knowing the past and facing the future: Indigenous education in Canada*. She shares the story with the Education Faculty at Simon Fraser University in the following presentation: https://www.sfu.ca/psychology/about/indigenous-reconciliation/Events/iskotew_crow.html. I highly recommend listening to the presentation and the story. Her teachings are deeply resonant with the work we all seek to do.

8. Successful, in this sense, is the ability to produce, regurgitate, read, write, and engage with colonial curricula, void of offerings of adaptations or modifications to address individual learning needs.

9. Challenging behaviors such as distracting others in a learning environment, school avoidance, fighting, lack of engagement with the learning material, swearing, drug use, and other behaviors which cause challenges to a productive learning environment.

10. A nod to Shel Silverstien's book *The Missing Piece*.

11. Mi'kmaq Elder and scholar Marie Battiste teaches us what the learning Spirit is: "We are all on a journey to find our unique gifts given to us by Creator, Elder Danny Musqua tells us. *Knowledge is held by the spirits, shared by the spirits and comes from the spirits . . . our body then can be seen as carrier of the learning spirit* (Elder Danny Musqua, in D. Knight, 2001). The 'learning spirit,' then, is the entity within each of us that guides our search for purpose and vision. Our gifts unfold in a learning environment that sustain and challenge us as learners." (Battiste, 2013, p. 18)

12. Smudging is the ceremonial practice of burning sage, sweetgrass, cedar, and tobacco in a shell or cast iron/metal container, waving the smoke over the body as a way to cleanse negative energies.

13. Vicarious trauma happens when caregivers experience similar manifestations of the trauma of others. If we are not mindful of our experience of this, we can become burned out and unhealthy, just like the folx with whom we work. For more information on vicarious trauma, here is one resource: https://www.cdcr.ca.gov/bph/wp-content/uploads/sites/161/2021/10/Trauma-Fact-Sheets-October-2021.pdf

References

Absolon, K. & Willett, C. (2005). Putting ourselves forward: Location in Aboriginal research. In L. Brown & S. Strega (Eds.), *Research as Resistance: Critical, Indigenous and anti-oppressive approaches* (pp.97–126). Canadian Scholars Press.

Archibald, J. (2008). *Indigenous storywork: Educating the heart, mind, body, and spirit*. UBC Press.

Battiste, M. (2013). *Decolonizing Education: Nourishing the learning spirit*. UBC Press.

Battiste, M. (2010). Nourishing the learning spirit: Living our way to new thinking. In *Education Canada, 50* (1), 14 – 18. https://www.edcan.ca/wp-content/uploads/EdCan-2010-v50-n1-Battiste.pdf

Connect Parent Group handout https://static1.squarespace.com/static/6191d20b18cacb2b6bf74bad/t/61f644343c2b8a3e9fa4f18d/1643529269434/Attachment-and-your-Child-1-1.pdf

Donald, D. (2012). Indigenous Métissage: a decolonizing research sensibility. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education, 25*:5, 533 – 555. https://ir.lib.uwo.ca/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1275&context=aprci

Fellner, K. (2019). In Carr-Stewart, S. (Ed.). *Knowing the past, facing the future: Indigenous education in Canada*. Purich Books.

George, R. (2023). *It stops here: Standing up for our lands, our waters, and our people*. Penguin Random House.

Hasebe-Ludt, E., Chambers, C., & Leggo, C. D. (2009). *Life writing and literary métissage as an ethos for our time*. Peter Lang.

Kelly, V. (2021). Radical acts of re-imagining ethical relationality and trans-systemic transformation. *Engaged Scholar Journal: Community – Engaged Research, Teaching, and Learning, 7*(1), 183–202. https://doi.org/10.15402/esj.v7i1.70759

Kelly, V. (2021). Kizhay ottiziwin: To walk with kindness and kinship. *Journal of the Canadian Association for Curriculum Studies (JCACS). 18*(2), 138–149. https://jcacs.journals.yorku.ca/index.php/jcacs/article/view/40617

Kelly, V. (2019). Indigenous poesis: Medicine for Mother Earth. *Artizein: Arts and Teaching Journal, 4*(1), 17-30. https://opensiuc.lib.siu.edu/atj/vol4/iss1/3

Kelly, V. (2010). Finding Face, Finding Heart, and Finding Foundation: Life Writing and the Transformation of Educational Practice. *Transnational Curriculum inquiry. 7*(2), 83–100). https://doi.org/10.14288/tci.v7i2.2042

Kovach, M. (2021). *Indigenous methodologies: Characteristics, conversations, and context*. University of Toronto Press.

Knight, D. (2001). *The seven fires: Teachings of the bear clan as recounted by Dr. Danny Musqua*. Many Worlds Publishing.

Leggo, C. (2011). Living love: Confessions of a fearful teacher. *Journal of the Canadian Association for Curriculum Studies (JCACS). 9*(1), 115-144. https://jcacs.journals.yorku.ca/index.php/jcacs/article/view/32135

Marya, R. and Patel, R. (2021). *Inflamed: Deep medicine and the anatomy of justice*. Picador.

Snowber, C., & Bickel, B. (2015). Companions with mystery: Art, spirit, and the ecstatic. In S. Walsh, B. Bickel, & C. Leggo (Eds.), *Arts-based and contemplative practices in research and teaching: honoring presence* (pp. 67–87). Routledge/ Taylor & Francis Group.

Silverstein, S. (1976). *The missing piece.* HarperCollins.

Smith, G. (2020, December 17). *What it means to include "x" in words such as womxn, folx, and Latinx.* SHAPE. https://www.shape.com/lifestyle/mind-and-body/latinx-folx-womxn-meaning

Townsend, P. (1965).The Kids Are Alright. On My Generation. Decca Records.

Vizenor, G. (2009). *Native liberty: Natural reason and cultural survivance.* University of Nebraska.

Wilson, S. (2008). *Research is ceremony: Indigenous research methods.* Fernwood Publishing.

Ramona Elke identifies as Anishinaabe/Métis/European. She is a doctoral student in the Arts Education program at Simon Fraser University. She is a high school teacher, a mother, a grandmother, and a student of weaving, beading, drumming, and ceremony. Her research centers on how to create spaces of honoring for all of the beings with her on this journey, to nourish her learning Spirit, and the learning Spirits of others. She is dedicated to bringing Indigenous pedagogies and methodologies into every aspect of her personal and professional life, making place for the transformative medicine teachings of All Our Relations in the hard work of reconciliation.

Reframing Youth Wellbeing Through Community-Engaged Learning

Noah Asher Golden

Abstract

In recent years, discourses about youth have been mired in narratives of learning loss and mental health crises. These cultural stories often pathologize youth, offering little in the way of generative pathways for educator practice to aid young people as they navigate the very real challenges in contemporary society. The experiences and reflections shared by a young man, Alberto, about the work he did with his peers and teacher demonstrates the power of community engagement, collaborative art, and responsive teaching to reframe the "problems" of education, offering new pathways to "do wellbeing" in learning spaces.

Introduction

The way that educators understand and frame a problem delineates the range of possible solutions (Golden & Petrone, 2021). What I mean by framing a problem involves how and where we locate it: if we decide that the "problem" in education is, or is within, the learners themselves, then our "solutions" will focus on fixing these learners through back-to-basics, skills and drill approaches, tougher discipline, and so on. But if we acknowledge that the problems to be solved are the conditions in which learners live and learn, then we have identified a wholly different set of solutions and possibilities for teaching and learning praxis. Improving these conditions include material realities like access to housing, health care, or air free of toxic pollutants. In addition to these material realities, the conditions of youth wellbeing also include the ways young people are positioned, meaning the ways they are located in a cultural story. The effects of such positionings are that identities are assigned onto others based upon broad social categories, such as race, class, ethnicity, gender, and sexuality (Vetter, Fairbanks & Ariail, 2011; Golden, 2017). That educational policy and practice have historically positioned and framed young people within discourses, or cultural stories, of deficiency or deviancy is not in doubt. In the current moment, these discourses have intensified with narratives of student deficits like learning loss related to the COVID-19 pandemic, mental health challenges, addiction to social media, and reactions to the unfolding climate crisis, to name but a few. Young people can internalize these cultural stories, adding to the challenges they must navigate as they seek out their desired life paths.

Narratives of young people successfully challenging deficit-laden positioning practices can help educators reflect on how we can rethink wellbeing, and better create meaningful learning opportunities and humanizing pedagogies that build on young people's strengths. I believe the story of Alberto,[1] his peers, and his teacher Ms. Santos offers one such narrative, and that the story about his work with the *Conexiónes* program and the *Artes Comunitarios* project (described below) highlights the power of community care through a place-based pedagogy grounded in an ethos of trust, support, and collaboration.

People and Setting

Alberto

When I met him, Alberto was 17 years old, and a student at an alternative education secondary-level program in the small city of San Sebastián on the west coast of the United States. Alberto self-identifies as a Mexican-American who is light-skinned and gay, and had attended a traditional high school before a guidance counselor suggested the alternative high school, given that he had not yet experienced success at his first secondary-level program. This new program, *Conexiónes* ("Connections" in Spanish), was reserved for one class of high school students at the larger Dolores Huerta Alternative Education School ("Huerta," for short), and invited students to form deep relationships with their peers and teacher as they engaged in youth-led projects in the local community. "Alternative" education has no single definition, and this descriptor has often been used in conflicting ways (Golden, 2018). While alternative at Huerta meant smaller classes and greater teacher support to engender possibilities for rapid "credit recovery" (i.e., quickly earning as many credits towards the secondary diploma as possible), Conexiónes was focused on inquiry-based and experimental pedagogies, as described below.

Researcher Identity

I am a former high school teacher in an alternative high school in a large city on the East Coast of the U.S. Despite it being 3,000 miles away from Alberto's school, the high school at which I taught also focused on humanizing pedagogy and community collaboration. While I am familiar with some aspects of the pedagogical approach, I, a white-identified middle-class man, have not experienced the joys and challenges of the primarily Mexican-American youth living in San Sebastián. I am now a teacher educator and literacy education researcher at a large urban public university a short distance from San Sebastián, and remain curious about the practices of alternative education to provide better, more humanizing ways of educating young people. It is for this reason that I spent three years learning from people at Huerta and the Conexiónes program, regularly sitting in on classes, field trips, and conducting focus group sessions with students and individual interviews with their teachers. My interest is in the ways that the pedagogical practices of the alternative education space support students in defining themselves as learners both within and beyond school. I am also focused on the ways the students navigate ethno-racialized, classed, and gendered dynamics about who has academic or other post-secondary potential, and how students agentively work to disrupt notions of who they are or might choose to become. My desire for this empirical work is that learning more about young people's understandings and experiences will contribute to scholarship and teacher praxis that can counter the de-legitimizing of minoritized people's literacies and other social practices that is sadly often prevalent in schooling.

Setting

Learners seeking a secondary diploma at this alternative high school program in San Sebastián are primarily Mexican-American and are often either working class or experiencing poverty. Students ages 16 to 20 would be recommended by guidance counselors to Huerta from traditional comprehensive

high schools, and the recommendation was most often based on the student's age and number of credits missing towards the diploma. While Huerta was focused solely on rapid credit recovery for these "over-aged/under-credited" learners, the grant-funded Conexiónes pilot program offered a chance to learn beyond the walls of the classroom. Interested Huerta students were invited to speak with the Conexiónes teacher and, following an assessment by their Huerta teachers, could be admitted into this new program. An attempt to re-envision high school,[2] the Conexiónes model is based on empirical work demonstrating the importance of social capital and experiential learning (e.g., Sanchez, 2007; Darvin & Norton, 2014; Bartlett, 2007). It builds on an understanding of alternative education as a site of humanizing pedagogies that prioritize close relationships between learners and educators, connections to community issues, and critical pedagogies (e.g., McGregor & Mills, 2012; Waters, 2016). Through learning projects in the community, the high school students can develop relationships with older adults in a variety of contexts, and these relationships can foster the development of new skills, identities, and possibilities for student-desired life pathways. During the time I spent with the students and teacher of Conexiónes, short-term projects included visits and conversations with a local DJ at a popular radio station, a real estate agent, and university students; longer, sustained projects included interviewing business owners and residents in the newly renovated downtown to learn about the impact of gentrification. The dialogues with the DJ, real estate agent, and university students were sparked by student desire to meet with people in professional roles that the students were considering as post-secondary options. The longer-term project around gentrification was in response to student-generated questions about the rising prices and new stores in downtown San Sebastián, and involved students learning to interview and write up data as they collected oral histories from business owners and residents of the city's downtown. In addition to practicing literacies associated with traditional academic success (e.g., extrapolating themes, writing up a report based on collected data), the Conexiónes students drew on their multiple and varied knowledge bases, including different varieties of Spanish and English as they built relationships and interviewed these business owners and residents. The goal of such community-engaged learning was to foster these connections, and spark possibilities for the students' next steps beyond their secondary-level learning.

The other long-term sustained project, which I will describe in greater detail below, was the aforementioned *Artes Comunitarios* ("Community Arts" in Spanish) collaboration, a partnership between the Conexiónes students and artists at a nearby arts venue. Conexiónes students would often spend one or two periods a day at Huerta taking traditional classes like biology or mathematics and then leave on a field trip to make connections with adults on the community and simultaneously develop their literacies and competencies through learning projects grounded in their communities. The program can be described as a place-based pedagogy (e.g., Comber et al., 2001; Comber, 2015; Pandya & Avíla, 2013), meaning that curriculum is responsive to learners in a particular place and a particular time. This is in contrast to dominant modes of schooling, which are often decontextualized, or relegated to simulations of real-world contexts and situations. In addition to its "situated-ness," place-based pedagogy can support learners in developing social capital (e.g., Stanton-Salazar, 2011) with adults in various professional fields through community-engaged learning collaborations. These collaborations were occasionally initiated by the Conexiónes teacher, Ms. Santos, but were often the result of student interests and outreach, something possible only due to the flexibility of the alternative education Conexiónes approach.

The idea for an alternative learning program like Conexiónes is both influenced by and resistant to recent trends in education reform, which include a reductive understanding of schooling as primarily or solely about the production of human capital (i.e., schooling as preparation for workers to be competitive in a globalized economy), and elements of a worldview that sees education as a building block for active citizenship and greater participation in society. The development of such programs rarely includes the voices, desires, and experiences of the students themselves (Lo-Philip, 2010; Jimenez, 2011), which can help challenge deficit-laden narratives about learners like Alberto and his fellow Conexiónes students by honing in on these young people's desires and ways they work to position themselves in cultural stories. Ideally, student voices and representation in decision-making would include dialogues about meaningful and authentic assessment practices, but Conexiónes students experienced the same assessment metrics (i.e., high-stakes state tests) as their peers in either Huerta classes or the more traditional comprehensive high schools. Where student voices and representation were valued in Conexiónes, though, was in the place-based pedagogy, in which the students' ideas for collaborations, projects, and field trips were regularly heard and acted upon by their teacher.

Positioning and (Re)framing

Scholars and educators have long known that access and material resources are necessary but not sufficient factors in successful post-secondary transitions (Engstrom & Tinto, 2008): the option to, say, attend college will not make a significant difference if a talented high school senior does not believe themselves to be college material. The way students are positioned, and the identity work marginalized students do as they work to be "read" in particular ways and achieve their desired outcomes (what one might think of as "[re]framing"), has significant effects on both opportunities to learn and possible pathways to enact knowledge in the service of expanded life and career opportunities (Golden, 2017; Harré and van Langenhove, 1999; Moje & Lewis, 2007). As scholars and educators, we often focus more on the potentially-negative impacts of undesirable positioning practices on student learning and outcomes than we do on learners' (re)framing efforts (Tuck, 2009). Young people in communities like San Sebastián have to navigate racialized, gendered, and classed hierarchies alongside labels positioning them as "bad" students as they work to earn their high school diplomas. Alberto's (re)framing work and understanding of himself demonstrates the power of community care, teacher and peer support, and meaningful learning projects to "do wellbeing" in learning spaces.

Alberto's (Re)framing Identity Work

Alberto is now well on his way towards his goal of becoming a marriage and family therapist—a counselor focusing on the wellbeing of individuals, couples, and families. Initially, this path was nearly derailed when he began having difficulty at Almgren High School, a large traditional comprehensive secondary school in San Sebastián. Due to what Alberto describes as "my bad grades and stuff," he says that during these experiences at his first high school, "I just thought I was dumb." During one focus group session with his peer Mari-Tere, Alberto's former self-perception is intermingled with his experience as

a light-skinned Mexican-American student in a society deeply mired in cultural stories of implicit white supremacy. Of his father, who he says "looks Mexican," Alberto says that "he's been stopped in the airport… he's been stopped, they thought he was a terrorist, or like a narco, like a drug trafficker, they labeled him because he's dark… it hurts because it's like, I don't know, it's like, why would they label him like that?" Alberto, though, describes himself as "light-skinned," appearing not as someone who others might say "looks Mexican." As a person living in a society that continues to attach importance to whiteness, he says that even though he is "100% Mexican, um, I guess I just, I got lucky." Asked what he meant, he replied "like with my genetics, like I just look white. …Like, [my dad's] the same as me and I'm pretty sure they wouldn't label me as [a terrorist, narco, or drug trafficker] just because I'm white, you know?" At the close of the focus group session where Alberto shared these thoughts about his identity, I asked Alberto and Mari-Tere what pseudonyms they might prefer in future writings about Conexiónes. Mari-Tere responded by saying that names couldn't be "too Mexican," as certain names would give people the sense that they knew everything there was to know about a person's life.[3] This "knowing everything" about a person's life included a sense of who is smart, who has college potential, and who is suitable for what sorts of careers. In short, it positions a person as a particular kind of person in a cultural story.

With great awareness of how others see him, how he is positioned within his society as a Mexican-American man, and how his light skin tone shields him from some of the negative positioning of people like his father and his friend Mari-Tere, Alberto shares a strong pride in his Mexican identity: "I am proud of being Mexican. I'm super proud of it, my culture, I'll never not be proud of it… I won't let anyone bring me down because of it. Because, I think, they have their own problems maybe with their culture, and they, maybe they're just jealous because they don't have a culture." As scholars have long noted (e.g., Sue, 2004), the dominant culture masks itself, making it seem as though those from the dominant culture (and those who might tarnish Mexican identities negatively due to ethnocentrism and/or racism) "don't have a culture." Alberto's statements show an awareness of imposed ethnic and racial hierarchies in education as well as a desire to challenge negative positionings through his strong assertions of cultural pride. It was hard, though, as Alberto started at Almgren High School and was not experiencing academic success, and attributed his "bad grades and stuff" to the belief that he "just thought [he] was dumb." At this time, Alberto was navigating both this sense of academic failure along with broader positioning in his society (i.e., the cultural stories about who is or can become successful in and through schooling).

Because he was not earning credits towards a high school diploma at the rate expected of students his age, his guidance counselor suggested that he move to an alternative high school in his home city of San Sebastián. It was here that he met Ms. Santos, an English Language Arts teacher at Huerta who invited Alberto to join a new pilot program for place-based pedagogy and community-based education. Ms. Santos was inviting Alberto to join the first Conexiónes cohort of 25 students.

Ms. Santos is a Filipino-American teacher steeped in the practices of Culturally-Responsive Pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 2021), particularly through her focus on relationships.[4] Relationships are at the core of her teaching; when a new student joins the Conexiónes program, the first thing she does is introduce the

new member of the program to peers who she thinks might befriend and support them in the community. Classroom-based meetings always begin with all participants sitting in a circle and sharing their thoughts on the daily topic, and Ms. Santos regularly begins by talking, in appropriate ways, about her life outside of the school community (e.g., as a parent, athlete, friend, etc.). When Ms. Santos met him, Alberto believed himself to be "dumb" and a bad student, and Alberto credits her guidance and support to his successful (re)framing of his own learning identity. He shared that Ms. Santos "would always tell us that we're all at Huerta for a reason, because we've been through stuff … I went from there, like I just started tracing it back." Alberto is drawing upon a new cultural story here, one that allows him to (re)frame his understanding of his academic identity. Based on her focus on building relationships and care about his wellbeing, Alberto trusted Ms. Santos by sharing about the personal challenges he and his family had faced in years past. Ms. Santos dialogued with Alberto in small moments: while sitting on a bus returning from a field trip, while discussing a writing project during his first period class at Huerta. Through these conversations, she suggested that while he had "been through stuff," these experiences were things that had happened around him and were not the final word on who he is as a human being or student, or who he could choose to become. This (re)framing, supported by Ms. Santos and the community-based learning projects, helped Alberto to re-imagine who he is as a student and human being. This identity work that Alberto did while supported by his teacher and peers in his alternative learning program was significant: he remarks of his reflections on past challenges both within and beyond school that "now that I realize, that I am self-aware of it, I can grow and it doesn't hurt anymore." This awareness, Alberto says, is freeing: "I feel like if I didn't have the realization I'd still be, like, a bad person." While Alberto never was a "bad person," it is telling that the cultural story he felt himself positioned within made him feel this way. In addition to the dialogues with Ms. Santos, the Artes Comunitarios project contributed to his emerging sense of his identity as a capable, smart young person on his way to becoming a Marriage and Family therapist. Alberto and his peers dove into this community-based project and art installation throughout the spring of his final year of high school.

The *Artes Comunitarios* Project

In the focus group sessions with Alberto and his peers, one thing that often emerged from the conversation was the appreciation for the freedom and possibility that came with the Conexiónes program. Students shared that they loved the new experiences and regular field trips, and that they much preferred these to the decontextualized learning that characterized their previous schooling. As mentioned above, these projects were responsive to students' interests and desires. If one of the Conexiónes students expressed an interest in an activity or project in the community, Ms. Santos would create time for them to research potential contact people, plan what they would want to request, and initiate the "cold call" themselves. Alberto expressed a desire to bring the group to the Berglund Art Center, a space he had visited and liked during a field trip at his initial high school, and he reached out to share his desire and ideas for a collaboration.

Berglund primarily serves wealthy patrons in the communities surrounding San Sebastián, and while it was only a 25-minute drive away, most of the Huerta community had never attended a theater or music performance there. The center, which may have been interested in shedding its image as an arts space

for only some of the community's residents, eagerly embraced the Conexiónes students and guided them in all stages of the public art installation that emerged. This was all sparked by Alberto's initiative: with Ms. Santos' guidance, Alberto started the conversation that lead to the months-long Artes Comunitarios collaboration, a sustained partnership between Conexiónes and Berglund. Educational grant funds were identified to pay the arts center staff to mentor the Conexiónes students during twice-weekly trips in which they advanced a vision for a collective work of art to be showcased to the broader community on the center's property. The Conexiónes students dialogued around their ideas for a massive, impactful installation that would announce their vision to the world, and engaged geometry, physics, visual arts, and sound engineering as they worked with mentors to bring it to fruition.

The result was the "The World Is Yours" installation, a 12-meter long by 4-meter wide (at its widest) physical, visual, and aural work of art that invited visitors to walk within it to experience the Conexiónes students' vision. This vision, shared both in focus groups and conversations with attendees at its unveiling, reflected their own experiences as students before and during the Conexiónes program. The physical multimedia arts installation invites the viewer to enter a narrow enclosure in which foreboding music, images associated with self-doubt, and quotes denying future possibility are heard and projected on the walls as the viewer walks through; the viewer then comes to a wider enclosure that has uplifting music, inspirational quotes, and images the Conexiónes students associate with success. This student-created installation is a physical manifestation of the process many students, including Alberto, described within the teaching and learning approach of the Conexiónes program: people experience challenging conditions and realities, but through collective support they can get through them, and new opportunities will arise. Together, the Artes Comunitarios collaboration and the product of it, "The World Is Yours" installation, are one site of a (re)framing, a reinterpretation by the young people, offering a new narrative of who they have been, who they are now, and who they can collectively become. While not the only facet required to build the conditions for youth well-bring, the focus on young people's experiences, understandings, desires, and agency in the learning, all grounded in an ethos of community collaboration and care is, I would argue, a necessary component. Formal education in the Conexiónes model is about responsive, humanizing learning that invites young people to reflect, build relationships, and center their own wellbeing as they discover and choose their next steps beyond secondary school.

Discussion

There are, of course, important critiques of the Conexiónes at Huerta alternative education program, and I would be remiss if I did not mention them here. While there was a strong focus on responsiveness, youth agency, youth desires, and community connection and support, the program did not often invite the Conexiónes learners to engage in critical analysis of the social arrangements that create so many opportunities for the few and so few for the many in a deeply inequitable society. There were hints of this in the oral history project around the "revitalization" work, and gentrification, of San Sebastián's downtown, but this was not sustained across community-engaged projects. As has been argued elsewhere (Golden & Bieler, 2018), critical work, advocacy, and activism are necessary for educational practice and educator collaborations at all levels if we desire education to be transformative and truly

responsive to communities' strengths and needs. But what the program gets right, in my view, is the focus on humanizing and place-based pedagogy, care for learners, and attention paid to learners' identity work in and out of classrooms. Alberto did much work to (re)frame how he sees his academic and personal past; he re-imagined (and is currently realizing) his path after high school, and he credits the support of Ms. Santos and the Conexiónes program for creating a space for him to be a leader in the Artes Comunitarios collaboration.

In the current moment where schooling is too often reduced to test preparation or decontextualized skills work, this focus feels like a radical transformation of the promise of schooling. Conexiónes as an alternative education program takes seriously this sense of providing an alternative to the mainstream approach: going beyond the walls of a classroom to learn from and with members of the broader community helps to reimagine what formal education might be if we educators demand youth wellbeing and engagement as the center of our work.

We need a collective re-imagining of what purposes schools serve, with youth and communal wellbeing at the center. Social conditions that shape access to health care, housing, air free of toxic pollution, and other material realities are vital areas of focus, but there must also be a focus on youth desires, meaning-making around past experiences, reflections on identity and positioning, and visioning for their futures. Alberto's Conexiónes experience afforded these aspects via the place-based pedagogy and community-engaged projects, and offers one example of realizing a more humanizing pedagogy centered on youth wellbeing.

The unfortunate coda to this narrative, though, is that school district leaders in San Sebastián shut down the Conexiónes program at Huerta after one year, arguing that it did not "improve test scores" enough and instead should be an enrichment program shifted to a school serving students who are already experiencing academic success. The Conexiónes students and teacher were understandably deeply disappointed and frustrated; for the students this seemed one of a long list of ways their schools had failed to create or continue meaningful learning opportunities. Judging a program's success solely on a single measure when there are so many other indications of student growth and engagement suggests a distinction between educational opportunities that serve a community's desires and needs and ones that are imposed upon people who do not immediately have the means to push back to demand better opportunities. Moving the Conexiónes program to a school where students were already experiencing academic success suggests a lack of faith by district leaders that alternative approaches like place-based pedagogy could engender the forms of success demanded by the state. Ultimately, the reductive framing of school as a site of test preparation sadly drives much of educational policy and practice, obscuring Conexiónes' successes and foreclosing its possible future successes. To make our school communities humanizing spaces centered on youth wellbeing, it is clear that there remains much (re)framing work about the purposes of schooling for educators working at all levels.

Acknowledgments

Notes

1. This is a pseudonym, as are all names and places related here.

2. This approach has some aspects in common with Québec's CEGEPs (Collège d'enseignement général et professionnel), though this is focused on high school and not the years after high school.

3. She suggested Mari-Tere, the pseudonym I am using here.

4. While the focus on relationships is a strength in Ms. Santos' teaching, it is important to point out that there were missed opportunities in the place-based pedagogy work, and that culturally sustaining practices that connected with Alberto's Mexican-American identity were a central missed opportunity. One place-based project (the one that included interviewing business owners and residents in the newly renovated downtown to learn about the impact of gentrification) did connect with culture and identity, but primarily focused on how these relate to class and shifting demographics. A missed opportunity is that the pedagogical work did not include explicit invitations to focus on culture and identity in a strength-based way.

References

Bartlett, L. (2007). To seem and to feel: Situated identities and literacy practices. *Teachers College Record, 109*(1), 51–69.

Comber, B. (2015). *Literacy, place, and pedagogies of possibility*. Routledge.

Comber, B., Thomson, P., & Wells, M. (2001). Critical literacy finds a "place": Writing and social action in a low-income Australian grade 2/3 classroom. *The Elementary School Journal*, *101*(4), 451–464.

Darvin, R., & Norton, B. (2014). Social class, identity, and migrant students. *Journal of Language Identity and Education, 13*(2), 111–117.

Engstrom, C., & Tinto, V. (2008). Access without support is not opportunity. *Change: The magazine of higher learning, 40*(1), 46–50.

Golden, N. A. (2017). "In a position I see myself in:"(Re) positioning identities and culturally-responsive pedagogies. *Equity & Excellence in Education, 50*(4), 355–367.

Golden, N. A. (2018). Narrating neoliberalism: Alternative education teachers' conceptions of their changing roles. *Teaching Education, 29*(1), 1–16. https://doi.org/10.1080/10476210.2017.1331213

Golden, N. A., & Bieler, D. (2018). From "turning the page" to getting our noses out of the book. *English Education, 51*(1), 80-93.

Golden, N. A., & Petrone, R. (2021). The social production of risk and resilience. *The Palgrave encyclopedia of critical perspectives on mental health*. Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-12852-4_23-1.

Harré, R., & van Langenhove, L. (1999). Varieties of positioning. *Journal for the Theory of Social Behavior, 21*, 393-407.

Jimenez, J. P. (2011). (I)literate identities in adult basic education: A case study of a Latino woman in an ESOL and computer literacy class. *Colombian Applied Linguistics Journal 10*(9), 25–43.

Ladson-Billings, G. (2021, July). Three decades of culturally relevant, responsive, & sustaining pedagogy: What lies ahead? *The Educational Forum, 85*(4), 351–354. Routledge.

Lo-Philip, S. W. (2010). Towards a theoretical framework of heritage language literacy and identity processes. *Linguistics and Education, 21*(4), 282–297.

McGregor, G., & Mills, M. (2012). Alternative education sites and marginalised young people: "I wish there were more schools like this one." *International Journal of Inclusive Education, 16*, 843–862.

Moje, E. B., & Lewis, C. (2007). Examining opportunities to learn literacy: The role of critical sociocultural research. In C. Lewis, P. Enciso, & E. Moje (Eds.), *Reframing sociocultural research on literacy: Identity, agency, and power*. Routledge.

Pandya, J., & Ávila, J. (Eds.). (2013). *Moving critical literacies forward: A new look at praxis across contexts*. Routledge.

Sanchez, P. (2007). Cultural authenticity and transnational Latina youth: Constructing a meta-narrative across borders. *Linguistics and Education, 18*(3-4), 258–282.

Stanton-Salazar, R. D. (2011). A social capital framework for the study of institutional agents and their role in the empowerment of low-status students and youth. *Youth & Society, 43*(3), 1066–1109.

Sue, D. W. (2004). Whiteness and ethnocentric monoculturalism: Making the "invisible" visible. *American Psychologist, 59*(8), 761–769.

Tuck, E. (2009). Suspending damage: A letter to communities. *Harvard Educational Review, 79*, 409–427.

Vetter, A. M., Fairbanks, C., & Ariail, M. (2011). "Crazyghettosmart": a case study in Latina identities. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education, 24*(2), 185–207.

Waters, R. (2016). Symbolic non-violence in the work of teachers in alternative education settings. *Teaching Education, 28*(1), 1–14.

Noah Asher Golden is an Associate Professor of Teacher Education at California State University, Long Beach, and a former alternative education high school teacher and literacy coach in New York City. His research is grounded in literacy practices and identities, and is situated within critical and sociocultural approaches to literacies scholarship. He teaches courses on Secondary Literacy and Culturally Responsive and Sustaining Pedagogies.

Nature-Based Physical Activity in Pictures: A Photovoice Unit in (and Beyond) Physical and Health Education

Jennifer Gruno and Sandra Gibbons

Abstract

Experts in public health and education alike have long advocated for the engagement of youth in nature to foster movement, human–nature connectedness, and mental wellbeing. Physical and health education teachers in school-based programs continue to find a variety of ways to help their students be physically active in the natural environment due to the plethora of positive benefits. This paper describes a unit entitled Nature-Based Physical Activity in Pictures that utilized Photovoice to engage youth and foster human–nature connectedness.

Introduction

Interactions with the natural environment, including urban nature, have been shown to reduce stress, provide relaxation (Cox et al., 2017), and help people stay physically healthy (Hartig et al., 2014; Markevych et al., 2017). For 13 years, Canadian children and youth spend a significant proportion of their waking day in school, and over time, experiences at schools affect nearly the entire population (McKenzie & Lounsbery, 2009). Physical and Health Education (PHE) is widely offered in schools (Pate et al., 2006), and PHE is also the only subject in which lifetime physical activity and health are primary outcomes (McKenzie & Lounsbery, 2009, 2014). However, many PHE programs in Canada include instructional practices that do not necessarily promote student learning of knowledge, behaviors, and skills for engagement in lifetime physical activity and healthy behaviors (Bulger & Housner, 2009; Kretchmar, 2006; Lee et al., 2007). Students are not always supported to be active in a way that helps them make the connection between being physically active in PHE and being active in the community and on the Lands where they live. This has led public health experts and leaders in PHE pedagogy to call for reform and urge PHE teachers to change (Institute of Medicine, 2013; Kretchmar, 2006; McKenzie & Lounsbery, 2014; Pate et al., 2006; UNESCO, 2021). The purpose of this article is to describe an instructional unit that used the action-research methodology Photovoice to help students in one PHE class foster human–nature connectedness through engagement in nature-based physical activity (NBPA). Students' connection to self, peers, community, Land, and technology throughout the unit is also discussed.

Human–Nature Connectedness

The PHE curriculum is provincially mandated in Canada and therefore can vary greatly across provinces. However, in 2023, PHE Canada published the Canadian PHE Competencies, which provides a unified approach for the subject in Canada. A vision mentioned in these national competencies is the goal for young people to be "respectful and empathetic towards themselves, others, and their environment"

(Davis et al., 2023). Specifically, one of the Grade 10 learning outcomes is to "enhance well-being and the well-becoming of others through exploration and movement in the outdoors" (Davis et al., 2023, p. 88). This national curriculum recognizes the wholistic nature of PHE and emphasizes human–nature connection for transformative wellbeing.

Educators nationwide now recognize the importance of human–nature connectedness as a determinant of children's and youth's lifelong health and wellbeing (Braus & Milligan-Toffler, 2018). Human–nature connectedness can be defined as "the extent to which humans see themselves as part of nature" (Barragan-Jason et al., 2022, p. 2). Several recent studies found that estimates of human–nature connectedness were positively correlated with pro-environmental behavior (Mackay & Schmitt, 2019; Vesely et al., 2021; Whitburn et al., 2020) and with human wellbeing (Capaldi et al., 2014; Pritchard et al., 2020). Although children from industrialized societies are known to show a strong affinity for other-than-human beings (Moore & Marcus, 2008), this affinity tends to fade with age (Hughes et al., 2019), and develop into low ecological concern in adulthood (Rosa et al., 2018), along with the acquisition of the perspective of humankind as the central element of existence (Wilks et al., 2021).

A global meta-analysis to assess human–nature connectedness found it can be used as a leverage point to reach sustainability (Barragan-Jason et al., 2022). The findings revealed that individuals with high human–nature connectedness had a deeper knowledge of nature, spent more time in natural outdoor spaces, engaged in more mindfulness practices, and were happier and healthier than those with low human–nature connectedness. They were also more humanistic, in the sense that they more strongly expressed their moral responsibilities to other humans, and their sense of connection to communities within society. The authors recommend promoting targeted and long-term interventions, including nature contact and mindfulness practices, and training those who educate young people in these practices to achieve the desired outcomes (nature conservation and human wellbeing) at a moderate cost (Barragan-Jason et al., 2022). One long-term targeted practice to achieve these outcomes is the implementation of NBPA in PHE.

Nature-Based Physical Activity

Human children and youth have never moved as little as they move today (Bowman, 2021). For almost the entire human timeline, movement has been woven into all aspects of living: foraging, learning, playing, building, celebrating, and traveling all required moving one's body over and over again in different ways (Bowman, 2021). However, over time, we have created a society that prioritizes conveniences that save us movement. Young people's desire and potential to move are often reflexive and innate, but they require an environment that signals and permits movement: nature. More nature usually equals more movement (Bowman, 2021), and this is where educators can utilize NBPA. NBPA is defined as physical activities that are done in natural spaces, require little specialized equipment, can be participated in by most youth, are cost-efficient, have connection to nature as a focus, and can be implemented by teachers on a regular basis (Gruno & Gibbons, 2023, 2020, 2021). A natural setting can be anywhere outdoors (on school campuses or in the local environment): woodlands, forests, beaches, gardens, farms, streams, or grass fields (Higgins & Nicol, 2002). Learning in natural environments can

offer many benefits for children's and youth's health, development, sustainability, and ecological and nature-friendly practices (Davies & Hamilton, 2018). While being outside is essential to getting acquainted with the Land, simply going outside is not enough. Encouraging deep connection with nature can transition into respect for the other-than-human world, develop children's and youth's sense of self, and help them understand their place in and connection to nature (Taylor et al., 2012).

NBPA differs from outdoor education programs which tend to draw students who already have experience in the outdoors, often have a costly fee associated with them, and focus on trip planning (Gruno & Gibbons, 2021). The goal of NBPA, on the other hand, is to be a cost-efficient and inclusive method of getting most kids moving in, and connecting to, nature on a regular basis. Students themselves, as part of a previous Photovoice study, have described NBPA as a means to connect to place, their classmates, and community; overcome challenges to being active in nature; and engage in mindfulness (Gruno & Gibbons, accepted).

Photovoice

Photovoice is a community-based participatory research method that empowers participants to identify experiences, concerns and elements of their environment through photographs (Catalani & Minkler, 2010; Wang & Burris, 1997). As a collaborative research method, Photovoice is a solution to support bottom-up, meaningful, youth-led collaboration to improve community and environmental resilience (Wang & Burris, 1997). The photo of Photovoice is the process that can turn the camera lens on the experiences of students when engaging in NBPA and provide them with the opportunity to record, reflect, and critique physical, community, and natural issues in creative ways (Wang & Burris, 1997). The voice aspect of Photovoice is a means to articulate lived experience and experiences of silencing, agency, and control (Liebenberg, 2018). It provides an opportunity for students to share their experiences in nature through photographic images. To have a voice also implies power—the power to express opinions (Liebenberg, 2018) —and it is builds strength and resilience (Dantas & Gower, 2021). By utilizing photos that participants have taken and then selected to discuss, discussions can be guided to reflect upon the reasons, emotions, and experiences that guided participants' chosen images. Photovoice can be adapted along a participatory continuum to suit the research design and purpose, ranging from individual, photo-elicited discussions to group interviews that collectively generate themes (Short et al., 2018). Due to this flexibility in methodology, previous Photovoice research has found that not only can Photovoice function effectively for research, but it can also be used as a powerful instructional tool by educators in the Kindergarten to Grade 12 school system. For example, Treadwell and Taylor (2017) utilized Photovoice to explore PHE students' physical activity in the community, and their methodology served as inspiration for this study. The steps taken by our team align with Treadwell and Taylor's (2017) first three steps: (a) select a topic; (b) take the photos; (c) select and analyze the photos. These steps within the unit entitled NBPA in Pictures are described in the next section.

NBPA in Pictures: Unit Description

Kate Baker, the teacher involved in this project, is a teacher-member of an ongoing schools–university partnership that studies the impact of NBPA in PHE (Gruno et al., 2018; Gruno & Gibbons, 2021). She is interested in the incorporation of NBPA to enhance meaning, lifetime physical activity, and health in PHE. She agreed to mentor pre-service teachers in the implementation of the NBPA in Pictures unit. NBPA in Pictures was the project of four pre-service PHE teachers for their major assignment in an assessment course. Kate opted to have the pre-service teachers work with a Grade 11/12 female identifying-only PHE class. The entire PHE class participated in the five-week unit, the taking of photos, and writing of captions, but only the photos and captions of those students who signed a district-approved media release form are included in this article.

Step 1: Select a Topic

NBPA was selected as the topic for this unit, as the benefits of participation for teachers and students have been well documented by the authors (Gruno & Gibbons, accepted, 2022, 2023, 2021). Prior to the unit, the pre-service teachers supplied the students in the PHE course with a survey identifying a variety of NBPA topics to explore over the five-week unit. Students were asked to rank the options, from the ones they were most interested in learning about to the ones they were least interested in learning about. Offering the opportunity to provide input into learning experiences has been identified by students as something that could help increase the personal relevance of activities in PHE and therefore the meaningfulness ascribed to the experiences (Beni et al., 2017). The top NBPA topics the students selected, and the pre-service teachers designed lessons for, were fitness and mindfulness in nature, forest games and teambuilding, survival skills, and connecting to community and yoga. The pre-service teachers then introduced the unit overview and assessment to the PHE students:

> Throughout this unit, you will be asked to take photos of yourself in nature or of your natural surroundings. Your assessment for this unit will be based on your photos and captions. For each topic, you will have the opportunity to submit a photo and an accompanying caption. Each week will have a different focus that you will center your photo and caption around. Details will be posted to Instagram for your reference and discussed during class time. You may be given opportunities to take photos in class, but you are also encouraged to take photos outside of class.

The teachers identified a theme and photo focus for each week of the unit. Every week, the teachers would send reminders on Instagram for students to post their pictures and captions.

Step 2: Take the Photos

The students were asked to use the Photovoice technique to visually document their experiences during the NBPA unit. Participants were provided prompts from the teachers about what to consider photographing. The teachers made the decision to have the students use their phones to take the photos, as Kate identified that all students in the course owned a phone and accessibility would be maximized. In designing the unit, the pre-service teachers and Kate also made the decision to not only suggest students take photos within the PHE lessons, but also encouraged students to take photos outside of class as well.

Many PHE experts have argued that PHE should further feature lifetime activities (Bulger & Housner, 2009; Ferry & McCaughtry, 2013; Palmer & Bycura, 2014), and many of these activities occur in nature, for example, swimming, walking, hiking, camping, and slack lining. They are activities youth can participate in alone or with others, and in a variety of natural settings (Schwab & Dustin, 2014).

Step 3: Select and Analyze the Photos

Students were encouraged to take many photos within and beyond the NBPA lessons in PHE, but they were only required to post one per week. That way, they could select the photo that best represented their experience in nature that week. We decided to use Instagram for the posting of pictures and captions because this was a medium that Kate was already using in her PHE classes and one that had received positive feedback from students. Additionally, a systematic review showed that apps can significantly impact physical activity behavior (Schoeppe et al., 2016), and Instagram as a tool to facilitate Photovoice research has been utilized and found to be effective (Pickering et al., 2022).

We created a private Instagram account and provided all students with the log-in information, so they did not have to use their private accounts. Instagram proved to be a valuable venue for the students' Photovoice exhibition, as it was an accessible medium that the students were comfortable with and visited daily. Also, Instagram offered the additional benefit that classmates could "like" and comment on their peers' photos and comments. In this paper, we use pseudonyms for all participating students in order to protect their identities. As the teachers identified the theme for the photos each week, the discussion occurred on Instagram through the captions and the comments. The next section is dedicated to exploring the teachers' NBPA themes and the students' photos and corresponding captions.

Learnings: NBPA Themes, Photos and Captions

The pre-service teachers selected the theme for each week of the unit based on research on how to facilitate NBPA in order to foster students' physical, emotional, and mental wellbeing, as well as human–nature connectedness (e.g. Barragan-Jason et al., 2022; Gruno & Gibbons, accepted). We identified some major themes that we wanted to emphasize, such as mindfulness, which has been identified as particularly impactful in having students connect with the natural world (Barragan-Jason et al., 2022). Mindfulness activities were woven throughout each week of the unit, and during these activities, students were asked to engage with their senses and their surroundings and disengage from their phones.

The first week of the unit functioned as an introduction to NBPA and featured a variety of outdoor activities—disc golf, orienteering, Indigenous plant identification, etc. All activities fit the definition of NBPA—they were done in natural spaces on, or adjacent to, school grounds; required minimal equipment; and had connection to nature as a focus. The Instagram prompt for the first week of the unit read, "Post a picture of yourself participating in a nature-based activity or the location of your activity." The teachers then added a follow-up question, asking students, "What elements of this activity make you feel motivated to participate?" This prompt resulted in a variety of images and captions from the students, including one from Michelle, taken in Mexico (Figure 1).

Fig. 1: Michelle's photo. "This is a photo I took in Mexico in the water. I love nature and I love to swim and take photos of nature. This was a family trip to Mexico; it made our family closer because we got to spend time together in nature."

The second week of the unit focused on fitness and mindfulness in nature. Students participated in a variety of movement activities while interacting with the natural landscape—running up a grass hill and over a bridge, balancing across a log, push-ups on some boulders, etc. The teachers then focused the last 15 minutes of each lesson on mindfulness activities where students were asked to engage with their senses while sitting silently by the creek adjacent to the school. After the first lesson, students were asked to complete the following during the week on Instagram:

> Take a photo of something that has the same colour that you are feeling right now based on the colour wheel provided on the Instagram feed. In the caption, describe what sort of techniques you may use to get your heart rate lower when in a stressful situation.

In response to this prompt, Madeline posted a photo of a sunset and her corresponding caption regarding her choice of capturing the color orange (Figure 2).
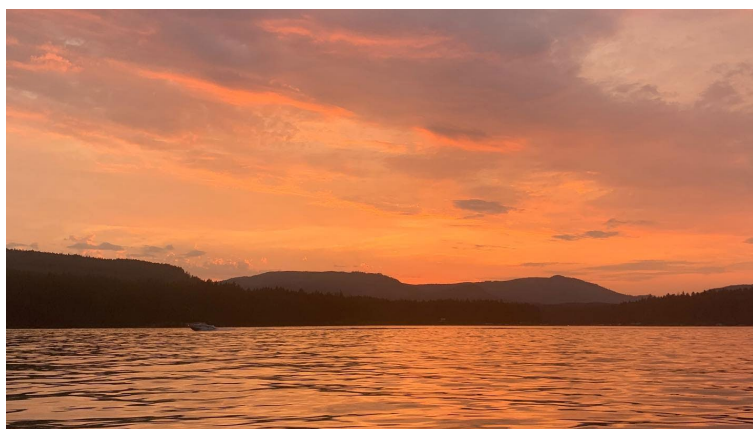
Fig. 2: Madeline's photo. "I've been feeling a lot of anticipation and optimism recently, so the colour I relate to the most is orange. A few ways I like to deal with stress are talking to friends, playing sports, listening to music, or going for hikes."

Purc-Stephenson et al. (2019), in their review of outdoor education programs in Canada, identified themes relating to the learning outcomes and psychosocial benefits of outdoor learning. The authors identified the incorporation of skills involved with recreational activities (hiking, canoeing, climbing) and camping (set-up, cooking, and fire building) to prepare students for these activities, either within the program or on their own time, as an important learning outcome. The third week of the NBPA in Pictures unit took inspiration from the results of this review and introduced students to a range of survival skills— shelter building, fire starting, and knot tying. After students had time to learn and practice the individual skills, they were asked to "select a photo taken during class that represents a practical skill you learned. In your caption, please describe what your photo is representing and when you might use that skill." Drew posted about their experience with knot tying (Figure 3) and Sam about her fire-starting experience in class (Figure 4).

Fig. 3: Drew's photo. "We learnt some simple knot tying in class and it is an important skill to know for survival skills like putting up shelters. Another important skill we learnt was untying the knots we made. This could come in handy in many dangerous situations."

Fig. 4: Sam's photo. "I took this photo during our fire-starting lesson. It was really fun to try and start fires, even if we didn't have much success. It was a valuable lesson that would be really useful in a worst-case scenario."

The fourth week of NBPA in Pictures focused on forest games and teambuilding activities in nature. Students participated in a variety of games such as Camouflage, Ring the Pin and Compass Walks. After participating in the games each lesson, students were then asked to walk silently back to the school while reflecting on their time in nature. As for the Instagram post, the student-teachers asked the PHE students to "post a picture of their environment while engaging in group games outside." In response, Annette took a picture of a flower in her school yard and reflected on nature games she played at summer camp (Figure 5).

Fig. 5: Annette's photo. "During our forest games classes, some of the games we played reminded me of summer camp when I would play Camouflage and Manhunt in the forest. Then when I saw the little flower in the photo [a student] took, it reminded me of how close spring is and then from there how close summer is!! I'm so excited for the warm days coming and can't wait to be back at camp soon."

The fifth and final week of NBPA in Pictures focused on connecting to community, and yoga in nature. Each lesson, students walked to a nearby beach and participated in a variety of yoga activities, including mindfulness, as well as beach clean-ups. The Instagram prompt for this week read: "Whether it is doing yoga on the beach or picking up garbage, post a picture of yourself connecting with your community and making an impact." Often, Kate, their teacher, would also post in response to the student-teachers' prompts to serve as a model for the students (Figure 6). Nikki followed Kate's post with her own insightful thoughts on yoga at the beach (Figure 7).

Fig. 6: Kate's photo. "I took this photo while I was observing the class during their mindfulness lesson at the beach. I chose to take this picture because I loved seeing the students do something different in nature and enjoy it. I also really enjoyed watching the community members' reactions to the activity and the students interacting with their surroundings. I will most definitely take them to do this in the future especially in the warmer months!"

Fig. 7: Nikki's photo. "I took this photo during yoga and mindfulness at the beach. To me, it highlighted the importance of connecting with both yourself and with nature. It also served as a reminder of how close and accessible this beauty is and how fun it is to experience with friends. I loved the feelings of calm and freedom this class brought me, and I feel like this photo encapsulated these."

Discussion and Conclusion

As a research and teaching team, we learned a lot from implementing the NBPA in Pictures unit with PHE students. From the photos, captions, and discussions with the students throughout the five-week unit, our number one takeaway was the sense of connection that the students emphasized throughout their learning experiences; connection not only to nature, which was the focus, but also to themselves, their classmates, and their community. This project supports previous Photovoice in PHE research (Gruno & Gibbons, accepted) and describes a promising instructional approach for eliciting student choice and voice, and connecting students to Land, themselves, others, and their community.

For this project, we did not focus on Treadwell and Taylor's (2017) fourth and fifth steps in conducting a Photovoice project in PHE: (d) create a needs assessment, and (e) advocate for change. Since a major goal of Photovoice is to advocate for change within the community, an area for future action will be to facilitate a class discussion after the NBPA in Pictures unit so students have an opportunity to share their selected photos and analyses as a key first step in creating a needs assessment. After sharing, we will ask students to list what they perceive to be shortcomings either on their school grounds, their neighborhood, or in the greater community when it comes to fostering human–nature connectedness and overall wellbeing. The final step advocated by Treadwell and Taylor (2017) is advocate for change. This could be at the class, school, district, or community level. The purest form of advocacy in traditional Photovoice projects occurs in the form of a photo exhibit (Wang, 1999). Another future goal of the NBPA in Pictures project is to put the students' photos on display around the school or host an exhibit in the evening and invite caregivers, teachers, administrators, and local community members to attend. The students, whose photos and captions would be on display, would be in attendance to answer questions about their photos

and talk about what they learned from their experiences in the unit. Taking these extended steps in a future iteration of NBPA in Pictures would further emphasize connection to community.

Another key learning from implementing this unit was the tension felt between technology usage and time in nature. The decision to include phones in this unit was a challenging one, as technology, when it comes to human–nature connectedness as well as health and wellbeing, "is like a double-edged sword" (Gao & Lee, 2019). It is often argued that media use leads to sedentary, indoor lifestyles and decreased time spent in nature (Pergams & Zaradic, 2006), and the rise of media technology is frequently identified as one of many factors that are distancing children and youth from the natural world (Payne, 2014). Seen from this perspective, media devices, such as cellphones, are unwanted intruders and disruptors of human–nature connectedness. "Green" and "screen" are seen to compete for young people's time in an increasingly time-poor society, and electronic media is blamed for drawing children and youth away from outdoor activity.

However, this imagined opposition between "green time" and "screen time" is complex. With the rise of mobile devices and interactive technologies, media consumption has diversified in a way that is not necessarily reflected in assertions that media "steals" children's and youth's "green time." Interactive and mobile media, therefore, can lead to intersections rather than divisions between "screen time" and "green time" (Hawley, 2022). Media can be consumed in nature (e.g., listening to a podcast while walking in a park) and it can also be produced in nature, for example, by using a cellphone to take and share photos as outlined in this project. Büscher (2016) points out that nature conservation organizations have adapted to the affordances and challenges of the digital age and identifies the importance of digital and interactive media in building support for causes relating to sustainability and conservation. This would be mirrored in future NBPA in Pictures projects when students utilize technology (cellphones to take pictures and then display them) to create a needs assessment and to advocate for sustainable change in their local environment. In this project, we felt it was important to begin exploring one way in which media can be more than a problem when it comes to connecting youth with the natural world (Hawley, 2022).

As popular media and research highlight increasing worries about young people, particularly in the context of climate injustice, implementing an NBPA in Pictures unit in PHE offers one potential for connecting youth with nature and fostering their health and wellness. A survey among adult environmental leaders showed that they attributed their commitment to sustainability to a combination of two sources in youth: many hours spent outdoors in keenly remembered wild or semi-wild places, and a mentoring adult who taught respect for nature (Chawla, 2006). NBPA in PHE can offer both sources. Perhaps we as educators can rethink how we foster wellbeing by asking our young people to take, select, and analyze photos of their time being active in nature. This critical engagement in their own learning within the local environment may help foster the realization that our health and wellbeing depend upon the health of the natural world.

References

Barragan-Jason, G., de Mazancourt, C., Parmesan, C., Singer, M. C., & Loreau, M. (2022). Human–nature connectedness as a pathway to sustainability: A global meta-analysis. *Conservation Letters, 15*(1), 1–7. https://doi.org/10.1111/conl.12852

Beni, S., Fletcher, T., & Ní Chróinín, D. (2017). Meaningful experiences in physical education and youth sport: A review of the literature. *Quest, 69*(3), 291–312. https://doi.org/10.1080/00336297.2016.1224192

Bowman, K. (2021). *Grow wild: The whole-child, whole-family nature-rich guide to moving more*. Propriometrics Press.

Braus, J., & Milligan-Toffler, S. (2018). The children and nature connection: Why it matters. *Ecopsychology, 10*(4), 193–194. https://doi.org/10.1089/eco.2018.0072

Bulger, S. M., & Housner, L. D. (2009). Relocating from easy street: Strategies for moving physical education forward. *Quest, 61*, 442–469. https://doi.org/10.1080/00336297.2009.10483625

Büscher, B. (2016). Nature 2.0: Exploring and theorizing the links between new media and nature conservation. *New Media and Society, 18*(5), 726–743. https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444814545841

Capaldi, C. A., Dopko, R. L., & Zelenski, J. M. (2014). The relationship between nature connectedness and happiness: A meta-analysis. *Frontiers in Psychology, 5*, 1–15. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2014.00976

Catalani, C., & Minkler, M. (2010). Photovoice: A review of the literature in health and public health. *Health Education and Behavior, 37*(3), 424–451. https://doi.org/10.1177/1090198109342084

Chawla, L. (2006). Learning to love the natural world enough to protect it. *Barn, 2*, 57–78.

Cox, D. T. C., Shanahan, D. F., Hudson, H. L., Plummer, K. E., Siriwardena, G. M., Fuller, R. A., Anderson, K., Hancock, S., & Gaston, K. J. (2017). Doses of neighborhood nature: The benefits for mental health of living with nature. *BioScience, 67*(2), 147–155. https://doi.org/10.1093/biosci/biw173

Dantas, J. A. R., & Gower, S. (2021). From ethical challenges to opportunities: Reflections on participatory and collaborative research with refugees in Australia. *Ethics and Social Welfare, 15*(2), 185–199. https://doi.org/10.1080/17496535.2020.1825765

Davies, R., & Hamilton, P. (2018). Assessing learning in the early years' outdoor classroom: Examining challenges in practice. *Education 3-13, 46*(1), 117–129. https://doi.org/10.1080/03004279.2016.1194448

Davis, M., Gleddie, D. L., Nylen, J., Leidl, R., Toulouse, P., Baker, K., & Gillies, L. (2023). *Canadian physical and health education competencies*. Physical and Health Education Canada.

Ferry, M., & McCaughtry, N. (2013). Secondary physical educators and sport content: A love affair. *Journal of Teaching in Physical Education, 32*, 375–393. https://doi.org/10.1123/jtpe.32.4.375

Gao, Z., & Lee, J. E. (2019). Emerging technology in promoting physical activity and health: Challenges and opportunities. *Journal of Clinical Medicine, 8*(11), 1–14. https://doi.org/10.3390/jcm8111830

Gruno, J., & Gibbons, S. L. (2020). Incorporating nature-based physical activity in physical and health education. *Journal of Physical Education, Recreation and Dance, 91*(3), 26–34. https://doi.org/10.1080/07303084.2019.1705210

Gruno, J., & Gibbons, S. L. (2021). Using discussion to inform action: Formative research on nature-based physical activity as a means of fostering relatedness for girls in physical and health education. *European Physical Education Review, 27*(4), 743–760. https://doi.org/10.1177/1356336X21991181

Gruno, J., & Gibbons, S. (2022). COVID-19 and beyond: Nature-based physical activities for physical and health education. *Physical and Health Education Journal, 87*(3).

Gruno, J., & Gibbons, S. (2023). Implementing nature-based physical activity in physical and health education teacher education. *Journal of Adventure Education and Outdoor Learning*, 1–18. https://doi.org/10.1080/14729679.2023.2243526

Gruno, J., & Gibbons, S. L. (Accepted). Using their (Photo)voice: Student experiences with nature-based physical activities in and beyond Physical and Health Education. *Canadian Journal of Action Research*.

Gruno, J., Gibbons, S., & Baker, K. (2018). Using Instagram to nurture relatedness amongst girls in physical and health education. *Physical & Health Education Journal, 84*(1), 5.

Hartig, T., Mitchell, R., De Vries, S., & Frumkin, H. (2014). Nature and health. *Annual Review of Public Health, 35*, 207–228. https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-publhealth-032013-182443

Hawley, E. (2022). Green time and screen time: Mapping the relationship between children, media, and nature. In *Environmental communication for children* (pp. 31–63). Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-04691-9_2

Higgins, P., & Nicol, R. (2002). Outdoor education: Authentic learning in the context of landscapes (Volume 2). In *An international collaboration project supported by the European Union*. https://parkland.sd63.bc.ca/course/view.php?id=161

Hughes, J., Rogerson, M., Barton, J., & Bragg, R. (2019). Age and connection to nature: When is engagement critical? *Frontiers in Ecology and the Environment, 17*(5), 265–269. https://doi.org/10.1002/fee.2035

Institute of Medicine. (2013). *Educating the study body: Taking physical activity and physical education to school*. H. W. Kohl & H. D. Cook (Eds.). The National Academies Press. https://doi.org/10.17226/18314

Kretchmar, R. S. (2006). Life on easy street: The persistent need for embodied hopes and down-to-earth games. *Quest, 58*(3), 344–354. https://doi.org/10.1080/00336297.2006.10491888

Lee, S. M., Burgeson, C. R., Fulton, J. E., & Spain, C. G. (2007). Physical education and physical activity: Results from the school health policies and programs study 2006. *Journal of School Health, 77*(8), 435–463. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1746-1561.2007.00229.x

Liebenberg, L. (2018). Thinking critically about photovoice: Achieving empowerment and social change. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods, 17*(1), 1–9. https://doi.org/10.1177/1609406918757631

Mackay, C. M. L., & Schmitt, M. T. (2019). Do people who feel connected to nature do more to protect it? A meta-analysis. *Journal of Environmental Psychology, 65*, 1–9. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jenvp.2019.101323

Markevych, I., Schoierer, J., Hartig, T., Chudnovsky, A., Hystad, P., Dzhambov, A. M., de Vries, S., Triguero-Mas, M., Brauer, M., Nieuwenhuijsen, M. J., Lupp, G., Richardson, E. A., Astell-Burt, T., Dimitrova, D., Feng, X., Sadeh, M., Standl, M., Heinrich, J., & Fuertes, E. (2017). Exploring pathways linking greenspace to health: Theoretical and methodological guidance. *Environmental Research, 158*, 301–317. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.envres.2017.06.028

McKenzie, T. L., & Lounsbery, M. A. F. (2009). School physical education: The pill not taken. *American Journal of Lifestyle Medicine, 3*(3), 219–225. https://doi.org/10.1177/1559827609331562

McKenzie, T. L., & Lounsbery, M. A. F. (2014). The pill not taken: Revisiting physical education teacher effectiveness in a public health context. *Research Quarterly for Exercise and Sport, 85*(3), 287–292. https://doi.org/10.1080/02701367.2014.931203

Moore, R. C., & Marcus, C. C. (2008). Healthy planet, healthy children: Designing nature into the daily spaces of childhood. In *Biophilic design: The theory, science, and practice of bringing buildings to life* (pp. 153–203). Wiley.

Palmer, S., & Bycura, D. (2014). Beyond the gym: Increasing outside of school physical activity through physical education. *The Journal of Physical Education, Recreation & Dance, 85*(1), 28–35. https://doi.org/10.1080/07303084.2014.855597

Pate, R. R., Davis, M. G., Robinson, T. N., Stone, E. J., McKenzie, T. L., & Young, J. C. (2006). Promoting physical activity in children and youth: A leadership role for schools: A scientific statement from the American Heart Association Council on Nutrition, Physical Activity, and Metabolism (Physical Activity Committee) in collaboration with the Councils on Cardiovascular Disease in the Young and Cardiovascular Nursing. *Circulation*, 114, 1214–1224. https://doi.org/10.1161/CIRCULATIONAHA.106.177052

Payne, P. (2014). Children's conceptions of nature. *Australian Journal of Environmental Education, 30*(1), 68–75. https://doi.org/10.1017/aee.2014.26

Pergams, O. R. W., & Zaradic, P. A. (2006). Is love of nature in the US becoming love of electronic media? 16-year downtrend in national park visits explained by watching movies, playing video games, internet use, and oil prices. *Journal of Environmental Management, 80*(4), 387–393. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jenvman.2006.02.001

Pickering, C. J., Al-Baldawi, Z., Amany, R. A., McVean, L., Adan, M., Baker, L., Al-Baldawi, Z., & O'Sullivan, T. (2022). Photovoice and Instagram as strategies for youth engagement in disaster risk reduction. *Qualitative Health Research, 32*(12), 1897–1906. https://doi.org/10.1177/10497323221116462

Pritchard, A., Richardson, M., Sheffield, D., & McEwan, K. (2020). The relationship between nature connectedness and eudaimonic well-being: A meta-analysis. *Journal of Happiness Studies, 21*(3), 1145–1167. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10902-019-00118-6

Purc-Stephenson, R. J., Rawleigh, M., Kemp, H., & Asfeldt, M. (2019). We are wilderness explorers: A review of outdoor education in Canada. *Journal of Experiential Education, 42*(4), 364–381. https://doi.org/10.1177/1053825919865574

Rosa, C. D., Profice, C. C., & Collado, S. (2018). Nature experiences and adults' self-reported pro-environmental behaviors: The role of connectedness to nature and childhood nature experiences. *Frontiers in Psychology, 9*, 1–10. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2018.01055

Schoeppe, S., Alley, S., Van Lippevelde, W., Bray, N. A., Williams, S. L., Duncan, M. J., & Vandelanotte, C. (2016). Efficacy of interventions that use apps to improve diet, physical activity and sedentary behaviour: A systematic review. *International Journal of Behavioral Nutrition and Physical Activity, 13*(1). https://doi.org/10.1186/s12966-016-0454-y

Schwab, K., & Dustin, D. (2014). Engaging youth in lifelong outdoor adventure activities through a nontraditional public school physical education program. *The Journal of Physical Education, Recreation & Dance, 85*(8), 27–31. https://doi.org/10.1080/07303084.2014.946189

Short, C. E., DeSmet, A., Woods, C., Williams, S. L., Maher, C., Middelweerd, A., Müller, A. M., Wark, P. A., Vandelanotte, C., Poppe, L., Hingle, M. D., & Crutzen, R. (2018). Measuring engagement in eHealth and mHealth behavior change interventions: Viewpoint of methodologies. *Journal of Medical Internet Research, 20*(11), 1–18. https://doi.org/10.2196/jmir.9397

Taylor, A., Pacinini-Ketchabaw, V., & Blaise, M. (2012). Children's relations to the more-than-human world. *Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood, 13*(2), 81–85. https://doi.org/10.2304/ciec.2012.13.2.81

Treadwell, S. M., & Taylor, N. (2017). PE in pictures: Using photovoice to promote middle school students' reflections on physical activity during free time. *Journal of Physical Education, Recreation & Dance, 88*(4), 26–33. https://doi.org/10.1080/07303084.2017.1280436

UNESCO. (2021). Making the case for inclusive quality physical education policy development: A policy brief. https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0003687013000513

Vesely, S., Masson, T., Chokrai, P., Becker, A. M., Fritsche, I., Klöckner, C. A., Tiberio, L., Carrus, G., & Panno, A. (2021). Climate change action as a project of identity: Eight meta-analyses. *Global Environmental Change, 70*, 1–8. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.gloenvcha.2021.102322

Wang, C. C. (1999). Photovoice: A participatory action research strategy applied to women's health. *Journal of Women's Health, 8*(2), 185–192. https://doi.org/10.1089/jwh.1999.8.18

Wang, C., & Burris, M. A. (1997). Photovoice: Concept, methodology, and use for participatory needs assessment. *Health Education and Behavior, 24*(3), 369–387.

Whitburn, J., Linklater, W., & Abrahamse, W. (2020). Meta-analysis of human connection to nature and proenvironmental behavior. *Conservation Biology, 34*(1), 180–193. https://doi.org/10.1111/cobi.13381

Wilks, M., Caviola, L., Kahane, G., & Bloom, P. (2021). Children prioritize humans over animals less than adults do. *Psychological Science, 32*(1), 27–38. https://doi.org/10.1177/0956797620960398

Jennifer Gruno is an Assistant Teaching Professor in the School of Exercise Science, Physical and Health Education at the University of Victoria, British Columbia. Her research interests include fostering meaningful connection to nature in Physical and Health Education, and pre-service and in-service teacher education.

Sandra Gibbons is a Professor in the School of Exercise Science, Physical and Health Education at the University of Victoria in Victoria, British Columbia. Her primary research interest and scholarly contributions focus on increasing meaningful participation of girls and young women in school physical and health education programs.

Towards a Theory of Collective Care as Pedagogy in Higher Education

Cory Legassic

Abstract

This piece offers a conceptual framework for collective care as pedagogy in higher education, and a proposition of how to theorize its orientations within anticolonial and feminist work on affect in education. First, I spotlight work that helps to define collective care. Next, I call on the concept of affective individualism as a way to describe what is: the taken-for-granted affective governmentality (Zembylas, 2021) that shapes how we often come together in our classrooms. Finally, I ground collective care as pedagogy as the building of affective solidarity, an affective conceptual framework for what could be, grounded in the feminist work of Clare Hemmings (2012).

Introduction: Collective Care in a Time of Crisis

I teach higher education in a time that calls for more collaboration in classrooms rife with anxieties. Responding to research on student engagement, experts celebrate the shift to collaborative learning environments in schools, where students turn to each other for deeper engagement through a wide range of active learning strategies (Strelan et al., 2020). Across the disciplines, students are increasingly urged to collaborate—from note-taking and active reading, to working together with the help of smart technologies, problem-solving in spaces designed for group work, and pursuing group projects. But collaborative learning does not occur in a vacuum: we teach on an unequal playing field. COVID, racial injustice and the climate crisis are only a few of the contexts exacerbating the inequities and anxieties shaping lives in and out of the classroom.

This piece offers a conceptual framework for collective care (as much-needed) pedagogy in higher education, and a proposition of how we may ground its theoretical orientations within anticolonial and feminist work on affect in education. Feminist anticolonial education facilitates learning, together, ways of resisting heteropatriarchal colonial and imperialist forms of knowledge production that come to life through education discourses, institutional structures, and pedagogical approaches (Logue, 2021; Ramos & Roberts, 2021; Smith, 2021).

As a starting point, *collective care* "refers to seeing members' well-being—particularly their emotional health—as a shared responsibility of the group rather than the lone task of an individual" (Mehreen & Gray-Donald, 2018). In the initial stages of my doctoral research, I am gathering individual and collective reflections, alongside literature about affect and learning, to work towards further developing a definition of collective care that grounds its care as a form of resistance to powerful colonial discourses of wellbeing that inhere in higher education. This work is also a love letter to New School at Dawson College in

Montreal, Quebec, where I have been a facilitator, faculty member, and coordinator for the last 15 years (as part of my regular full-time position as a Sociology and Humanities teacher). At the time of writing, New School is celebrating 50 years of holding space for alternative education models in Quebec's public CEGEP system. CEGEPs (collège d'enseignement général et professionnel) are publicly funded colleges unique to Quebec that provide technical and pre-university programs—all supported by mandatory general education courses in English, humanities, physical education, and French.

It is not my goal here to write a history of New School, or to focus on its many emergent practices. Rather, I am reflecting on my own, and with others, about what makes New School a worthy contribution to conversations about wellbeing in the wake of recent pandemics that are also shaped by the legacies of ongoing endemic violences. When my colleagues and I try to put a finger on the longing in our teaching that New School nurtures in contexts of multiplying crises, collective care is that special quality that deserves appraising and protecting through further research.

In her book *Reconstructing Education* (1992), New School co-founder Greta Hofmann Nemiroff describes New School's pedagogical model as "critical humanistic education." Much of that pedagogy comes alive in testimonials and stories we have been collecting leading up to New School's 50th anniversary celebration in the spring of 2024. When different generations of New Schoolers share their experiences, most remember what New School *feels* like, that it's a relational learning philosophy in action.

Fig. 1a: A New School group during class time, a decade ago

Fig. 1b: A New School group during class time, a decade later

On the page, critical humanistic education is an ongoing commitment to bringing together the lineages of humanistic education and critical pedagogy in higher education classrooms. Off the page, our students (mostly 17- to 20-year-olds) speak about the embodied experience of gathering in learning circles, sitting on couches, or on the floor with pillows; they emphasize the check-ins and grounding activities where we help each other be a little more present after long days. Pedagogically, New School is about emerging curriculum, participatory course design and "self-to-subject" approaches to learning outcomes. Perhaps most profound is what I would describe as our *leaning in* together, each according to their means, to the learning edges that emerge. "Learning edges" (Adams & Bell, 2016, p. 74) connotes the affective and cognitive dissonances that emerge in learning, an integral part of New School's group effort at learning to care for each other in the collective discomfort that often surfaces in social-justice-oriented learning spaces. At our anniversary party, a New School alumna (Class of 2020) shared a poem entitled "The Room," which describes an embodied experience of learning in one of our classrooms that resonated with a packed audience of alumni spanning five decades who came back to celebrate with us:

Note to the Future Student

You are the student in this room.

Your story is as broad as albatross wings

and as deep as the ocean beneath them.

I can write about the room you sit in,

but I cannot write about you,

for you have crossed mountains

whose names I do not know,

and plains whose flowers I have never seen. (Santavy, 2020)

The power of Santavy's words come in part with their acknowledgment of difference and dissonance as part of the learning experience, an emphasis on leaning into discomfort. As a teacher, student, and emerging practitioner-researcher, I want to lean into New School's attention to embodied conditions of learning together and help articulate more explicitly the ways collective care—as described in, but certainly not limited to, this example—works at its center.

Despite much being written about collective care in transnational feminist, decolonial, Black, and Indigenous scholarship, little scholarly literature is available to ground how we might work with collective care as a theoretical framework within education. The most fruitful fields have been critical affective pedagogies, critical scholarship on care, and the activist literatures that proliferate outside academia around mutual aid and community care. Like most concepts that do not exist in a discursive vacuum, collective care as a guiding concept is also subject to the same critical concerns that single out, for example, EDI (equity, diversity and inclusion) initiatives as suspect and ultimately complicit (in their impacts) with other racist and colonial higher education policies (Henry et al., 2017). As teachers, we grapple with the complexities of our institutional structures and cultures, and work to challenge the complicities of our higher education classrooms in reproducing epistemic violences. Accordingly, this essay aims to offer a way to center collective care within anticolonial and feminist approaches to affect-based theories in education. My proposition to ground collective care in these lineages is genealogical (Foucault, 1980), providing an alternative to those lineages that have profoundly shaped Western education. To do this genealogical grounding work, I define collective care as pedagogy through elaborating the relationship between the concepts of *affective individualism* and *affective solidarity* in higher education classrooms.

Through tracing, describing, and analyzing the relationships between key concepts, this essay becomes a portrait of collective care in three broad strokes. First, I spotlight some important work that helps to contextualize and define *collective care*. Next, I call on the concept of *affective individualism* as a useful way to describe *what is*—the complicities with colonial epistemic violences and the taken-for-granted affective governmentality that shapes how we often come together in our classrooms (e.g., taking aim at some emotional hegemonies within Social Emotional Learning [SEL]). Finally, grounded in the feminist work of Clare Hemmings (2012), I theorize *wellbeing* in ways that move beyond the legacy of affective individualism, rather toward *affective solidarity*, an affective conceptual framework for *what could be* in our classrooms. Affective individualism and affective solidarity are conceptual poles that create productive analytical tension for holding collective care accountable to its political commitments when applied to the growing field of critical affective pedagogies. I outline this conceptual framework for collective care with an eye to future research on developing collective care as pedagogy (praxis) in higher education.

On Collective Care and Critical Affective Pedagogies

In 2018, I started considering collective care as a meaningful framework because of a workshop in a series we organized through New School—"Teaching Outside the Box"—which focused on the concept of collective care as a response to teacher burnout. Additionally, in the following years, I continued to explore collective care with New School colleagues as a theme in further reading groups on decolonizing and abolition pedagogies, and monthly teaching support circles which we called "Collective Care for Teaching Community." (For the love of study groups, read Leigh Patel's (2021) "No Study Without Struggle is a Love Letter.")

Moving from learning with teachers about collective care to enacting collective care in the classroom and exploring the concept with students, I recently co-designed and co-facilitated a New School course on Care and the Climate: Critical Thinking in a Time of Crisis (Fall 2023). Drawing on discussions and resources within our teachers' collective care support circle, my co-facilitator and I explored with students four different dimensions of care within our lives: 1) self soothing, 2) self care, 3) community care (as collective-care-from-below), and 4) structural care (as collective-care-from-above). These dimensions draw from the work of Deanna Zandt (2020), who frames community care as the "workarounds for systems that don't inherently support care" and structural care as "systems that support community care, self-care and self-soothing." To facilitate understanding of these dimensions, we asked students to share their own experiences and thoughts about care as multi-dimensional. The result was a large poster on a bulletin board in our learning space with four quadrants containing a forum of over one hundred Post-its (see Figure 2). In our facilitated discussions, we grappled with the nuances of the different dimensions: for example, asking how police do or do not fit into this grid for different-bodied folks. The next step in this essay is to situate the complex nuances of these dimensions of care within everyday lived contexts.

Self-soothing (yellow): Activities that provide distraction and/or comfort in difficult times

Self-care (pink): Activities that help you find meaning, and that support your growth and groundedness

Community care (blue): Workarounds for systems that don't inherently support care (i.e., capitalism!)

Structural care (green): Systems that support community care, self-care, *and* self-soothing

Fig. 2: Four dimensions of care: student Post-its

The Care Manifesto (The Care Collective et al., 2020) maps "political care" from an interdisciplinary perspective across different spheres—"from caring politics, caring kinships, and caring communities to caring states and economics as well as caring for the world" (DeCuir, 2021). Current crises can be framed at multiple scales around the world as forms of *carelessness*—naming both the ongoing neglect, harm, and structural violence that continue to act on targeted communities and the marginalized histories of care and care-related activities, practices, professions, and institutions. Conversely, "We also need to account for the ways that care, intimacy, and tenderness are also media of violence," especially where systematic racial violence is embedded in "practices, policies and policings that name themselves as care" (Antwi, 2024, pp. 10, 23). Taken together, collective care is a politics that "puts care front and centre" at every scale of life, but as "a social capacity and activity involving the nurturing of all that is necessary for the welfare and flourishing of life" (The Care Collective et al., 2020, p. 5). It is in these contexts of carelessness, or "being loved to death" (Antwi, 2024), that I continue to look for feminist and anticolonial lineages for collective care that refuse on a basic level any notion of care that denies the interdependencies of living.

A radical politics of care is necessarily collective in its "moving back and forth from notions of proximate physical and emotional care, through theorizing caring infrastructures and the nature of an overarching politics of care, to conceptualizing care for strangers and distant others" (The Care Collective et al., 2020, p. 22). For me, that distance is not just represented by faraway places, but also, for example, the distance that inheres in my own learned relationship as a settler to the land and waters that I call home. Collective care orients us toward a politics of intimacies and relationships, and thus requires a grappling with a relational understanding of both ontology and epistemology. How does affect-based work do this theoretical work for collective care?

Affect theories help us to move an understanding of collective care away from a focus on wellbeing as the interiorized property of pre-given individuals:

> Affects are the forces (intensities, energies, flows, etc.) that register on/with-in/across bodies to produce and shape personal/emotional experiences. In other words, affect is not what you feel, as much as it is an event that forces you *to be(come) affected, to feel some-thing* (Shaviro, 2010). A body then is a processual "event" constantly being re/modulated through affects, rather than a static and self-contained entity being acted on from without; a body is defined not by what it is, but by what it *does* and *can do* (Clough & Halley, 2008; Massumi, 2015; Puar, 2012). (Dernikos et al., 2020, p. 5)

Affect theories take embodiment seriously by emphasizing "the ways in which multiple figurations [discourses being but one such figuration] interact to produce the sites, scenes and episodes of social life" (Wetherell, 2013, p. 358). It becomes clearer that *collective* not only describes the collection of individuals in a given context of mutual care, but also necessarily centers the conditions of care as an ongoing, relational, embodied process (remembering that care can reproduce and/or resist violence). How does affect scholarship help us think critically about wellbeing, collective care, and pedagogy in higher education?

Feminist lineages, within what is described as an "affective turn" across disciplines, are important for bridging affect and education. Feminist anti-racist affect theorists who write about higher education— like Sara Ahmed in "Queer Feelings" (2014) and *The Promise of Happiness* (2010), and Megan Boler in *Feeling Power: Emotions and Education* (Boler & Greene, 1999)—are useful guides into the field of critical affective pedagogies. Critical affective pedagogy takes seriously "the ways in which affect is also a means to address the critical, and makes visible the power and privilege that develops and maintains limitations that are placed upon various forms of thinking, ways of being, and the bodies that become consequentially tied to . . . discourses of power" (Cartun, 2017, p. 30). Thus, I situate collective care within work on critical affective pedagogies because it constitutes an integrated framework— a container that can hold together cognition, affect, and relationality in the context of the tensions between human individuals and collectives in learning contexts, while always considering power.

Accordingly, collective care as pedagogy can be understood as the work in education of resisting affective individualism and developing our capacities for affective solidarity. The field of critical affective pedagogies has not made analytical use of *affective individualism* as a quintessential problematic in social justice higher education. In the following sections, I introduce the problematic of affective individualism and the possibilities of affective solidarity to help ground the onto-epistemological commitments of collective care as pedagogy within feminist anticolonial education.

Collective Care as Against Affective Individualism

Feminist and anticolonial scholars use the concept of *affective individualism* to describe the problematic of a colonial (Enlightenment) onto-epistemology (Bhattacharya & Kim, 2020): a colonial way of understanding how we know ourselves as humans in the world that limits the conditions and possibilities of how we learn together. With recourse to the problematics highlighted in affective individualism, we can begin to unpack how formal education organizes our emotional and embodied lives in classrooms through discursive practices such as managing anxiety through "self-regulation" or stress through "time management"—and their implications on notions of selfhood linked to property, governance, capital, and hyperindividualism. Schools organize wellbeing within dominant discourses of care that produce a subject who is "autonomous, entrepreneurial, and endlessly resilient, a self-sufficient figure," whose care is organized around self-enhancement and self-discipline, but whose needs for care are internalized as pathologies (Bhattacharya & Kim, 2020, pp. 5, 12, 23).

Affective individualism is deeply rooted in the "intimacy of four continents," a turn of phrase that traces the interwoven and interlocked "coeval global processes of settler colonialism, slavery, and imported colonial labor, as the conditions for British and American national formations of liberty, liberal personhood, society, and government at the end of the eighteenth and the beginning of the nineteenth centuries" (Lowe, 2015, pp. 20–21). Affective individualism was first coined in 1977 (Stone) to describe a Western figuration of a "liberal subject" through shifts "in disciplining of gendered subjectivity and desire in relation to family and home" (Lowe, 2015, p. 21). But Lisa Lowe pushes the problematics of affective individualism further conceptually to signal a deeper shift of Enlightenment worldviews into a colonial ontology (beyond Stone's original focus on marriage and family):

> Philosophy elaborates [the liberal] subject with interiority, who apprehends and judges the field of people, land, and things, as the definition of human being . . . as a particular fiction that depends on the "intimacies of four continents," in other words, the circuits, connections, associations, and mixings of differentially laboring peoples, eclipsed by the operations that universalize the Anglo-American liberal individual. (Lowe, 2015, p.21)

I work with Lowe's definition here of affective individualism as describing the (re)shaping of an affective subjectivity. Critiques of affective individualism identify colonial affective "structures of feeling" meant to organize how we come to understand what it means to *feel* human (or less human, or non-human): these are affective structures held up by a repertory of habits of thinking and feeling, discourses, informal and formal rules, categories and institutions that scaffold colonial knowledge production (Zembylas, 2002).

Dominant discourses today on wellbeing in higher education follow a neoliberal framework of care that reflects Lowe's framing of affective individualism as both a way of being and learning/knowing. Neoliberal notions of care depend on a consumer-subject who is always-already lacking and, more specifically, in our schools, a student-subject committed to "habitual self-doubt" (Hemphill quoted by brown, 2021, p. 18) under a white supremacy culture of urgency and perfectionism (Page, 2019). From the problematic perspective of affective individualism, wellbeing can be mobilized as a form of capital for political gains (Phipps, 2016) within educational contexts. For a recent example, we can look at how the language of safety is being used on North American campuses to justify the policing of campuses by governments (Kouri-Towe & Matthews, 2024).

The problematics of wellbeing in higher education, as shaped by affective individualism, are a good starting place for working on frameworks and methodologies that bring our bodies and our senses into understanding the role emotions play in shaping collectivities and power relations in the classroom. One site where these discourses of self-regulation and hyper-individualism are working powerfully, and gaining currency, is the field of social emotional learning (SEL).

Since the 1960s, the growing field of SEL has done a lot of work to make emotional literacy into a framework for learning, and sometimes as a learning outcome in itself, mostly through focusing on developing skill sets for students. My own teaching has benefitted from the literature and skills-based approaches that come out of SEL resources, but I question the reductive discourses around emotions that are normalized through SEL. Dominant in SEL discourses is a centering of the individual within a context of self-awareness, self-management or self-regulation, interpersonal dynamics, and productive decision making (with its pillars of autonomy, agency, and individualism).

The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL)—a multidisciplinary network across the US that includes researchers, educators, practitioners, and child advocates—has become a good site to catch the pulse and orientations of emerging SEL approaches (Casel.Org, n.d.). For example, the CASEL website points to the trend of "transformative Social and Emotional Learning" with its central aim of facilitating a "critical examination of individual and contextual factors that contribute to inequities and collaborative solutions that lead to personal, community, and societal well-being" (Casel.Org, n.d.). Despite a turn in SEL toward responding to inequities, I don't see CASEL or transformative-SEL advocates

challenging the dichotomy of reason/emotion through which emotions are disciplined, subjugated to reason, or seen as sites of control that are socially, culturally, and politically situated (Boler & Greene, 1999). SEL's advocacy for emotional intelligence and emotional safety is "dependent perhaps on not noticing that these discourses and practices in education create certain exclusions and inclusions" (Zembylas, 2014, p. 543). Greco and Stenner (2008) ask, for example: "How does knowledge about emotion enter into the power configurations of our time? How does it contribute to the ways in which individuals and collectivities can both affect and be affected?" (p. 13). And, I would add, how might those limitations perpetuate harm in the classroom and risk playing out as what Linda Jacobson (2021) calls "white supremacy with a hug"? Critical affective pedagogy scholarship asks these questions but could be better served by identifying the problematic of *affective individualism* as a conceptual anchor in these discussions. In other words, problematizing affective individualism becomes a productive starting point for a theorizing of collective care as pedagogy and for my interest in further developing New School's pedagogical approach.

Critiques of affective individualism help to better articulate the critical humanistic approach taken by New School. They highlight the possibilities and problematics of calls for a more humanizing education "because," as Nathan Snaza (2020) argues, "what is at stake is precisely the articulation of the human in relation to its constitutive outsides: the inhuman, nonhuman, and less-than-human" (p. 117). Humanistic education discourses are "thus always already about a struggle over what the human is and how it is effectively policed" (Wynter, 2003, as cited in Snaza, 2020, p. 118). In other words, our calls for humanizing education risk reproducing the same colonial divisions between thinking and feeling that fuel colonial ontologies. The student poem cited earlier intimates the pedagogical possibilities in surfacing the "affective milieu of the classroom" as political. Certainly, unsettling feelings become grounds for collective care that challenges individualist discourses of wellbeing and care that shape the taken-for-granted conditions that produce the "I," "us," "them" (and all of the exclusions and absences they in turn produce) in our classrooms. I want collective care as pedagogy to challenge affective individualism as the paradigmatic condition for learning.

But unlearning affective individualism is not a standalone event, or an easy switch into some new way of thinking or way of being—much like anti-racism is not a new, enlightened identity or perspective one simply adopts. The long, hard work towards collective care comes in cultivating an openness to confronting what we don't know we don't know about different ways of being and relating in the world. Critically unpacking affective individualism as a colonial ontology can be understood within an "ontological politics" that requires such an "ontological openness" (Emmanouil, 2017). But engaging in this ontological politics in a classroom can't just be thinking work—it requires a pedagogy for groups that supports a diversity of complex embodied positionalities and praxes. At New School, I think of the different embodiments and emotional literacy that are at work in class discussions in the Care and the Climate course, where students were responding to the storytelling of Pacific Islander communities who are forced to relocate because of rising sea levels (Solnit et al., 2023). Collective care as pedagogy asks, what constitutes good feelings and bad feelings when different stories of displacement emerge from students in the classroom? How might these lead to conversations about differing complex relationships to land (and water)? How do our frameworks for feelings shape the conditions for solidarity in the

classroom? What surfaces differently in and on our bodies, and how have we learned to make sense with what we don't know we don't know about ontological differences? And how do we carry the weight of these conversations differently outside of the classroom? How do we support each other when the answers don't come, and the unknowing feels unsettling? As Zembylas (2014) notes:

> There is no satisfactory basis on which to assume that an atmosphere that feels safe, welcoming and caring to one person will feel that way to another person. . . . People who face systematic injustices daily generally recognize that feelings of trust and safety are not prerequisites of participation, but privileges endowed by existing hierarchies. (p. 543)

Collective care as pedagogy stays with Zembylas's sense of risk here, and in doing so takes seriously bell hooks's (1994) warning against the possibility of a universal applicability of comfort in the classroom. The key question intimated here is how do we care for each other when the learning environment may be one that risks feeling unsettled, anxious, and fraught.

In the next section I describe what happens affectively when learning and relationships in the classroom challenge the kind of regulatory goals of affective individualism. As different students experience varied levels of affective dissonance, there is a pedagogical opportunity for developing affective solidarity as a powerful framework for how we can care for each other in unsettling moments.

Collective Care Through Affective Solidarity

So what is *affective solidarity*? Let me start off with what it is not. Affective solidarity is not a commitment to calibrating a group of people (facilitators and learners) into sharing the same feelings and experiences. The distinction here parallels the discussions in social justice classrooms around the difference between equality and equity (where justice is not about the same treatment but fair treatment that responds to inequities). The distinction holds closely and carefully how power shapes the ways we come together in the classroom. Following a feminist tradition of exploring the relationship between reflexivity and power, I propose grounding a theory of collective care as pedagogy explicitly in Clare Hemmings' (2012) elaboration of affective solidarity, and those whose work builds upon Hemmings (i.e., Luzynski et al., 2023; Zembylas, 2022).

Affective solidarity as a political mode of relationality and engagement moves away from "empathy as the primary affect through which affective connections with others might be achieved" (Hemmings, 2012, pp. 147–148). Instead, affective solidarity describes a mode of engagement that "draw[s] on a broader range of affects—rage, frustration and the desire for connection—as necessary for a sustainable feminist politics of transformation, but that does not root these in identity or other group characteristics" (Hemmings, 2012, p. 148). Black feminists (Crenshaw, 1991; Taylor, 2017) have developed the analytical framework of intersectionality for resisting an understanding of experience through the comfort of monolithic identity categories, but it is important work to translate intersectional approaches to the affective economies that underlie the relationship between experiences, affects, and power relations in the classroom (without decentering a feminist analysis of anti-blackness).

Reflecting on the ways my various positionalities and experiences interact with those of colleagues and students, social justice pedagogies have taught me to be wary of innocence and guilt, and rather to move toward responsibility—or response-ability. Relevant to this response-ability, Hemmings (2012) urges us to look for "modes of engagement that start from the affective dissonance that feminist politics necessarily begins from" rather than look for points of shared empathy (p. 148). Affective dissonance is the experience of tension between ontology and epistemology—that "feeling that something is amiss in how one is recognised, feeling an ill fit with social descriptions, feeling undervalued, feeling that same sense in considering others" (Hemmings, 2012, p. 150). This dissonance can become a political impetus in the classroom. And to further understand affective dissonance as a starting point for defining affective solidarity, it helps to understand the theoretical lineage from which it emerges: the feminist tradition of exploring the relationship between reflexivity and power.

Affective solidarity emerges from the field of feminist epistemology and picks up many of its critical reflexes: stressing the significance of intersubjectivity and relationality; valuing modes of knowing that prioritize dialogue and collectivity; highlighting "feeling for others as a way of transforming ourselves and the world"; highlighting the centrality of process as well as content; prioritizing the ability to appreciate the other, to render them a subject rather than object of inquiry; and "centering the 'other' in an alternative, politicised epistemology" (citing various authors, Hemmings, 2012, pp. 148–151). Key to this philosophical project, affective solidarity asks us to resist "the privileging of ontology over and above *the negotiation of the relationship between ontology and epistemology*" (Hemmings, 2012, p. 152). Or, stated another way, developing a praxis for "staying with the trouble," in ways that build community (Haraway, 2016).

Here, feminist reflexivity is an active reflection on (negotiation of) the difference between one's own sense of being and what the world makes possible (conditions for being / knowledge of being); an active shuttling back and forth between ontology and epistemology (how we negotiate what we experience about our being and the social ordering of knowledge and power about being) (Hemmings, 2012; citing Probyn, 1993). I can offer examples of affective dissonance from experiences facilitating New School groups and teaching regular stream sociology courses: racialized students grappling with the monolithic category and legacy of *settler* together, alongside white and Indigenous students; students' discomfort with or outright refusal of the label *feminist* despite their feminist politics; neurodivergent students necessarily and strategically navigating an ableist discourse of "accommodations" with other students; students feeling like they don't trust science "because everything is ideological"; and more. I have experienced this in my own life with my ambivalence to social categories (like "gay") that I have nevertheless leaned into at times in order to find community—as a form of strategic essentialism (Sharma, 2015).

Affective solidarity is the praxis of finding nurturing ways to do the work of looking into each of these examples from a framework of intersectionality, while considering how many of these experiences (among so many others) also intersect with each other in classrooms. More than examining discourses, and critically *thinking* our way through these ambivalences, we need affective strategies that tend to the ways we have internalized these ambivalences as powerful classroom affects (or "conditioned tendencies" [Haines, 2019]). Affective solidarity knows the limits of challenging white supremacy as

solely an intellectual project, and speaks to the effort of working on unlearning embodied white supremacy. Somatic abolitionism describes "living, embodied anti-racist practice and cultural building" (Menakem, n.d.) and insists that "all of us need to metabolize this trauma [of white supremacy], work through it with our bodies (not just our thinking brains), and grow up out of it" (Menakem, 2017, p. 25). In order to know differently, we have to feel (and sit with feeling) differently.

Affective dissonance is central to feminism and can be "theorised as the basis of a connection to others and desire for transformation not rooted in identity, yet thoroughly cognisant of power and privilege" (Hemmings, 2012, p. 154). Where a clear understanding of affective solidarity is important, and perhaps counterintuitive to how we might understand solidarity, is asking how we might "square a focus on affective dissonance with the necessity of engaging others without a presumption of reciprocity" (Hemmings, 2012, p. 155). Feminist theorists consider empathy to be an essential part of an "ontology of connectedness," but also caution that empathy can block feminist praxis from moving from individual feminist reflection to collective engagement (Hemmings, 2012; Tong, 1997). Through empathy, we run the risk of misrecognizing the other, bending their experiences to the service of our own feminist knowledge project; thus, empathy "may signal a cannibalisation of the other masquerading as care" (Kaplan, 1994, as cited in Hemmings, 2012, p. 152). What if what we think is significant about others (especially in moments we experience as empathy) may be marginal to the other's sense of self? This colonial politics of recognition (Coulthard, 2014) is another characteristic of affective individualism. Desiring a connection with others through empathy can rush us too quickly out of the potential generative connection that comes in being present for each other before settling into some form of understanding.

Affective solidarity means creating space for not having the same affective experience (emotions, bodily responses/needs, coping mechanisms, etc.); it means not assuming a universal or essentialized understanding of feelings, or that any shared feelings stem necessarily from the same understanding of experience, or nature of being (ontology). Where I see promise in affective solidarity as a conceptual tool for theorizing collective care within a critical affective pedagogy is in its commitment to explore affective dissonance in collective care that allows for a more dynamic, rather than essentializing, account of experience. It moves us away "from a feminist politics based in identity, . . . while nevertheless retaining the importance of politicized transformation of . . . social relations" (Hemmings, 2012, p. 158). When pedagogical strategies explore affective solidarity, through feminist reflexive praxis, "this may be a productive basis from which to seek solidarity with others, not based in a shared identity or on a presumption about how the other feels, but on also feeling the desire for transformation out of the experience of discomfort, and against the odds" (Hemmings, 2012, p. 158). We need strategies for learning to become attuned to our own bodies and feelings, and the feelings of others, in ways that will foster deeper response-ability as we engage in challenging discussions and collaborative work.

To conclude with some possibilities, building affective solidarity might require us learning more about the "amygdala hijack" together—having a kind of basic literacy of neurobiology and the ways our fight, flight, freeze, and appease responses shape the ways we collaborate in our discussions (Gold, 2021)—and how those responses are also shaped by histories and contexts. Social justice education should encourage students to feel injustice in ways that don't reproduce what Zembylas calls "affective governmentality."

We can unlearn anxiety as just a "bad feeling," and rather learn to develop such unsettling affects as sites of transformative work in collaborative classrooms—being comfortable with being uncomfortable in ways that encourage care for inequities, and developing our "windows of tolerance" for unsettling work. Trauma-responsive education looks at students developing their window of tolerance as a capacity to stay present in high-intensity deregulating learning environments (i.e., Siegel, 2020).

Perhaps another strategy worth investigating—moving us from a pedagogy organized around discomfort (Zembylas & McGlynn, 2012) toward collective care as pedagogy—is exploring co-regulation. Co-regulation refers to skills that students develop in relation to one another in the classroom when tackling discomfort (Daniels, 2020), as opposed to the common emphasis on self-regulation skills (Zimmerman & Schunk, 2011), where students are encouraged to manage stressors on their own. Most research on co-regulation has focused on early childhood contexts, but I want to highlight its potential in the field of higher education as a dimension of pedagogy that can facilitate affective solidarity. Co-regulation for collective care would not be about feeling the same things, but listening and holding space for each other's bodies in the classroom as we grapple with the many interlocked crises that shape our times. Finding ways to build affective capacities intentionally together is the fieldwork of affective solidarity: it is an important priority in collective care as pedagogy.

Critical affective pedagogies do not take for granted that the desire for empowerment and resistance are a "natural resource" in critical pedagogy or social justice education; instead, they center the affective tensions around issues of empowerment and resistance at the heart of that work (Amsler, 2011). Collective care as pedagogy can transform classrooms into spaces for more embodied learning that is "not merely disciplining the body with new repertoires, but doing so in the context of opening up the body's capacity to know itself as permeable, and moveable, with other bodies; . . . an imaginative invitation to engage in knowing otherwise" (Leander et al., 2023, p. 33). In my time at New School, I think I have felt what I am coming to know as experiences of affective solidarity—in feelings, actions, or as something "in the air." Collective care as pedagogy is the work of cultivating the conditions for affective solidarity. I think it's in the culture and materiality of the space we share, how we facilitate ways of being together in the classroom, opportunities to care for each other while learning strategic ways of being vulnerable with each other, as responsibly as possible. I want to develop collective care as a transformational pedagogy that could help us rehearse a radical care that we need in order to face the trauma and systemic violences that threaten our interdependencies.

References

Adams, M., & Bell, L. A. (2016). *Teaching for diversity and social justice* (3rd ed.). Routledge.

Ahmed, S. (2010). *The promise of happiness*. Duke University Press. https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822392781

Ahmed, S. (2014). Queer feelings. In *The cultural politics of emotion* (NED-New edition, 2, pp. 144–167). Edinburgh University Press. https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.3366/j.ctt1g09x4q

Amsler, S. S. (2011). From "therapeutic" to political education: The centrality of affective sensibility in critical pedagogy. *Critical Studies in Education*, *52*(1), 47–63. https://doi.org/10.1080/17508487.2011.536512

Antwi, P. (2024). *On cuddling: Loved to death in the racial embrace* (1st ed.). Pluto Press. https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/jj.8501591

Bhattacharya, K., & Kim, J.-H. (2020). Reworking prejudice in qualitative inquiry with Gadamer and de/colonizing onto-epistemologies. *Qualitative Inquiry*, *26*(10), 1174–1183. https://doi.org/10.1177/1077800418767201

Boler, M., & Greene, M. (1999). *Feeling power: Emotions and education*. Routledge.

brown, adrienne maree. (2021). *Holding change: The way of emergent strategy facilitation and mediation*. AK Press.

Cartun, A. (2017). *The affective archive: Supporting critical-affective practitioners and pedagogies in teacher education* [Doctoral dissertation, University of Colorado at Boulder]. https://www.proquest.com/openview/382f034abcdfcc929981eacf4c81c9af

Casel.org. (n.d.). Casel.Org. Retrieved February 21, 2023, from https://casel.org

Coulthard, G. S. (2014). *Red skin, White masks: Rejecting the colonial politics of recognition*. University of Minnesota Press. https://public.ebookcentral.proquest.com/choice/publicfullrecord.aspx?p=1793913

Crenshaw, K. (1991). Mapping the margins: Intersectionality, identity politics, and violence against women of color. *Stanford Law Review*, *43*(6), 1241–1299.

Daniels, E. R. (2020). *The regulated classroom: Bottom-up trauma-informed teaching: A new somatosensory and polyvagal-informed approach to creating safety and connection in the classroom*. Independent Publisher.

DeCuir, G. (2021, June 9). *The interdependence of care: A conversation with The Care Collective - NECSUS*. https://necsus-ejms.org/the-interdependence-of-care-a-conversation-with-the-care-collective/

Dernikos, B. P., Lesko, N., Niccolini, A. D., & McCall, S. D. (2020). Feeling education. In B. P. Dernikos, N. Lesko, S. D. McCall, & A. D. Niccolini (Eds.), *Mapping the affective turn in education: Theory, research, and pedagogies* (1st ed., pp. 3–27). Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003004219

Emmanouil, N. (2017). Ontological openness on the Lurujarri dreaming trail: A methodology for decolonising research. *Learning Communities: International Journal of Learning in Social Contexts*, *22*, 82–97.

Foucault, M. (1980). Nietzsche, genealogy, history. In D. F. Bouchard (Ed.), *Language, counter-memory, practice: Selected essays and interviews* (pp. 139–164). Cornell University Press. https://doi.org/10.1515/9781501741913-008

Gold, E. (2021). Trauma-sensitivity. In *Essential resources for mindfulness teachers* (pp. 177–188). Routledge.

Greco, M., & Stenner, Paul. (2008). *Emotions: A social science reader*. Routledge. http://catdir.loc.gov/catdir/toc/ecip0816/2008016530.html

Haines, S. (2019). *The politics of trauma: Somatics, healing, and social justice*. North Atlantic Books.

Haraway, D. J. (2016). *Staying with the trouble: Making kin in the Chthulucene*. Duke University Press.

Hemmings, C. (2012). Affective solidarity: Feminist reflexivity and political transformation. *Feminist Theory*, *13*(2), 147–161. https://doi.org/10.1177/1464700112442643

Henry, F., Dua, E., James, C. E., Kobayashi, A., Li, P., Ramos, H., & Smith, M. S. (2017). *The equity myth: Racialization and Indigeneity at Canadian universities*. UBC Press.

Hofmann Nemiroff, G. (1992). *Reconstructing education: Toward a pedagogy of critical humanism*. Praeger.

Jacobson, L. (2021, April 6). Social-emotional learning or "white supremacy with a hug"? Yale official's departure sparks a racial reckoning [News website]. *The74*. https://www.the74million.org/article/social-emotional-learning-racial-reckoning-yale-center-departure/

Kouri-Towe, N., & Matthews, S. (2024, May 3). Debates on campus safety in response to Palestine solidarity activism show we need strategies to navigate discomfort. *The Conversation*. http://theconversation.com/debates-on-campus-safety-in-response-to-palestine-solidarity-activism-show-we-need-strategies-to-navigate-discomfort-228865

Leander, K., Carter-Stone, L., & Supica, E. (2023). "We got so much better at reading each other's energy": Knowing, acting, and attuning as an improv ensemble. *Journal of the Learning Sciences*, 1–38. https://doi.org/10.1080/10508406.2022.2154157

Logue, J. (2021). Gender, anticolonialism, and education. In J. Logue, *Oxford research encyclopedia of education*. Oxford University Press. https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190264093.013.1383

Lowe, L. (2015). *The intimacies of four continents*. Duke University Press. https://doi.org/10.1515/9780822375647

Luzynski, C., Caretta, M. A., & Tanner, E. (2023). Vulnerability and affective solidarity: Feminist assemblies in Appalachia under and after the Trump presidency. *Gender, Work & Organization*, 31(3), 1072–1091. https://doi.org/10.1111/gwao.13077

Mehreen, R., & Gray-Donald, D. (2018). Be careful with each other: How activist groups can build trust, care, and sustainability in a world of capitalism and oppression. *Briarpatch*.

Menakem, R. (n.d.). *Somatic abolitionism | Anti-racist practices*. Resmaa Menakem | Embodied anti-racist education. Retrieved February 24, 2023, from https://www.resmaa.com/movement

Menakem, R. (2017). *My grandmother's hands: Racialized trauma and the pathway to mending our hearts and bodies*. Central Recovery Press.

Page, K. (2019, November 5). *White supremacy culture in organizations*. COCo. https://coco-net.org/white-supremacy-culture-in-organizations/

Phipps, A. (2016). Whose personal is more political? Experience in contemporary feminist politics. *Feminist Theory*, *17*(3), 303–321. https://doi.org/10.1177/1464700116663831

Probyn, E. (1993). *Sexing the self: Gendered positions in cultural studies*. Routledge.

Ramos, F., & Roberts, L. (2021). Wonder as feminist pedagogy: Disrupting feminist complicity with coloniality. *Feminist Review*, *128*(1), 28–43. https://doi.org/10.1177/01417789211013702

Santavy, A. (2020, September 7). *Rooms*. Explorations | SPACE. https://space.dawsoncollege.qc.ca/explorations/article/rooms

Sharma, N. (2015). Strategic anti-essentialism: Decolonizing decolonization. In K. McKittrick (Ed.), *Sylvia Wynter: On being human as praxis* (pp. 164–182). Duke University Press. https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822375852-007

Siegel, D. J. (2020). *The developing mind: How relationships and the brain interact to shape who we are* (3rd ed.). The Guilford Press.

Smith, L. T. (2021). *Decolonizing methodologies: Research and Indigenous peoples* (3rd ed.). Zed Books. https://ca1lib.org/book/17408769/98df44

Snaza, N. (2020). Love and bewilderment: On education as affective encounter. In B. P. Dernikos, N. Lesko, S. D. McCall, & A. D. Niccolini (Eds.), *Mapping the affective turn in education: Theory, research, and pedagogies* (1st ed., pp. 108–121). Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003004219

Solnit, R., Young Lutunatabua, T., & Gill, J. (2023). *Not too late: Changing the climate story from despair to possibility*. Haymarket Books. https://digitalcommons.library.umaine.edu/fac_monographs/320

Stone, L. (1977). *The family, sex and marriage in England 1500-1800*. Harper & Row. http://hdl.handle.net/2027/heb.01414

Strelan, P., Osborn, A., & Palmer, E. (2020). The flipped classroom: A meta-analysis of effects on student performance across disciplines and education levels. *Educational Research Review*, *30*, 100314. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.edurev.2020.100314

Taylor, K.-Y. (2017). *How we get free: Black feminism and the Combahee River Collective*. Haymarket Books.

The Care Collective, Chatzidakis, A., Hakim, J., Littler, J., Rottenberg, C., & Segal, L. (2020). *The care manifesto: The politics of interdependence*. Verso.

Tong, R. (1997). Feminist perspectives on empathy as an epistemic skill and caring as a moral virtue. *The Journal of Medical Humanities*, *18*(3), 153–168.

Wetherell, M. (2013). Affect and discourse—What's the problem? From affect as excess to affective/discursive practice. *Subjectivity*, *6*(4), 349–368. https://doi.org/10.1057/sub.2013.13

Wynter, S. (2003). Unsettling the coloniality of being/power/truth/freedom: towards the human, after man, its overrepresentation—an argument. *CR: The New Centennial Review*, *3*(3), 257–337. https://doi.org/10.1353/ncr.2004.0015

Zandt, D. (2020, November 11). The unspoken complexity of "self-care." *Medium*. https://medium.com/@deanna/the-unspoken-complexity-of-self-care-8c9f30233467

Zembylas, M. (2002). "Structures of feeling" in curriculum and teaching: Theorizing the emotional rules. *Educational Theory*, *52*(2), 187–208.

Zembylas, M. (2014). Making sense of the complex entanglement between emotion and pedagogy: Contributions of the affective turn. *Cultural Studies of Science Education*, *11*(3), 539–550. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11422-014-9623-y

Zembylas, M. (2021). Affective strategies of abolition pedagogies in higher education: Dismantling the affective governmentality of the Colonial University. *Equity & Excellence in Education*, *54*(2), 121–135.

Zembylas, M. (2022). Post-truth as difficult knowledge: Fostering affective solidarity in anti-racist education. *Pedagogy, Culture & Society*, *30*(3), 295–310.

Zembylas, M., & McGlynn, C. (2012). Discomforting pedagogies: Emotional tensions, ethical dilemmas and transformative possibilities. *British Educational Research Journal*, *38*(1), 41–59. https://doi.org/10.1080/01411926.2010.523779

Zimmerman, B. J., & Schunk, D. H. (2011). *Handbook of self-regulation of learning and performance*. Routledge/Taylor & Francis Group.

Cory Legassic is a faculty member in the Sociology and Humanities Departments as well as a coordinator for New School at Dawson College in Tio'tia:ke (Montreal, Quebec). He is currently a PhD candidate in the Department of Integrated Studies in Education at McGill University. He is a recipient of the Canada Graduate Scholarships—Doctoral Program Award as well as the 2022 SALTISE Best Practices & Pedagogical Innovators Award for college instructors.

Cory Legassic

Making With Place: Community Artists Theorizing Change

Charlotte Lombardo and Phyllis Novak

Abstract

This article confronts tensions of "risk" and "change" in youth engagement and community arts, towards insights for alternate world-building. We problematize overly instrumental approaches, by examining aesthetic and inductive theories of change arising from *Making With Place*, a research creation initiative based in Toronto, Canada. From Spring 2020 to Fall 2022, we engaged diverse young people as artist-researchers in community arts production experiments exploring concepts of place from individual and collective perspectives. We draw here on resulting public artworks, discussions with the artists, and our own field notes to surface the theories of change arising from this work. We identify three emergent metaphors—the garden, the bridge, the margins—and the ways in which they resist dominant discourses in favor of new practices of imagination and repair. We explore how these creative explorations articulate theories of change that refuse forgetting and call forth desire.

Introduction

"Culture drives its own change."
Ayrah Taerb, Making With Place artist-researcher

Intentions of "change" predominate in efforts towards "youth engagement" and "empowerment," which are often rooted in addressing identified gaps and failures resulting from inequities in social systems. And yet, despite these principles, constructs of change are generally externally and hierarchically imposed, and can inadvertently reproduce the very hegemonic neoliberal and colonial discourses they seek to challenge. This article confronts these tensions to uncover aesthetic and affective articulations of change by youth artist-researchers as creative resistances and insights for alternate world-building.

The last several decades have witnessed a participatory turn in diverse arenas, from research, to democracy, to the arts (Badham, 2013; Bardnt, 2004; Bishop, 2006; Purcell, 2007; Sepala et al., 2016; Wyatt et al., 2013). Within this widening of participatory traditions and methods, arts-based strategies have increasingly been employed as hopeful opportunities for youth voice, agency, and re-storying (Cahill et al., 2010; Domínguez & Cammarota, 2022; Wright, 2019). Unlike alienating deficit-oriented constructions of youth, arts-based approaches engage young people as assets and advocates (Carson et al., 2007; Mutere et al 2014; Prescott et al., 2008; Spiegel & Parent, 2017). This emphasis counters a dominant deficiency model in youth work which places a focus on negative images of youth as "at risk" or "in need" (Foster & Spencer, 2010; Kelly, 2001; te Riele, 2006). Risk/needs-based perspectives have been critiqued for reinforcing external and internal processes of stigmatization, fragmenting efforts to find solutions, underlining the

perception that only outside experts can help, and ultimately deepening cycles of dependence (Kelly, 2001; Kretzmann & McKnight, 1993; Kwon, 2013). Foster and Spencer (2010) identify such discourses as a form of "symbolic violence." Rooted in individualized notions of risk, they maintain power differentials by placing burden and responsibility on young people and those who care for them, downplaying or neglecting attention to structural forces and inequities. Arts-based approaches contest discourses of youth risk and deficit by focusing on skills and capacities of imagination, creativity, and vision (Hickey-Moody, 2010; Rhodes & Schecter, 2014; Wright, 2019). Creative arts projects can spark "aesthetic openings" into more critical understandings of social worlds, and new insights into how things might be otherwise (Fine & Torre, 2021).

Constructs of Change in Community Arts

Community arts in particular have been leveraged as part of a broader range of socially engaged art practices characterized by dialogue and co-creation (Novak, 2012). These approaches operate within broader ecosystems of community work, where change is taken up and expressed most commonly in processes of evaluation and assessments of impact. Within this context, community arts initiatives are increasingly feeling pressure to substantiate the value of their work in social, arts and cultural sectors (Clift, 2012; Hamilton et al., 2003). However, alongside calls for "better evidence" are internal resistances to traditional evaluation methods that conflict with creative processes implicit to community arts (Goulding, 2014; Putland, 2008). These are often characterized by imposed frameworks such as indicators and logic models that are widely used in the charitable sector and connected to neoliberal funding requirements. A key tension is emerging between these more instrumentalist approaches, which tend to position arts activities as tools to fulfill predetermined objectives, and a more transformational approach that is more grounded in participatory and creative integrity (Lombardo, 2021). Artists often report feeling marginalized by reductive research and evaluation discourses that focus on outputs and products, as opposed to artistic process (Daykin et al. 2016). As Badham (2010) contends:

> Socially engaged arts are inherently transformational because they are collaborative and engaging, especially when lead artists are determined to uphold the artistic integrity of the work. It is the art more than the social policy outcome that results in transformation, yet there has been limited discussion in the literature on these kinds of artistic processes. (p. 91)

Reductionism can impact not only how community arts projects are valued and evaluated, but also project design and implementation. An emphasis or pressure to achieve individual and/or social policy outcomes (such as increased self-esteem and social inclusion) can interfere with more creative, collective and emergent artistic processes (Lombardo, 2021).

To address these epistemological challenges, some practitioners are calling for more efforts towards theorizing concepts of change in community arts practice (Galloway, 2009; Raw et al., 2012; Sonn & Baker, 2016). One popular approach centers around modeling a *theory of change* that seeks to depict how interventions are supposed to work by extrapolating impact pathways and processes (Mayne, 2015). Often abbreviated as ToC and reified via capitalization, these models seek to articulate causal pathways identifying short- and long-term intended/desired outcomes thought to be necessary to achieve

higher-level outcomes and impacts. Though these ToC models grew out of the tradition of logic models, this evolution is positioned as providing more autonomy and flexibility for organizations to explore and represent change in a way that reflects complex, contextual, and systemic understandings of how change happens (Stein & Valters, 2012). Yet, despite a degree of openness, for the most part, ToC models remain largely funder-driven tools (Stein & Valters, 2012) that too frequently reduce practice to something instrumental and operational (Van Stolk et al., 2011). Often applied in overly linear, prescribed, and individually focused ways, ToC models may serve to conflate community arts with other "charity"-type approaches, missing the iterative sense-making of arts-based processes as deeply plural and relational.

Indigenous educator and theorist Eve Tuck problematizes and pluralizes ToC perspectives through decolonial critique. In her seminal work "Suspending Damage," Tuck (2009a) names the "damage-centered" construct fundamental to colonial conceptualizations of social change as operating "even benevolently, from a theory of change that establishes harm or injury in order to achieve reparation" (p. 413). She discusses in depth how this underlying theory of change operates to pathologize communities as being singularly defined by oppression. In this way, Tuck articulates theorizations of change not as a tool or an operational model, but holistically as fundamental ways of reading the world.

> It is clear that what we mean by theories of change is not the same as what those (non-profit) foundations mean, because we do not mean anything certain or linear. We're not ready to cede the term to those other evocations—instead, we want to deepen the notion of theory and deepen the notion of change in our use of the term. Reflecting or imagining a theory of change is an ontological and epistemological activity, related to core questions of being and knowing. (Tuck & Yang, 2013, p. 125)

In related work, Tuck (2009b) elaborates theories of change from "alternate vantage points." She calls forth Indigenous epistemologies that emphasize the power of narration for making place through stories and relationships. These, in turn, are shaped by personal interactions with our environment, as well as collected communal memories.

This article dialogues with tensions of change in community arts work, and advances a theories of change approach in keeping with Tuck's plural and decolonial perspectives. We discuss findings from *Making With Place*, a community arts initiative based in Toronto (Canada), which engages young artist-researchers to explore desires and intentions for place, community, and culture. As graduate students who actively facilitated and convened this project as part of our scholarly endeavors, we draw on reflections of the project's creative action cycles and artistic productions to explore images and metaphors expressed in the artworks as emergent and plural theories of change.

Making With Place Theories of Change

Making With Place is a research-creation project and series of public art exhibitions that take up complexities of place, working with young community artists to animate and amplify hidden or silenced social histories. The project is an initiative of SKETCH Working Arts, a Toronto-based community arts organization with over 25 years of experience partnering with young people from equity-seeking groups to

create and sustain arts opportunities, and to join their fights for social justice, fairness and inclusion. Making With Place engaged QT/BIPOC (Queer, Trans, Black, Indigenous, People of Color)-identifying young people as artist-researchers in a participatory process from Spring 2020 to Fall 2022. Through artistic practice and production experiments, the artists explored the complexities of place from both individual and collective perspectives. In this article, we discuss key resulting public artworks and the theories of change arising from this work. We draw on data generated from open-ended group discussions and one-on-one interviews with the youth artist-researchers throughout the project's creative exploration and production cycles, as well as our own participant observations and field notes (for a more detailed discussion of methods, see Lombardo, 2023). Taking inspiration from Tuck (2009a), we intentionally play with narrative form and storytelling as key elements in our approach to theorizing change.

The Garden as an Indiqueer Place

It's a cool afternoon in early October. A growing group of colorfully dressed people assembles around an unusual plot of land in the middle of a downtown Toronto park space. The park is known as Garrison Commons, named after a creek that runs beneath the land, now hidden by development. The spot is walking distance from the shores of Great Lake Ontario, and yet it is surrounded by condominium buildings so that one cannot view the water. In the middle of the space is a garden plot that was not here last fall. It was lovingly developed over the preceding months by a team of 2SLGBTQIA+ young artists (2-Spirit, Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, Queer, Intersex and Asexual). Their project *Queering Place* is an earth-art installation which explores queer community engagement with place, plants, and medicines. The artists have planted and stewarded a garden patterned around the four quadrants of the medicine wheel, alongside planters built out of used decorated tires with QR codes that link to stories, poetry, and songs (see Figure 1). With these cultivations, the project seeks to nurture gathering spaces that prompt deep "inQueery." To explore queer conceptualizations of nature and relationality, to destabilize heterosexual and settler colonial norms on what is "natural," as "imaginative work (that) is vital to the re-worlding before us" (Tallbear & Willey, 2019, p. 5).

On this autumn afternoon, as the garden prepares to move into rest, the artists are hosting a community gathering that will feature readings, performances, movement, dance, and Indigenous ceremony (see Figure 2). Activations will stretch to fill a weekend of connection, reflection, and retreat. The "inQueeries" explored reveal creative articulations of fluidity, connection, and interbeing—in the planter and tire sculpture designs and stories, and in the group reflections they inspire. They materialize an emergent "queer theorizing" that re-envisages spaces both internal and external for building relationships, knowledge, and identities as cultural actors. As artist-resident T. J. Banate describes (Banate & Lombardo, 2022):

> Queer experiences or lenses vary, queer identities, two spirit, LGBTQ+ are constantly changing. We should never cling too closely or too tightly to pre-set ideas. Living organisms are constantly growing, shedding, changing—a tree sheds its bark, leaves, in order to strengthen. We need to make space for this within our communities, creating place to re-experience and re-imagine our

futures, embracing fluidity, expressing a broader, more inclusive understanding of the social system that we're trying to change.

Fig. 1: *Queering Place* earth-art installation. Left: medicine wheel garden.
Right: tire planter with QR code for accessing stories, songs, and poetry. All photos by Jahmal Nugent.

Queering Place artist-stewards advance a theory of change that expresses learning on, with, and within natural and social worlds in land-based placemaking. The medicine wheel garden is populated with plants from queer growers, queer homes, and queer kinships, with sunflowers in the middle "for dynamic sight lines signaling to 2S folks & wilds to come, gather here" (SKETCH, n.d.). The artists highlight the tensions of a queer placemaking in public spaces that are open, unprotected. Collaboration with the natural world adds its challenge, given identifications reported by the group with displacements or exclusions from connections with land, property, or growing. Queer identity knows well the navigation of liminal space, the call to public placemaking, and the necessary considerations of risk and exposure. These realities made this project both a challenge, and an opening. Public space has visibility that reaches across communities; passersby approach with their children, drawn by the sacred fire to experience Indigenous teachings offered to ground the dialogues. Local residents sow their own plants into the garden soil, alongside queer growers. Cycles of the natural world, exposed and explored, provide lessons of fluidity, accessibility, and exchange. The gardens grow native plant medicines to make soothing balms and teas for anxiety and all manner of unwellness. Relationship building, wisdom and knowledge transfer between diverse artists-researchers are cultivated through plants, medicines and soils rather than hyper focused on sexual identity. A cross-pollination of ideas, energies and activisms is manifested, which in turn sows relationships and leadership for re-centering the margins with city staff and officials and the

broader public. These seemingly small but powerful offerings go beyond well-known emblems of pride flags to offer medicines needed to enact agency, to queer place. They rejuvenate compacted soils to make space-healing invitations for queer youth experiencing displacement. T. J. Banate further identifies and theorizes (Banate & Lombardo, 2022):

> We learned that by law you cannot disrupt Indigenous persons from holding sacred fire ceremony in public space. . . . And that impacts . . . even the city staff and people . . . who are witness to us navigating fluidity, red tape, weather, etc.

> What we created is not necessarily very loud or very long lasting physical change, but it's the social change that shifted. . . .The artist residents have now created relationships, connected our communities. . . . Queer spaces were opened up, resisting structures that tell us how and what to know.

> Prior to *Queering Place,* my ideas about community organizing were a lot more rigid . . . [but] it doesn't always have to be formally structured.

> Can we just gather? Can we commit to showing up? Can we make space for what is wanting to be built? Can we prioritize just being in space with one another?

Fig. 2: *Queering Place* talking circle gathering—sharing thoughts and "inQueeries"

This group drew on the physical potential and metaphorical notion of a public garden as a space for both queering and Indigenizing ideas about change. They generatively explored cycles of growth, ceremony, medicine, community, and celebration. Consequently, they managed to concretely change both the physical and social landscape for themselves and others passing through.

The Bridge as a Radical Place

There's a landscaped area under a highway in downtown Toronto with a unique sense of place. It was redeveloped into a park and cultural venue with a skating path and picnic tables. It regularly hosts public artworks, discussions, and community events. Called *The Bentway*, after its large concrete pillars or "bents" that hold up the Gardiner Expressway above it, the area is widely praised as a project of innovative urban placemaking. It is known as a "reclaimed" public space. It has also been a place for community building and alternative placemaking by under-housed people for decades.

On a breezy spring afternoon, a group is strolling through this space with purpose. Folks move between listening stations that have been placed amongst the bents (see Figure 4). The stations display QR codes which link to digital stories grounded in the experiences of young people who have lived homeless in Toronto. The exhibit, called *A Wandering*, invites audiences to hear and receive stories and wisdom from those with lived experience of homelessness. The exhibit is part of a larger initiative, *Reconstructions of Home*, which addresses stigmas and celebrates the creativity of homeless communities by making the unseen visible. As curator Sue Cohen (2022) describes:

> Cities are enriched by street artists, and homeless community culture is vibrant and thrives despite ongoing displacement and so much loss. Partnerships like this recognize this community's hidden legacies, wisdoms and histories, yet they're often not valued as contributions to community or city development. This needs to change. Toronto must recognize its many hidden histories—so HEAR US in the place we call home.

Fig. 3: *A Wandering* installation. Left: phone booth to listen to stories or leave one's own

Right: QR code for accessing digital stories, augmented reality images and videos

Reconstructions of Home expresses a theory of change grounded in radical placemaking for community building and resistance. The area under the "bridge" of the expressway serves as location and metaphor for a place that both harbors and conceals. Under the Bentway, an audience moves through the story stations of *A Wandering* while cars buzz along the expressway above. The digital stories tell of displaced young people remaking homes under bridges as acts of creative care and collective survival. They center not just experiences of erasure and grief, but also of celebration and joy. In one multimedia digital story, a scene of revelry is recreated featuring high-energy music and dancing bodies in communal connection. In another part of the exhibit, tiny dioramas depict whimsical scenes of "home" that can be read in diverse ways—desired, remembered, romanticized, problematized. *A Wandering* speaks to structural violences of houselessness, of repeatedly being forced to vacate these dwelling sites, sometimes leading to the loss of all personal belongings. At the same time, it firmly and proudly proclaims the radical acts of care and community inherent to the reconstructing of these spaces for home-making. As *A Wandering*'s curatorial statement (Cohen, 2022) attests, "While potential is easy to miss and walk by (similar to those living homeless) . . . [we] demonstrate the layers and diversity of lived experience, beyond what is often presented in a reduced way as an 'issue,' a 'problem.'" Later, as the sun sets, the Reconstructions of Home Curatorial Collective will host a gathering under the darkening Bents to commemorate underhoused community members lost to the opioid epidemic. While to the average viewer or property developer, this area under the "bridge" of the highway may seem unclaimed and underused, for those who have found a haven here or in similar spaces, it is a site rife with memory, meaning, and creative resistance.

In a striking image from *A Wandering* called *Safe Landing*, artist Lisa Petrunia captures such a "reconstruction of home" as a nestlike space carved out under the highway bridge, experiencing it as a space of both resilience and vulnerability.

> I imagine alternate ways of inhabiting space in solidarity with those who live outside of conventions. If we can imagine possibilities, we can create them. I create an offering of safety, comfort, community, and home in a space where people's efforts to do so for themselves have historically been criminalized. . . . The Gardiner Expressway has been home to hundreds of houseless people over many years. We live in a society where the most vulnerable are repeatedly displaced from spaces where they attempt to create a sense of home. Where they are all too often abruptly and sometimes violently awakened by police. Where eviction notices are taped to tents, and bulldozers flatten possessions. (Artist's statement)

Fig. 4: *Safe Landing*, by Lisa Petrunia (2022). Three-dimensional mixed media diorama, 16'x16'

Like the string of lights above Lisa's *Safe Landing* nest, *Reconstructions of Home* illuminates possibilities for building relationships within and between communities. Because while bridges can conceal, they can also connect. Stretching across boundaries, the Reconstructions partnership with The Bentway has served as a bridge between cultural institutions and under-reached communities for more critical civic engagement. The two partners have co-hosted several community events, and members of the Reconstructions curatorial collective have been invited to sit on Bentway panels and inform planning recommendations for discussions that engage city officials, property developers, and academics. This is a theory of change that elucidates the role of storytelling, public art, and collaborating across differences for bridging radical placemaking and community equity. We use the term *radical* here to denote the use of critical, creative, and intangible placemaking methods, such as memories, stories and sensemaking, by local yet displaced communities, to voice equity issues and advocate for justice (Gonsalves et al., 2020). As the Bentway's executive director Ilana Altman indicates:

> We recognize the importance of celebrating and learning from the many communities who have shaped and are shaping the lands under the Gardiner. We believe that public art can be powerful, helping us to see, hear, and better understand the stories of our neighbors. Together, we can continue to inform the evolution of our city's public spaces. (Personal communication, June 10, 2022)

In this work, the physical bridge-like features of the highway and support bents are placed as metaphorical possibilities for change. Theorizing through this metaphor allowed young artists to imagine the potential results of collaborations and the productive possibilities for placemaking. Here, bridge is both noun and verb: a place and a transformative action.

The Margins as Embodied Culture-Making

On a fall afternoon with the sun emerging after a threat of rain, Ayrah Taerb is preparing to take center stage under The Bentway. A crowd is assembling as music plays from a sound system. They have come to hear and support the launch of Ayrah's newest hip-hop album, *Indica; Omega*. Today's performance will feature Ayrah's high-energy lyricism, dance, and theatrical movement, alongside musical collaborators. Before launching into his hip-hop pieces, Ayrah begins the performance at a colorfully painted piano. He plays a refrain from Claude Debussy's *Reverie*, which features prominently as a sample in the album's sound bed. In his performance and lyrics, Ayrah explores what he terms as "blackness as it presents itself in popular culture," touching on themes of black creativity, mental health, and harm reduction (Taerb, 2021). A core feature of his creative explorations revolve around the role of hip hop as an expression of voice and emancipation while problematizing the ways in which mainstream culture can serve to commodify and co-opt "blackness." As he articulates (Taerb & Lombardo, 2022):

> Hip hop has a history, a genesis, in responding to, reflecting and resisting processes of marginalization. Claiming space, for black men in particular, to enact power and care within their communities. The history of hip hop has also manifested and reflected the history of black culture as a driver, and even a commodity, of popular, white culture. Hip hop is currently going through major shifts, building sociocultural awareness and power. This is an important moment and opportunity for social change.

Fig. 5: *Indica; Omega* performance at The Bentway, by Ayrah Taerb (2021).

Hip hop has been a key locus of action for community arts projects, precisely because of this history of coming from and tapping into experiences and processes of marginalization (Chang, 2005; Rose, 1994). In resonance to Tuck's (2009a) arguments on damage, starting from associations with marginalization can be both empowering and limiting. Ayrah himself resists labels that locate individuals as "marginalized," seeking to instead re-call a focus on systemic forces (Lombardo et al., 2023). His theory of change is rooted in contestation, reminding us that social change is fraught with challenge, protest, and struggle. In dialogue about his experiences with community arts work, Ayrah emphasizes the assertion that it is not the community arts projects themselves that drive change. Rather, "culture drives its own change" and community projects seek to leverage and amplify this. As he pointedly states (Taerb & Lombardo, 2022): "Culture drives its own change. Community is where the real work must get done, resourced or not. True arts for social change should sustainably recognize and resource community artists."

Ayrah questions potentially overly benevolent ideas of arts for social change. He reminds us that community programs do not create culture; rather, they harness and help support changemakers as part of a much broader resistance. And he highlights that community initiatives operate within inequitable systems that are themselves challenged to properly combat processes of marginalization (Lombardo et al., 2023). The unique role and need for culture from the "margins" is bound up in existing and ongoing processes of social change. Community arts projects seek to tap into this energy but can also risk objectifying and appropriating. Ayrah calls us into the space of an artist hungry for opportunity, for audience, and for expression. He spotlights and problematizes the re-centering notions of community arts from both perspective and resistance at the margins.

Fig. 6: *Indica; Omega* video shoot, Metropolitan United Church.

Community Arts as Sites of Resistance

The Making With Place projects *Queering Place*, *Reconstructions of Home* and *Indica; Omega* articulate rich, place-based theories of change which resist singular, instrumental interpretations. They capture aesthetic and embodied art-making by diverse young artists as intersections of making and critical thinking. They also highlight community arts collaborations and activations for re-storying under- and misrepresented peoples' experiences, wisdoms, and readings of the world. In these ways, they take up Eve Tuck's (2009a) invitation to move from a damage- to desire-focused lens. Desire is productive and plural; it resists a damage focus that pathologizes and limits. Instead, desire accounts for both loss and hope, for "the not yet and the not anymore" (Tuck, 2009a, p. 417). Foundational desire-based explorations (Anzaldúa, 2010; Didion, 2005; Gordon, 2008) evoke a ghostly, remnant quality; a longing and a haunting, emanating from the past but seeking towards the future. Expressing such haunting as a theory of change, Tuck (2018) posits that the opposite of dispossession is not possession/accumulation, it is unforgetting.

Unforgetting compels active resurfacing of knowledges that are repressed, or not yet legitimized. Unforgetting situates itself beyond and across time, connecting history, presence, and futurity. It reminds us of what has come before, to break silences and amplify ways of knowing that are necessary for more fully realized communities. It helps us understand social engagements and social movements as care-takers for the past and incubators for more liberated worlds to come (Shotwell, 2016). Young artists creating place and community are well positioned developmentally to digest, to interpret, to unforget the past, and to recognize and compel broader society forward with course corrections towards more inclusive futures.

Each of the Making With Place theories of change are a placemaking of unforgetting. *Queering Place* saw the assertion of suppressed yet immutable natural elements: the hidden river bed below, the lake to the south, and the grasses of the well-trodden communal park space. Here, young artists made space by sowing garden plots and stories that connected like a pollinator river, offering medicines and articulation for queer 2spirit young people who are often repressed and disengaged from public space and planning processes. The Indiqueer writer Jonathan Whitehead (2022) theorizes that moving into histories that have been carefully and politically removed or destroyed "is sometimes to move into a rupture that is beyond and outside space and time, into a wound, which is its own place" (p. 148). Working within this rupture, within the wound, the *Queering Place* artists sow a garden of plants, medicines, and possibilities, calling forth a land-based experience of past, present, and future (Whitehead, 2022). In doing so, their making feeds into queer theorizing that contests heteronormative readings of "nature," and nourishes the queering of place, through a re-storying of environmental ethics, affect and desire (Mortimer-Sandilands & Erickson, 2010).

Reconstructions of Home, through *A Wandering*, marks and interprets place by young people living homeless via audio-visual symbols, stories and iconography, urging remembering, immersive storytelling, and commemorating as part of change making. Moreover, the works do so by renouncing limiting and dehumanizing stereotypes, in favor of being and delight. The installation echoes the "abundant justice" inherent in Adrienne Maree Brown's (2022) conceptualization of pleasure activism: "The work we do to reclaim our whole, happy and satisfiable selves from the impacts, delusions, and

limitations of oppression and/or supremacy" (p. 23).The *Reconstruction of Home* artists embody an activism that resists state/colonial control to derive collective power from desire and aliveness. They highlight a making of community rooted in liberation and justice, which has much to teach us all about how to learn to live together, stay in relationship, and survive (Brown, 2017).

Indica; Omega confronts oppressive "placing" of "marginalized" youth, and surfaces culture as its own place, and responsible for its own change. In doing so, the work enacts, as bell hooks (1989) teaches, the margins as a space of resistance, of radical openness.

> I make a definite distinction between that marginality which is imposed by oppressive structures and that marginality one chooses as site of resistance—as location of radical openness and possibility. This site of resistance is continually formed in that segregated culture of opposition that is our critical response to domination. We come to this space through suffering and pain, through struggle. We know struggle to be that which is difficult, challenging, hard and we know struggle to be that which pleasures, delights, and fulfills desire. We are transformed, individually, collectively, as we make radical creative space which affirms and sustains our subjectivity, which gives us a new location from which to articulate our sense of the world. (p. 23)

In his artmaking and critique, artist Ayrah Taerb works through pain and segregation towards a fulfillment of desire, yet it's one that is incomplete. He reminds us that projects of social change are complex and ongoing, and at once caught up in and railing against forces that seek to reduce and contain. He embodies, even demands, a need for aesthetic and engaged theorizations of change.

As theories of change, the garden, the bridge, and the margins all tap into metaphors of place. They harken to Lakoff and Johnson's (2008) seminal understandings of human thought and agency as largely metaphorically structured and defined:

> Metaphor is pervasive in everyday life, not just in language but in thought and action. Our ordinary conceptual system, in terms of which we both think and act, is fundamentally metaphorical in nature. Our concepts structure what we perceive, how we get around in the world, and how we relate to other people. Our conceptual system thus plays a central role in defining our everyday realities. But our conceptual system is not something we are normally aware of. (p. 3)

Queering Place, *Reconstructions of Home* and *Indica; Omega* surface metaphors of place ignited by resistance and desire, rooted in realities and histories of specific places and placings. They reveal universalizing themes arising from creative explorations of people in these places, rather than pre-determining impact pathways from outside perspectives. Through affective artworks, they engage sense-making that springs from subjective aesthetic layers of interpretation, from the personal to the communal. They draw on arts processes as playing with metaphor, and as messy, uncontainable, and unable/uninterested in having all of the answers. The very act of art installation is already a changed place. These placemakings from the margins enact hooks' (1989) "new location from which to articulate our sense of the world" (p. 23). They are an expression of radical spaces from the conceptual to the tangible, from the ephemeral alterations of music, performance, and storytelling, to the more physical change of a garden plot. They invite introspection, and even trust, into ripple effects that cannot easily be measured.

Each Making With Place project sought to make such radical creative space by and through young people not often positioned as change makers. Artists offered a direct response and resistance to displacement. In the public art that emerged from these conversations, place has agency, place reveals repressed stories of haunting desire, theories of change of individual embodiment, and collective body politic. Together, the projects resist predominant theories of pioneering, conquest, and power-over. Instead, they move towards decolonial framings of place and change as living processes. These are aesthetic and experiential expressions and enactments of change. As a collection, they allow for multiplicity and contradiction. As "alternatives to damage," they highlight how "what's been concealed is very much alive and present, interfering precisely with those always incomplete forms of containment and repression" (Gordon, 2008, p. xvi). The works illuminate complexities of human agency, complicity, and resistance, of desire and conscience (Sontag. 1977; Tuck, 2009b). By revealing and learning from subjugated knowledge, the works move past trauma towards "a something-to-be done" to claim the right to theorize (Gordon, 2008, p. xvi).

Making With Place as dynamic theorizing and placemaking, as both outcome and causal pathway, pokes at static concepts in ToC models (Malovics et al., 2021). Here we intentionally, playfully repurpose constructs as active verbs. Community arts as an embodied and participatory practice of inquiry expands causal pathways or flips them. The practice has the potential to cast light on a new way of looking beyond change to *individuals* to change that focuses on *place, groups, systems and culture*. The Making With Place explorations of change speak to a growing critique of positivist views of evaluation and theory-building (Daykin et al., 2016; Friedman & Rogers, 2009). They respond to calls for an epistemology of evaluation that honors the spirit of the intervention and matches the values and integrity of arts-based processes (Galloway, 2009; Raw et al., 2012). They affirm an important role and need for theoretical frames that actualize principles like participatory practice, anti-oppression, and Indigenous ways of knowing (Friedman & Rogers, 2009; Lombardo, 2021). Critically attending to equity in ToC and evaluation approaches calls for space to think, to reposition "key performance indicators," to reimagine a "learning from here" as room or direction for change. Rather than sticking to a logic model for understanding change, Making With Place adopted a more emergent framework almost entirely premised on curiosity. This allowed participants to articulate how they understood the purpose, value, and success of their work at several points in time. This made space for a recognizing and theorizing of change in ways that may never have been imagined through preconceived notions and conversations, "plans or strategies."

Moreover, as explored here, it led to rich and nuanced theories of change that are far better aligned with our values. Offering authorship to communities to re-story themselves into culture and place on their own terms can be an act of transformation. Elements of place are rarely considered in traditional theories of change. Context is typically situated as "the problem" or condition we aim to change. Place in the Making With Place projects had more to say about itself emerging as a site of both "outcome" and "causal" consideration/pathway. Here place is an active collaborator, infused with multiple flows and dynamics, historic and current, of human and more-than-human beings (Tuck & McKenzie, 2015). This collaboration revealed place as a site of resistance that goes beyond the artworks themselves. Place asserts itself as part of the change cycle, to be nurtured and livened.

Such arts and place-based processes can help realize more kinetic, fluid understandings of change. They can allow for an embracing of tensions and complexities in relation to notions of impact (Gustavsen, 2008; Malovics et al., 2021). They can suggest more dynamic and emergent ways of theorizing and measuring change. They propose alternatives, or even complements, to more prescribed frameworks or standardized instruments.

This reframing serves to re-situate young artists and leaders not as passive learners, but as interpreters of the world around them with powerful ability to offer aesthetic extrapolations towards the future. Arts-based explorations provide tactile engagement with knowledge, place and co-creation that can spark new insights and multi-sensory ways of knowing, particularly for youth visions that are actively developing. Making with place allows young people to tap into their desires, and exchange with others to explore the change and world-making they want to see and create. This is an active project drawing alive interactions that can take youth beyond participation towards more fulsome agency and activism. Such movement is of vital importance at a time when anxieties and uncertainties about our futures loom especially largely for young people. Broader research, informed in culture, needs young people engaged in futuring projects (Karabanow & Naylor, 2015). Young community artists theorizing change provide affirmation of diversities of personhood and experience that can inform and promote the building of new knowledges and caring ecologies.

In capturing and re-imaging metaphors of place—the garden, the bridge, the margins—these makings with place resist dominant structures in favor of new practices of imagination, resistance and repair (Haraway, 2016). They refuse forgetting and call forth desire.

Acknowledgments

Notes

All photos by Jahmal Nugent (@ninjahmal).

References

Anzaldúa, G. (2010). *Borderlands/la frontera, 3rd edition*. Aunt Lute Books.

Arieli D., Friedman V. J., & Agbaria K. (2009). The paradox of participation in action research. *Action Research, 7*(3), 263–290. https://doi.org/10.1177/1476750309336718

Badham, M. (2010). The case for "socially engaged arts": Navigating art history, cultural development and arts funding narratives. *Identity, Security, Community, 7*, 84–99. https://search.informit.org/doi/10.3316/informit.582355865317803

Badham, M. (2013). The turn to community: Exploring the political and relational in the arts. *Journal of Arts & Communities, 5*(2–3), 93–104. https://doi.org/10.1386/jaac.5.2-3.93_1

Banate, T.J., & Lombardo, C. (2022). On queering place, fluidity, and reclaiming failure [Online Zine]. *Making With Place* journal-zine. https://www.makingwithplace.ca/2022/01/28/5806/

Barndt, D. (2004). By whom and for whom?: Intersections of participatory research and community art. In A. Cole, L. Neilsen, G. Knowles & T. Luciani (Eds.), *Provoked by art: Theorizing arts-informed research* (pp. 221–234). Backalong Books & Centre for Arts-informed Research. https://hdl.handle.net/10587/1090.

Barrett, E., & Bolt, B. (2019). *Practice as research: Approaches to creative arts enquiry*. I.B. Taurus & Co. https://doi.org/10.5040/9780755604104

Bishop, C. (2006).The social turn: Collaboration and its discontents. *Artforum, 44*(6), 178–186.

Brown, A. M. (2017). *Emergent strategy: Shaping change, changing worlds*. AK Press.

Brown, A. M. (2022). *Pleasure activism: The politics of feeling good*. AK Press.

Brydon-Miller, M., Berthoin Antal, A., Friedman, V., & Gayá Wicks, P. (2011). The changing landscape of arts and action research. *Action Research, 9*(1), 3–11. https://doi.org/10.1177/1476750310396405

Cahill, C., Quijada Cerecer, D., & Bradley, M. (2010). "Dreaming of . . .": Reflections on participatory action research as a feminist praxis of critical hope. *Affilia, 25*(4), 406–416. https://doi.org/10.1177/0886109910384576

Carson, A. J., Chappell, N. L., & Knight, C. J. (2007). Promoting health and innovative health promotion practice through a community arts centre. *Health Promotion Practice, 8*(4), 366–374. https://doi.org/10.1177/1524839906289342

Chang, J. (2005). *Can't stop won't stop: A history of the hip-hop generation*. Picador.

Clift, S. (2012). Creative arts as a public health resource: Moving from practice-based research to evidence-based practice. *Perspectives in Public Health, 132*(3), 120–127. https://doi.org/10.1177/1757913912442269.

Clift, S., Camic, P., Chapman, B., Clayton, G., Daykin, N., Eades, G., et al. (2009). The state of arts and health in England. *Arts & Health, 1*(1), 6–35. https://doi.org/10.1080/17533010802528017

Cohen, S. (2022). *Reconstructions of Home* curatorial statement. SKETCH Working Arts.

Daykin, N., Gray, K., McCree, M., & Willis, J. (2016). Creative and credible evaluation for arts, health and well-being: Opportunities and challenges of co-production. *Arts & Health, 9*(2), 123–138. https://doi.org/10.1080/17533015.2016.1206948

Daykin, N., Orme, J., Evans, D., Salmon, D., McEachran, M., & Brain, S. (2008). The impact of participation in performing arts on adolescent health and behaviour: A systematic review of the literature. *Journal of Health Psychology, 13*(2), 251–264. https://doi.org/10.1177/1359105307086699

Didion, J. (2005). *The year of magical thinking*. Vintage.

Domínguez, A. D., & Cammarota, J. (2022) The arc of transformation in youth participatory action research: Creative expression to creative resistance. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education, 35*(8), 805–823. https://doi.org/10.1080/09518398.2021.1985650

Fine, M., & Torre, M. E. (2021). *Essentials of critical participatory action research*. American Psychological Association.

Foster, K. R., & Spencer, D. (2010). At risk of what? Possibilities over probabilities in the study of young lives. *Journal of Youth Studies, 14*(1), 125–143. https://doi.org/10.1080/13676261.2010.506527

Fox, R. (2013). Resisting participation: Critiquing participatory research methodologies with young people. *Journal of Youth Studies, 16*(8), 986–999. https://doi.org/10.1080/13676261.2013.815698

Friedman V. J., Rogers T. (2009). There is nothing so theoretical as good action research. *Action Research, 7*(1), 31–47. https://doi.org/10.1177/1476750308099596

Galloway, S. (2009). Theory-based evaluation and the social impact of the arts. *Cultural Trends, 18*(2), 125–148. https://doi.org/10.1080/09548960902826143

Goulding, A. (2014). Arts on prescription for older people: Different stakeholder perspectives on the challenges of providing evidence of impact on health outcomes. *Journal of Applied Arts & Health, 5*(1), 83–107. https://doi.org/10.1386/jaah.5.1.83_1

Gonsalves, K., Foth, M., Caldwell, G.A., & Jenek, W. (2020). Radical placemaking: Immersive, experiential and activist approaches for marginalised communities. In H. Griffin (Ed.), *Connections: exploring heritage, architecture, cities, art, media. Vol. 20.1* (pp. 237–252). AMPS (Architecture, Media, Politics, Society).

Gordon, A. F. (2008). *Ghostly matters: Haunting and the sociological imagination*. U of Minnesota Press.

Gustavsen, B. (2008). Action research, practical challenges and the formation of theory, *Action Research, 6*(4), 421–437. https://doi.org/10.1177/1476750308094130

Hamilton, C., Hinks, S., & Petticrew, M. (2003). Arts for health: Still searching for the Holy Grail. *Journal of Epidemiology & Community Health, 57*(6), 401–402. http://dx.doi.org/10.1136/jech.57.6.401

Haraway, D.J. (2016). *Staying with the trouble: Making kin in the Chthulucene*. Duke University Press.

Hickey-Moody, A. (2010). Youth arts, place and differential becomings of the world. *Continuum: Journal of Media & Cultural Studies, 24*(2), 203–214. https://doi.org/10.1080/10304310903421514

hooks, B. (1989). Choosing the margin as a space of radical openness. *Framework: The Journal of Cinema and Media, 36*, 15–23. http://www.jstor.org/stable/44111660

Karabanow, J., & Naylor, T. (2015). Using art to tell stories and build safe spaces: Transforming academic research into action. *Canadian Journal of Community Mental Health, 34*(3), 67–85.

Kelly, P. (2001). Youth at risk: Processes of individualisation and responsibilisation in the risk society. *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education, 22*(1), 23–33. https://doi.org/10.1080/01596300120039731

Kretzmann, J., & J. McKnight. (1993). *Building communities from the inside out. A path toward finding and mobilizing a community's assets*. Institute for Policy Research.

Kwon, S. A. (2013). *Uncivil youth: Race, activism, and affirmative governmentality*. Duke University Press. https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822399094.

Lakoff, G., & Johnson, M. (2008). *Metaphors we live by*. University of Chicago press.

Lombardo, C. (2021). Mapping the discourse on the health-promoting impacts of community arts. In J.H. Corbin, M. Sanmartino, E. A. Hennessy & H.B. Urke (Eds.), *Arts and health promotion: Tools and bridges for practice, research and training* (pp. 217–232). Springer Publishing. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-56417-9_13

Lombardo, C. (2023). *Making with place: Youth community arts experiments and theories of change*. [Doctoral dissertation, York University, Faculty of Environmental and Urban Change]. YorkSpace. https://hdl.handle.net/10315/41797

Lombardo, C., Novak, P., Flicker, S., & Making With Place artist collective. (2023). Making With Place: Youth arts experiments. *Art/Research International 8(*1), 142–172. https://journals.library.ualberta.ca/ari/index.php/ari/article/view/29702

Malovics, G., Juhasz, J., Berki, B.M., Mihok, B., Szentisvanyi, I., Pataki, G., Nagy, M., & Toth, J. (2021). Confronting espoused theories with theories-in-use: Challenges of participatory action research with marginalized communities in contributing to social change and theory building. *Action Research, 19*(2), 266–276. https://doi.org/10.1177/1476750318774389

Mayne, J. (2015). Useful theory of change models. *Canadian Journal of Program Evaluation, 30*(2), 119–142. https://doi.org/10.3138/cjpe.230

Mortimer-Sandilands, C., & Erickson, B. (2010). Introduction: A genealogy of queer ecologies. In C. Mortimer-Sandilands & B. Erickson (Eds.), *Queer ecologies: Sex, nature, politics, desire* (pp. 1–42). Indiana University Press. https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt16gzhnz

Mutere, M., Nyamathi, A., Christiani, A., Sweat, J., Avila, G., & Hobaica Jr, L. (2014). Homeless youth seeking health and life-meaning through popular culture and the arts. *Child & Youth Services, 35*(3), 273–287. https://doi.org/10.1080/0145935X.2014.950416

Novak, P. (2012). *Community arts in community health: (re)Making ME*. SKETCH Working Arts. Toronto.

Petrunia, L. (2022). *Safe Landing*. Mixed media installation, The Bentway, Toronto, Canada.

Prescott, M. V., Sekendur, B., Bailey, B., & Hoshino, J. (2008). Art making as a component and facilitator of resiliency with homeless youth. *Art Therapy, 25(*4), 156–163. https://doi.org/10.1080/07421656.2008.10129549

Purcell, R. (2007). Images for change: community development, community arts and photography. *Community Development Journal, 44*(1), 111–122. https://doi.org/10.1093/cdj/bsm031

Putland, C. (2008). Lost in translation: The question of evidence linking community-based arts and health promotion. *Journal of Health Psychology, 13*(2), 265–276. https://doi.org/10.1177/1359105307086706

QP curatorial collective. (2021). *Queering Place*. Earth art installation, Trinity Commons, Toronto, Canada.

Raw, A., Lewis, S., Russell, A., & Macnaughton, J. (2012). A hole in the heart: Confronting the drive for evidence-based impact research in arts and health. *Arts & Health, 4*(2), 97–108. https://doi.org/10.1080/17533015.2011.619991

Refstie, H. (2021). The Beginning is never the beginning: Co-producing action research space. *Action Research, 19*(3), 560–573. https://doi.org/10.1177/1476750319888272

Rhodes, A. M., & Schechter, R. (2014). Fostering resilience among youth in inner city community arts centers: The case of the artists collective. *Education and Urban Society, 46*(7), 826–848. https://doi.org/10.1177/0013124512469816

RoH curatorial collective. (2022). *Reconstructions of Home*. Multimedia installation, The Bentway, Toronto, Canada.

Rose, T. (1994). *Black noise: Rap music and black culture in contemporary America*. University Press of New England. https://doi.org/10.2307/3052359

Seppala, T., Serantou, M., & Miettinen, S. (Eds.) (2016). *Arts-based methods for decolonizing participatory research*. Routledge.

Shotwell, A. (2016). *Against purity: Living ethically in compromised times*. University of Minnesota Press.

SKETCH Working Arts (n.d.). *Queering place earth art – medicines on the move*. Sketch. https://www.sketch.ca/publicart/queering/

Sonn, C., & Baker, A. (2016). Creating inclusive knowledges: Exploring the transformative potential of arts and cultural practice. *International Journal of Inclusive Education, 20*(3), 215–228. https://doi.org/10.1080/13603116.2015.1047663

Sontag, S. (1977). *On photography*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

Spiegel, J. B., & Parent, S. N. (2017). Re-approaching community development through the arts: A "critical mixed methods" study of social circus in Quebec. *Community Development Journal*, 1–18. https://doi.org/10.1093/cdj/bsx015

Stein , D. , & Valters , C. (2012). *Understanding "theory of change" in international development: A review of existing knowledge*. Asian Institute and the Justice and Security Research Programme.

Taerb, A. (2021). *Indica; Omega*. Performance installation and musical album, The Bentway, Toronto, Canada.

Taerb, A., & Lombardo, C. (2022). On equity and scarcity in community arts. [Online Zine]. *Making With Place* journal-zine.

Tallbear, K., & Willey, A. (2019). Introduction: Critical relationality: Queer, Indigenous, and multispecies belonging beyond settler sex & nature. *Imaginations, 10*(1), 5–15. https://dx.doi.org/10.17742/IMAGE.CR.10.1.1

te Riele, K. (2006) Youth "at risk": Further marginalizing the marginalized? *Journal of Education Policy, 21*(2), 129–145. https://doi.org/10.1080/02680930500499968

Tuck, E. (2009a). Suspending damage: A letter to communities. *Harvard Educational Review, 79*(3), 409–428. https://doi.org/10.17763/haer.79.3.n0016675661t3n15

Tuck, E. (2009b). Re-visioning action: Participatory action research and Indigenous theories of change. *Urban Review, 41*, 47–65. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11256-008-0094-x

Tuck, E. (2018, March 16). *I do not want to haunt you but I will: Indigenous feminist theorizing on reluctant theories of change*. Indigenous Feminisms workshop, Edmonton, Alberta. https://vimeo.com/259409100

Tuck, E., & McKenzie, M. (2015). *Place in research: Theory, methodology, and methods*. Routledge.

Tuck, E., & Yang, K. W. (2013). Thinking with youth about theories of change. In E. Tuck & K. W. Yang (Eds.),*Youth resistance research and theories of change* (pp. 125-138). Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203585078.

Van Stolk, C., Ling, T., & Reding, A. (2011). *Monitoring and evaluation in stabilization interventions: Reviewing the state of the art and suggesting ways forward*. RAND Europe, prepared for DFID Stabilisation Unit.

Weiss, C. H. (1997). How can theory-based evaluation make greater headway? *Evaluation Review, 21*(4), 501-524. https://doi.org/10.1177/0193841X9702100405

Whitehead, J. (2022). *Making Love with the Land*. Penguin Random House Canada.

Woolf, S. B., & Wamba, N. G. (2019). Embracing intersectionality to create a collective living theory of practice. *Action Research, 17*(2), 208–219. https://doi.org/10.1177/1476750318818879

Wright, D. (2019). Imagining a more just world: Critical arts pedagogy and youth participatory action research. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education, 33*:1, 32–49. https://doi.org/10.1080/09518398.2019.1678784

Wyatt, D., MacDowall, L., & Mulligan, M. (2013). Critical introduction: The turn to community in the arts. *Journal of Arts & Communities, 5*(2–3), 81–91. https://doi.org/10.1386/jaac.5.2-3.81_1

Charlotte Lombardo (she/her), Faculty of Environmental & Urban Change, York University, Toronto, Canada, is a community-engaged scholar, educator, and facilitator with core interests and experiences in youth engagement, community arts, participatory action, and health promotion. This manuscript was prepared as part of her doctoral dissertation.

Phyllis Novak (aka Nowakowski) (she/they), Faculty of Environmental & Urban Change, York University, Toronto, Canada, is an artist-researcher and educator, and the founding artistic director of SKETCH Working Arts in Toronto. Her work centers culture-making as a primary way to build equitable and vibrant communities and to enact social change. This is the focus of her current doctoral studies.

Reimagining Educational Success: Lessons on Support, Wellbeing, and Trust from Community-Grounded Research with Black Families and Gender-Diverse Youth

Tanya Matthews and Jayne Malenfant

Abstract

We present a dialogue between two community-based scholars in Tio'tia:ke/Montréal, who are examining the experiences of low-income Black families and youth, and gender-diverse, homeless youth. We argue that success must be understood differently in light of the systemic discrimination many youth navigate in schools and explore how research may mirror experiences of discrimination and lack of access that youth navigate in schools. The article highlights how relational research approaches may provide lessons for supporting youth and community leadership and posits that we must foster deep practices of trust-building, shared aims for research impact, and trust in youth.

Introduction

This article explores questions of how young people we work with—Black youth from low-income families (Tanya) and gender-diverse, precariously housed youth (Jayne) in Tio'tia:ke/Montréal—navigate institutions of education that, often, fail to support their success and wellbeing. Our conversation(s) show our mutual interest, curiosity, and passion for conducting impactful research that employs methods that ensure our research is grounded in cultural sensitivity, safety, and authenticity. We draw from our lived experiences navigating the education system and offer insight into challenges and barriers that parents, children, and loved ones from vulnerable communities may face with navigating institutions of learning. We reflect from our roles as professionals within these communities to outline barriers and points of potential action for fostering wellbeing and learning. This represents ongoing work we undertake together as two researchers who have navigated first-hand some of the very educational barriers we study. We highlight challenges, lessons, and themes across our respective projects to explore how experiences between communities illuminate a persistent lack of access for some youth and their families. In our respective and collective roles, we draw from our lived, professional, and academic knowledge to support young people to access learning in the ways they need to and, more importantly, thrive in the learning environments of their choosing. In this article, we aim to offer insight into how community-grounded research findings and approaches illuminate the potential for broader educational reimagination with youth currently underserved by schools, across communities and in solidarity. In our collaborations and research, we have found ourselves returning to the persistent question: How is it that schools continue to fail many youth in their educational pathways, and how is this manifesting in new and compounding ways? The dialogue presented in this paper extends this question to ask:

1) What does educational success mean to us and our communities?

2) How can the lessons we have garnered in our respective roles point to ways to reimagine learning for young people who are underserved by current education structures?

3) How can we learn from the differences and similarities across communities to act on structures of educational injustice?

Across these questions, which also guide our dialogue as we reflect upon the research generated from these lines of inquiry, we try to keep youth agency and leadership at the forefront—even as we are two adults discussing the topic. We hope to highlight the responsibility of adults like ourselves—educators, community supports, researchers, parents, aunties, uncles, mentors, and professionals working with youth—to listen to young people, show up with humility, and act for educational change. We highlight the role of community, families, and connection in facilitating support for young learners, while exploring the harmful ways that educational institutions, often, define success. Our respective community-based research activities show us one way that research can be not only a means to understand the "how" of connection-building for youth but also a tool to directly foster capacity, engagement, and access in itself. While there is an understandable and warranted mistrust of research in the respective communities we work with (e.g. Scharff et al., 2010; Nelson et al., 2022), we ultimately argue that respectful, reciprocal, and sustained research can provide a powerful model toward understanding and acting on educational injustices that impact youth, including Black youth, gender-diverse youth, and precariously housed or low-income youth.

Methodological Grounding and Context: Reflection as Feminist Process and Praxis

I begin in authenticity—I share and tell a bit of my own story, always. Who I am, where I came from, and why I believe my research is important and useful, why I think it will also *benefit* these families and the community. When I share where I am coming from, they can *empathise* with me, and understand why I do this work. We get on the same page and highlight our similarities as people. People may not always express it, but I can tell with the way they communicate with me, you can see it. You know when you've passed the test, and they trust you because you are authentic and vulnerable, and you show that you want to make changes because you have experienced some of the same things. They know some very personal things that have happened in your life too. (Tanya)

This article is grounded in our methodological commitment to transparency, curiosity, and reflection as educators and researchers who work with young people. We aim to embody what Tanya states above, sharing our vulnerability and process not only as people who navigated educational barriers ourselves but as researchers who continue to act and learn to undertake educational justice research with young people in our communities. In a feminist commitment to honoring everyday experience as important knowledge to understand the social organization of our lives (Smith, 1990), we also realize this requires ongoing reflection, and learning across communities and perspectives—this is what we aim to do here.

We believe that making visible the processes, reflections, and questions of doing this work is an educational opportunity in itself.

Tanya's work is undertaken in deep connection with the community in Tio'tia:ke/Montréal. It is done in collaboration with different organizations that serve low-income families, and while her partnerships hold a specific focus on Black families, children, and youth, she sees that these organizations often serve many intersecting communities: first-generation families, people who have come to Canada from different territories, and those navigating immigration status. Jayne draws from their work with youth and young adults navigating housing precarity, where they explore the educational trajectories and formal/informal needs of youth—many of whom are queer and trans, as this community is overrepresented in populations of youth experiencing homelessness (Gaetz et al., 2016). We are both researchers, have worked as educators across formal and informal learning spaces, and have first-hand experience of educational barriers in our own trajectories—and necessarily act as researchers with this lived knowledge.

This article emerges from everyday conversations we have had, and continue to have, with each other around our roles as researchers in communities where we felt we existed both as members and as learners. We discuss how we see potential in community-based research methods to organize unique opportunities for learning, both in the insights they offer and the immediate bonds they can foster. As two researchers who faced educational barriers ourselves, we found ourselves seeing opportunities in the relational and non-hierarchical ways that our projects approach knowledge, showing how education can be a tool to serve the community rather than an institution of harm. We do not wish to argue that the barriers facing these communities are the same, but through putting our perspectives and work in dialogue, we wish to illuminate how the same systems can organize barriers across communities—even if they manifest in different ways, arguing that this provides a starting point to imagine educational shifts that support all learners, better.

To reimagine sustainable approaches to the wellbeing of youth through research, our approaches draw on calls for strong relationships of solidarity and trust with young people themselves (Bergman, 2022), as well as their families, support systems, and communities. This stance hopes to disrupt top-down approaches to supporting youth that have long dominated many spaces of youth work (Ramey et al., 2017). Youth work happening in and outside of schools is persistently grounded in paternalistic and deficit-based approaches (Coffey, 2022), assuming that others know best what youth (and their families) need to achieve success. Rather, in our research and educational work, we wish to highlight the ways we have witnessed and experienced success when actions are grounded in what young people know (e.g. Malenfant et al., 2023). If the research we undertake is contributing to negative experiences for youth, and invisibilizing their expertise about their own realities, it is already failing to have an impact in young people's lives. We believe this stance necessarily involves deep and ongoing reflection and continuous learning, which we undertake with each other here. While our research occupies different disciplines, and often encompasses diverse (albeit, at times, intersecting) communities, we present these reflections in conversation with one another as this is representative of how we undertake our community-based research: in collaboration, in solidarity, and with the goal of addressing the overarching structural and systemic access barriers that impact many diverse youth.

What Does Educational Success Mean in Our Communities? Navigating Lack of Access, Wellbeing, and Institutional Education

We have experienced how, even within communities that seem homogenous (which may come to be known institutionally as Black youth, gender-diverse youth, or precarious youth), providing supports that foster the unique needs and agency of each learner can be a powerful tool for wellbeing and educational success. Educational success in our communities requires naming, combatting, and shifting systemic discrimination that youth navigate in their daily lives, connecting their individual experiences to the overarching systems that shape them. Despite facing a consistent lack of support and disproportionate punishment in mainstream schooling, Black youth are often highly motivated and invested in education (Livingstone et al., 2014), including post-secondary (Turcotte, 2020). Gender-diverse youth face barriers to accessing education as well, including regular experiences of transphobia from peers and teachers (Peter et al., 2021). Youth facing housing precarity are eight times more likely to be pushed out of schools, often contributing to lifelong cycles of precarity (Gaetz et al., 2016). Youth and families we work with are navigating intersecting and complex barriers to access institutions which are often not organized in ways that honor, represent, or recognize their experiences or knowledge (Plamenig, 2022; Plaster, 2012).

Tensions between understanding community and individual needs, supporting learners today while imagining new futures for learners, and balancing difference, similarity, and solidarity continue to shape and inform our work as individual researchers/educators and collaborators. One way we have explored this is through beginning in our own experiences, practice, collaborations with community, presenting emergent themes to explore the overarching systems that shape what impedes "success" for youth we work with. Through putting our work in dialogue, we hope to continue understanding how institutions face challenges in fostering the educational success of some young learners and, further, fail to understand the realities of youth who may not fit normative standards of what they imagine students to be—standards which are grounded in White supremacy, colonial frameworks, ableism, transphobia, and classism. We see our research—anchored in strong relationships of trust with community, beginning in our own experiences and those of people we love, and dedicated to action—as holding commonalities for thinking globally about how to sustainably support youth (and community) wellbeing. When we work in these ways, we collectively embody different possible ways of organizing relationships and learning, fostering opportunities to radically imagine new futures of educational success (Haiven & Khasnabish, 2014). We acknowledge that there is still work to be done to foster a relationship and understanding between the community and the schools. The following sections include quotes from our conversations that highlight challenges and barriers individuals continue to face which can hinder educational success.

What Impedes Success Today: Feeling Judgment and Discrimination

Educational institutions often don't understand the learning practices of youth, nor their needs or the needs of their families. Parents often share feelings of judgment because of how they may differently teach their children literacy and language at home, which may not reflect normative ideas of literacy in a Canadian context. This leads to complex barriers because parents feel both as if their children are not prepared for school settings and that their knowledge and pedagogical approaches are not valued.

Additionally, Black youth and communities face a disproportionate amount of prejudice, as evidenced by extensive historical and contemporary discrimination based on race in a Canadian context (Codjoe, 2001; Maynard, 2017). These everyday experiences of racism and dehumanization (Grace-Williams, 2021) in their everyday navigation of school environments contributes to barriers to access and success for Black youth that Tanya works with. This discrimination extends to perceptions of capability—in contrast (and in addition) to failing to access diagnoses that may support their learning. Black students also face assumptions about their capabilities and intelligence, at times being misdiagnosed by educators in ways that put them at a disadvantage (Balde et al., 2011). Black families and youth in Montreal who are navigating immigration (Shizha et al., 2020) often face compounding institutional discrimination. The following quote, from a dialogue we undertook in preparing this reflection, is typical of the institutional experiences Tanya hears about in her work with community, wherein professionals, youth, and families share feelings of over and insidious discrimination when trying to access educational resources. Often, families don't feel like schools are "on their side":

> One employee from the community centre shared with me that a parent tried to call the school to enrol her child, and the parent had an accent. The person on the phone just dismissed her and wouldn't give her any information about the school. So, she got this same employee, who was a white woman, to call. And she got so much more information. I really think that the person on the phone heard an accent, assuming an immigrant, assuming no value, not intellectual. But then this person calls who sounds just like the person on the phone, and that person already has value. And information is given freely. (Tanya)

Youth that Jayne works with also share that they navigate everyday experiences of discrimination in schools. Gender diverse youth—including Two-Spirit, trans, and non-binary youth—regularly face harassment in school environments, with 74% of trans students reporting verbal harassment in schools based on their gender expression (Peter et al., 2021). In North American studies, over half of 2SLGBTIA+ youth have reported feeling unsafe at school (GLSEN, 2021) and one quarter of trans students had faced physical violence in schools (NCTQ, 2016).

> With the new policies coming in,[1] it's telling trans kids that they don't have a safe place anymore in schools, if they ever did. Some young people I work with don't have a safe place at home, they face transphobia there. A lot of youth talk about having to make the decision between being well, being authentically themselves, or being safe, hiding who they are, and accessing shelter, and education. It's so much work for them, in a system that already wasn't supporting them enough. (Jayne)

In Jayne's work with youth, youth share that anti-trans discrimination permeates school experiences and shapes access to healthcare, housing, and criminal-legal systems. Youth often employ strategic attempts to hide their gender identities or "pass" as cisgender. For professionals working with gender-diverse communities, inclusion or equity training on gender may make up a single professional development day, and professionals often lack the knowledge to adequately support Two-Spirit, trans, or non-binary youth (Nelson et al., 2022). Some families may struggle to support their children through trans-exclusive institutional pathways, or may be an additional source of experiences of discrimination for youth (Abreu et al., 2022). At times, gender-diverse youth may not feel safe or cannot stay with their families due to discrimination and violence, leading to an overrepresentation in groups experiencing youth

homelessness (Abramovich et al., 2022). Youth that Jayne works with describe discrimination, a lack of understanding from professionals and staff, and instability, as well as the need to put in substantial labor to meet everyday wellbeing, as detracting from their capacity to find success in school environments. Success defined in any way is difficult to achieve when navigating these multiple, and often compounding, experiences.

Both of us also witness how families are facing accessibility challenges in terms of getting help their children and youth may need academically. Learning differences, and diagnoses of learning disabilities, often hold a complex role in accessing supports at school, providing institutionally legible documentation that a learner may need additional supports or considerations in their schooling (Nichols, 2019). In Tanya's work, families hold an assumption that their child has a learning disability or recognize that their child may learn differently, but due to a lack of knowledge, information, support, and affordable diagnosis options, many youth are not receiving the support they need. In Jayne's work, youth mention misdiagnoses, a lack of access to diagnoses, or an absence of tailored supports without official documentation to justify them. Another barrier outlined by gender-diverse youth is a need to have parents (who may not always have the knowledge to understand or support diverse gender expression [Airton et al., 2023]) to approve access to mental health diagnoses, learning disability diagnoses, or interventions, often preventing youth from accessing supports before moments of crisis, educational disengagement, or housing precarity (Nichols & Malenfant, 2021; Parodi et al., 2022).

How can lessons from our research point to ways to reimagine learning for young people who are underserved by current education structures?

> You can't go in as a researcher and just be doing the same harm these youth see in their lives, in schools. Research can't just replicate that. It can't say, "We know better than you about your own life." (Jayne)

> There has to be open communication; youth have to feel seen, feel like they can trust you, and that you will listen. If research does it differently, then why can't schools go into the communities differently? We can ask, "Why does it have to be like this?" (Tanya)

One lesson we have shared across our roles as researchers is the regularity with which people refer to the connectedness between community and individual wellness. Youth share positive experiences when they are surrounded by multiple levels of access to support and when those around them are well. Tanya has witnessed the positive impact on community wellness (as opposed to narrow, individualized notions of being "well" [Smythe, 2022]) when there are strong organizations that are adaptive to the needs of a given community, and academic success is taken on collectively. Fostering strong relationships between schools and community has been demonstrated to support Black learners in Canadian schools (Sefa Dei, 2008). Tanya notes that community hubs are particularly impactful for fostering these connections, especially when they are funded, publicized (e.g. families and youth know about them), and address multiple needs of young people and their families (e.g., education, access to services, cultural and spiritual supports). However, she has also witnessed that in Montreal, these organizations are not always available or accessible in every neighborhood or for every community. Churches and community centers may play this role, fostering education and connection in the Black community. While research may not

always play a role in these hubs, Tanya has seen how a resourced researcher who is engaged in reciprocal community learning can provide additional supports for participants, and that when a community hub is flourishing, the stability of the community follows.

Jayne has also witnessed the power that community can hold for gender-diverse youth navigating educational disengagement and precarity. Often, this necessarily draws on notions of chosen family or peer groups (Cruz, 2014; VanMeeter, 2023), where connecting and learning with peers is undertaken as a strategy by gender-diverse and precariously housed youth in the absence of access to support or education within formal institutions (Malenfant et al., 2023). Spaces of support where gender-diverse young people do not have to hide their gender expression to access education or services (Nelson et al., 2022) provide room for youth to foster stability and wellbeing and shape their own educational trajectories. While navigating schooling, many youth and their support systems talk about being mentally exhausted. Significant labor is required to constantly navigate systems that not only fail to support their educational success and wellbeing but actively cause harm in their lives. For both the Black youth that Tanya works with and the gender-diverse youth that Jayne works with, not being able to meet financial needs is a significant hindrance to wellbeing, as well as educational access. One lesson research can tangibly offer in this regard is funds, capacity, and resources. Organizations that provide essential connection and services, especially organizations led by Black communities and 2SLGBTIA+ communities, are persistently underfunded (Nelson et al., 2022). Academic projects can bring additional funds, personnel, and support to organizations (Nichols, 2021).

Community connections, including with researchers from a shared community (Nelson, 2021), may be a way to disrupt internalized blame and recenter cultural knowledge, fostering diverse pathways to educational success and providing material and educational support where useful. Tanya sees an ongoing and strong lack of trust of researchers in families and youth she works with, indicative of broader historical and current trends of warranted mistrust of research and academic institutions in Black communities (Scharff et al., 2010). Jayne has also witnessed a mistrust of both research and institutional responses with youth with whom they undertake research (Malenfant et al., 2023). We recognize and understand this mistrust and know that research often remains a tool that invisibilizes, abstracts, or speaks on behalf of youth and underserved communities. We share aspects of our own experiences with youth and families, not to erase these legacies of research harm but to demonstrate why we are compelled to do research that is grounded in care and action. We share our own hope for the potential research may hold for mobilizing community knowledge to inform potential ways forward in education and wellbeing for youth. We see trust-building as an integral method to support effective research for fostering youth wellbeing and echo literature calling for meaningful relationships built between researchers and youth over time (Ramey et al., 2017), grounded in reciprocity and action (Akom et al., 2008) and the flattening of knowledge hierarchies (Frederick et al., 2018). Research can be powerful when used in service of the community, with youth being understood as integral, important, and active members of those communities and the development of research knowledge. We draw on community-based participatory research and youth participatory action research methodologies and recognize that many before us have mobilized these as a tool for community action (Israel et al., 2013; Mirra et al., 2016).

We have also noted that the potential benefits of research in the community may be deeply related to how much researchers can show up in ongoing and long-term ways, building trust, respect, and reciprocity over time—though this is not often how research is organized in academic institutions (Chatterton et al., 2010). However, there are ways to foster these bonds in the meantime while we are advocating for long-term funding of research relationships. Tanya highlights the ways that fostering wellness in phases of data collection and collaboration can include ensuring that researchers are not violating the rules and expectations of a community space, including people's homes. While we wish to highlight the potential solidarity that can be built through sharing, we also think that the power dynamics inherent in research relationships should impact how sharing takes place, with ongoing check-ins necessary to be mindful of when, how, and how much to share. There is power that comes from shared experiences between researchers and the community, but we must keep in view how important it is to be honest about the limitations of academic research for fostering immediate change and be transparent about our own realities/limitations as researchers, and our intentions for the work. We see youth as key actors in the creation of research communities—not as those research should be imposed on (Ramey et al., 2017) or necessarily a subject of inclusion. We advocate that research projects that want to use the knowledge of communities to change systems must exist outside of narrow institutional definitions of research practices, which often mirror the discrimination, limitations, and paternalistic experiences that youth navigate in their lives—and that we also navigated in our own educational trajectories

While we argue that research can serve as a tool for supporting wellbeing, learning, and action, it has often done the opposite (Mirra et al., 2016). We use research cautiously, knowing that research methods, paradigms, and outputs are often discriminatory in themselves. We are wary of research empowerment narratives, both with youth and communities that are deemed voiceless or disenfranchised (Baroutsis et al., 2016). We know that those we work with have strong voices and are actively navigating systems that fail to support them. We return here to our grounding in methodologies that do not require researchers to be separate from the social issues they are studying, adhering instead to notions of "strong objectivity" rooted in feminist or Marxist theory (Au, 2018)—our own experiences, in conversation with the lived experiences of those we work with, provide objective knowledge about how systems are organized every day (Smith, 1990). When we enter research spaces and share experiences we have had navigating similar issues in schooling, we are not only building trust to facilitate research, but we are also actively addressing power dynamics that have shaped how research can be useful to communities that it has historically harmed (Scharff et al., 2010). We draw from our pedagogical approaches and philosophies to undertake research for the transformation of relationships and spaces. In schools, bell hooks (1994) argues:

> Professors who expect students to share confessional narratives but who are themselves unwilling to share are exercising power in a manner that could be coercive . . . . I do not expect students to take any risks that I would not take, to share in any way that I would not share. (p. 21)

In this, we can follow a philosophy to building spaces of learning—including in research—which frame reciprocal sharing of experiences as a key practice for both building knowledge and disrupting coercive power dynamics. Why should we expect youth to share in ways that we would not?

How can we learn from the differences and similarities across communities to *act* on structures of educational injustice?

There is a need for adults working to support the educational success of youth (including educators, researchers, and community supports) to engage with and come into spaces with curiosity, humility, and an openness to learn the difference—qualities that are often not resourced or valued in current spaces of learning. The devaluation of these forms of relating is part of what upholds systems organizing schools but are, often, not named by those in power (Smythe, 2022): systems of white supremacy, neoliberalism, capitalism, settler colonialism, ableism, and cis-normativity. From both of our lived, professional and research perspectives, we view school non-completion as one aspect of illuminating a larger system of environmental factors, interpersonal and community relationships, and institutional racism, transphobia, and discrimination. We have both experienced and witnessed how focusing on the behaviors, challenges, or actions which are visible in an educational setting may misrepresent the reality that a young person is navigating. For example, in Jayne's research, many young people are punished for poor attendance; youth have specified, however, that this is often a survival strategy to avoid daily discrimination or disproportionate punishment from staff. In Tanya's work, this may appear as families "choosing" to pick schools that are seen as less prestigious, misinterpreted as less investment in quality education while, in reality, aiming to protect youth who are facing daily racism from peers and educators in other institutions.

Equity (or diversity or inclusion) should not be incidental to structuring education but is integral to ensuring educational success for all youth. Youth and families we work with have taught us to reject one-size-fits-all approaches to education, community-building, and research. We recognize that individual professionals working with youth—educators, youth workers, staff, and counsellors—may acknowledge and respond to youth's unique needs on an individual level (at times), but current educational systems, often, do not account for the labor or space required to understand the needs of individual youth, families, or communities. Educators (or researchers) from communities that are studied often bear the brunt of labor to address injustice in systems of learning, while being under-resourced to do so. As such, the youth we work with are simultaneously navigating a lack of access organized along individual, structural, and systemic lines. In our experience, the institutional work of addressing the roots of everyday harm that youth are navigating is particularly difficult in contexts where systemic discrimination and racism are yet to be acknowledged,[2] let alone addressed. Building strong relationships, including through research, may support the visibility of diverse lived experiences of communities and help illuminate not only if systemic racism and discrimination exist (they do), but how—to foster important changes in school to support the academic achievement and wellbeing of all learners.

Another key consideration across communities we work with is their experiences being treated as if they cannot be trusted to know their own realities, or what they need—a common experience that young people face, particularly for Black, Indigenous, and Latine/x youth who are queer and trans (Cruz, 2014). In Tanya's work, families and youth are being "given" diagnoses in schools that do not correspond to their realities, and which make them feel they are receiving paternalistic advice; regardless of the intentions of educational professionals, this perception by youth and families renders these diagnoses ineffective to support learning. Similarly, the youth that Jayne works with are constantly navigating

pathologizing and paternalistic interventions and are often denied services if they are deemed non-compliant or refuse to participate in the programming or trajectories that adults choose for them (Nichols & Malenfant, 2022). These adults may not have an understanding of the circumstances or everyday experiences of these youth, also rendering these interventions both ineffective and often leading youth to lose trust in educators and other adults around them (Malenfant et al., 2023). We ensure—whenever possible—that we are entering relationships of research honoring youth agency, and offering tangible tools, knowledge, and services to those we work with. We aim to listen to what young people believe educational success means for them. For example, Tanya brings more effective ways of understanding diagnoses that families and youth may be navigating at school. Often, professionals are not communicating about learning differences or diagnoses in a way that is useful for families and students. Regardless of the intentions of these professionals, top-down assessments of learning differences are being interpreted as paternalistic, out of line with educational needs, or limiting, rendering them a largely ineffective tool to foster youth educational success and wellbeing at the moment. Respecting, understanding, and bridging contexts, languages, and needs can be a first step toward effectively supporting Black, low-income families better. We hope, across our research, that we can provide immediately useful information to those we undertake research with, including to support their current work to navigate the very systems we hope to transform.

How can we foster educational success for all youth? Exploring relationships across research and education.

In the current educational landscape in Tio'tia:ke/Montreal, Quebec, and Canada broadly, success for members of these two communities—low-income Black families and gender-diverse youth experiencing precarity—may mean refusing continued engagement in schools or institutions of learning. It certainly must involve strong relationships of trust. Drawing from our own experiences as well as our research, we know that, as youth move into adulthood or enter into post-secondary spaces, educational institutions do not eventually become spaces where racism, transphobia, or classism cease to be experienced. For us, educational success must include structural and systemic transformation—changing the ways that youth in these communities are able to access and thrive in spaces of learning, existing authentically as themselves. While we hope our research will contribute to the transformation of the educational spaces rooted in systems which fail to serve the youth we work with, we also recognize that success for many includes immediate goals within the current school system. The ways that youth experience racism and discrimination in schools can shape what success means, often in ways that are invisibilized in normative understandings of how the school system is structured. In each of our research contexts, significant labor is undertaken by youth to navigate the daily realities of schools. For young people we work with, success may mean that you can finish your high school diploma without experiencing constant racial or transphobic discrimination. We wish to support—through research, collaboration, and relationships of trust—educational spaces where Black students, gender-diverse students, precarious students, and learners who navigate intersections of these identities can feel wanted, safe, accepted, and thrive. We believe that the relationships fostered in community-based research with youth can provide a starting place to model other forms of engagement with learners, across systems, to model new educational pathways to success. This can include youth

being able to stay, safely, in school environments—as "authentically" themselves, feeling that the adults around them have their backs—as well as having access to strong connections to the school and broader community to support their wellbeing as they learn.

Conclusion

In our own educational trajectories and our work as educators and researchers in K–12, post-secondary, and other learning environments, we see an increasing will to support the success and wellbeing of learners who may be labelled "diverse" or who don't fall into normative notions of who students are. However, there is much work to be done. We know how difficult it is to break from intergenerational cycles of educational barriers and a deep mistrust of institutions and access new opportunities for learning. When young learners we work with do access learning spaces, their experiences of discrimination and internalized notions of failure often follow them into adulthood and may shape their relationships with the education of their peers, children, or family members. For many youth, educational spaces communicate on a daily basis that they are not welcome. We see how diplomas and engagement with post-secondary can present the illusion that individual resilience or hard work can negate the structural and systemic barriers that exist in many spaces of learning. We enter our research with a clear aim to make schools better suited for diverse learners and a continuing dedication to working with the community to figure out how to do this. We have seen that the changes we hope to achieve through research and action are changes our community collaborators hope for as well, highlighting the potential that community-led research projects can contribute toward a shared effort for educational justice.

Notes

1. In 2023, the provinces of New Brunswick, Saskatchewan, and Alberta passed policies limiting students' agency and requiring parental consent to use chosen names or pronouns for students in certain age groups.

2. Quebec's Coalition Avenir Québec party (CAQ) maintains that there is no systemic racism in Quebec, despite calls from many communities and advocates to acknowledge and act on this issue (Cabrera, 2022).

References

Abramovich, A., Pang, N. & Moss, A. (2022) Experiences of family violence among 2SLGBTQ + youth at risk of, and experiencing, homelessness before and during the COVID-19 pandemic. *Journal of Gay & Lesbian Mental Health*, 26:3, 265–288.

Abreu, R. L., Sostre, J. P., Gonzalez, K. A., Lockett, G. M., & Matsuno, E. (2022). "*I am afraid for those kids who might find death preferable*": Parental figures' reactions and coping strategies to bans on gender affirming care for transgender and gender diverse youth. *Psychology of Sexual Orientation and Gender Diversity, 9*(4), 500–510.

Airton, L., Gray, S., Pyne, J., Turje, M., & Whitmore, T. (2023). No for now: Guidance for school staff on supporting transgender students and parent-child relationships [White paper]. www.nofornow.ca

Akom, A. A., Ginwright, S., & Cammarota, J. (2008). Youthtopias: Toward a new paradigm of critical youth studies. *Youth Media Reporter: The Professional Journal of the Youth Media Field* 2(4), 1–30.

Au, W. (2018). *A Marxist education: Learning to change the world*. Haymarket Books.

Balde, A., Sène, J. M., & Mc Andrew, M. (2011). *Portrait des jeunes québécois originaires des Antilles et de l'Afrique subsaharienne, secteur français*. Chaire de recherche du Canada sur l'Éducation et les rapports ethniques

Baroutsis, A., Mills, M., McGregor, G., te Riele, K., & Hayes, D. (2016). Student voice and the community forum: Finding ways of "being heard" at an alternative school for disenfranchised young people. *British Educational Research Journal*, *42*(3), 438–453.

Bergman, C. J. (2022). Introduction. In *Trust kids: Stories on youth autonomy and confronting adult supremacy*. AK Press.

Cabrera, H. (2022, September 29). Broken promises, denial of systemic racism strain CAQ-Indigenous relations. CBC News. Accessed January 2, 2024.

Chatterton, P., Hodkinson, S., & Pickerill, J. (2010). Beyond scholar activism: Making strategic interventions inside and outside the neoliberal university. *ACME: An International E-Journal for Critical Geographies,* 9(2), 245–275.

Codjoe, H. M. (2001) Fighting a "public enemy" of Black academic achievement—the persistence of racism and the schooling experiences of Black students in Canada. *Race Ethnicity and Education*, 4(3), 343–375. https://doi.org/10.1080/13613320120096652

Coffey, J. (2022) Assembling wellbeing: Bodies, affects and the "conditions of possibility" for wellbeing, *Journal of Youth Studies*, 25(1), 67–83.

Cruz, C. (2014). LGBTQ street youth doing resistance in infrapolitical worlds. In E. Tuck & Y. Wang (Eds.), *Youth resistance and theories of change* (pp. 209–217). Taylor and Francis.

Frederick, T., Daley, M., & Zahn, W. (2018). Peer support work to enhance services for youth experiencing homelessness. In S. Kidd, N. Slesnick, T. Frederick, J. Karabanow & S. Gaetz (Eds.), *Mental health and addiction interventions for youth experiencing homelessness: Practical strategies for front-line provider*s (pp. 247–261). Canadian Observatory on Homelessness Press.

Gaetz, S. Dej, E., Richter, T., & Redman, M. (2016). *The state of homelessness in Canada 2016*. Canadian Observatory on Homelessness Press.

GLSEN Research Institute (2021). *Improving school climate for transgender and nonbinary youth*. [Research Brief].

Grace-Williams, M. (2021). "Who feels it knows it": Black mothers' resistance to anti-black racism in North American K–12 schools. In E. Lyle (Ed), *Re/humanizing Education* (pp. 151–161).

Haiven, M., & Khasnabish, A. (2014). *The radical imagination: Social movement research in the age of austerity*. Zed Books.

hooks, B. (1994). *Teaching to transgress: Education as the practice of freedom*. Routledge.

Israel, B. A., Eng, E., Schulz, A. J., & Parker, E. A. (2013). *Methods for community-based participatory research for health* (2nd Ed.). Jossey-Bass.

Livingstone, A.-M., Clemencki, J., & Calixte, M. (2014). Youth participatory action research and school improvement: The missing voices of Black youth in Montreal. *Canadian Journal of Education* 37(1), 283–307.

Malenfant, J., Watchorn, M., & Nichols, N. (2023). Homeless youth-led activism and direct action: Lessons from a participatory research project in Tio'tia:ke/Montréal. *Children & Society, Special Issue: Conceptualising and Researching Child and Youth Activism,* 00, 1–15.

Maynard, R. (2017). *Policing black lives: State violence in Canada from slavery to the present.* Fernwood Publishing.

Mirra, N., Garcia, A., & Morrell, E. (2016). *Doing youth participatory action research: Transforming inquiry with researchers, educators and students.* Routledge.

National Center for Transgender Equality (NCTQ). (2016). *The report of the U.S. transgender survey.*

Nelson, A. (2021). The exclusion of inclusion: Critically re-examining lived experience engagement. *Parity,* 34(6), 48–50.

Nelson, A., Malenfant, J., Schwan, K., & Watchorn, M. (2022). *Literature review & practice scan: Housing need & homelessness amongst gender-diverse people in Canada.* The Office of the Federal Housing Advocate, Canadian Human Rights Commission.

Nichols, N. (2019). *Youth, school, and community: Participatory institutional ethnographies.* University of Toronto Press.

Nichols, N., & Malenfant, J. (2021). Tracing institutional histories of youth homelessness: Points of possibility for the child welfare, health & mental health and education systems in Québec. *The Research for Social Change Lab.* Report Prepared for: Dans la rue.

Nichols, N., & Malenfant, J. (2022) Health system access for precariously housed youth: A participatory youth research project. *Society and Mental Health,*12(2): 1–18.

Parodi, K. B., Holt, M. K., Green, J., Katz-Wise, S.L., Shah, T.N., Kraus, A.D., & Xuan, Z. (2022). Associations between school-related factors and mental health among transgender and gender diverse youth. *Journal of School Psychology,* 90, 135–149.

Peter, T., Campbell, C. P., & Taylor, C. (2021). Still in every class in every school: Final report on the second climate survey on homophobia, biphobia, and transphobia in Canadian schools. *Egale Canada Human Rights Trust*, 158.

Plamenig, H. (2022). The schooling experiences of Black youth in Canada. *EGSA University of Ottawa Education Journal,* 8(2), 93–103.

Plaster, J. (2012). Imagined conversations and activist lineages: Public histories of queer homeless youth organizing and the policing of public space in San Francisco's Tenderloin, 1960s and present. *Radical History Review, 2012,* (113), 99–109.

Ramey, H. L., Lawford, H. L., & Vachon, W. (2017). Youth–adult partnerships in work with youth: An overview. *Journal of Youth Development*, 12(4), 38–60.

Scharff, D. P., Mathews K. J., Jackson, P., Hoffsuemmer, J., Martin, E., & Edwards, D. (2010). More than Tuskegee: Understanding mistrust about research participation. *Journal of Health Care for the Poor and Underserved. 21*(3), 879–97.

Sefa Dei, G. J. (2008). Schooling as community: Race, schooling, and the education of African youth. *Journal of Black Studies, 38*(3), 346–366.

Shizha, E., Abdi, A. A., Wilson-Forsberg, S., & Masakure, O. (2020). African immigrant students and postsecondary education in Canada: High school teachers and school career counsellors as gatekeepers. *Canadian Ethnic Studies, 52*(3), 67–86.

Smith, D. (1990). *Texts, facts and femininity exploring the relations of ruling*. Routledge.

Smythe, S.A. (2022). Can I get a witness? Black feminism, trans embodiment, and thriving past the fault lines of care. *Palimpset: A Journal on Women, Gender, and the Black International,* 11(1), 85–107.

Turcotte, M. (2020). *Insights on Canadian society. Results from the 2016 Census: Education and labour market integration of Black youth in Canada.* Statistics Canada.

VanMeeter, M. (2023). *Creating home in community: Reframing and resourcing informal shared housing with chosen family and kin as part of the solution to youth homelessness*. Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago.

Tanya Matthews is from Staley, North Carolina, but has been in Tio'tiá:ke/Montreal since 2012. She is a McGill Third Century Postdoctoral Research Fellow in the School of Communication Sciences and Disorders in the Faculty of Medicine and Health Sciences at McGill University. Her research interest is rooted in her lived experience as an individual who was raised in a low-income household with differential exposure to oral language and literacy. Her research uses a community-based participatory approach to document oral language and emergent literacy practices used in the homes of Black families who face financial hardships.

Jayne Malenfant is from Kapuskasing, Ontario, but has been in Tio'tiá:ke/Montreal since 2016. They are an Assistant Professor in social justice and community-engaged education in the Department of Integrated Studies in Education at McGill University. They are a researcher with lived experience of subjects they study, which include the educational experiences of young people and adults navigating homelessness, research leadership by people with lived and living experience of housing precarity, and the experiences of Two-Spirit, trans, and non-binary communities navigating housing precarity.

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

Alyssa Mayer

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)[1] 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.[2] 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.
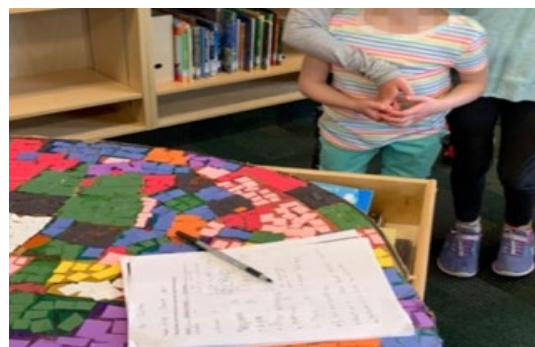
Fig. 3: Posing at a Share Fair. Students across grade levels embrace in support of inquiry projects that derived from a week-long field experience.

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,[3] coming alongside and learning to walk together, and pimatisiwin,[4] 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,[5] 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.[6] 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.
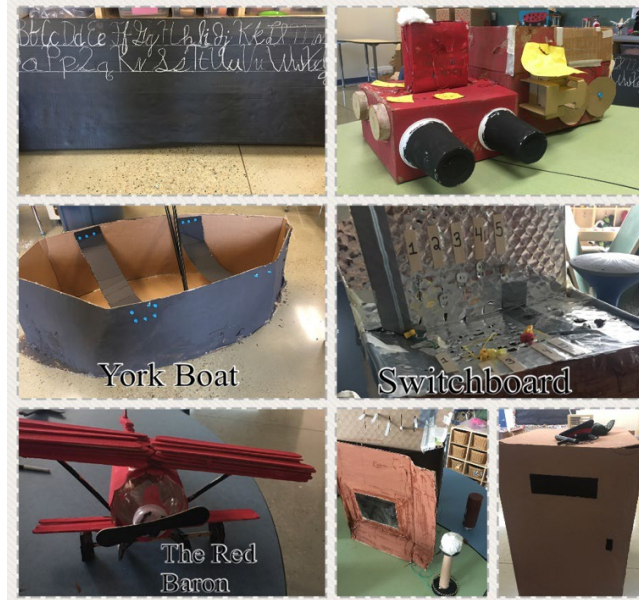
Fig. 10: Inquiry school representations. Grade 1 projects following a week-long inquiry experience

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.

References

Book Riot (n.d.). *Best Ms. Frizzle quotes from the magic school bus.* https://bookriot.com/best-miss-frizzle-quotes/

Cardinal, T., Murphy, M. S., & Huber, J. (2019). Movements toward living relationally ethical assessment making: Bringing Indigenous ways of being, knowing, and doing alongside narrative inquiry as pedagogy. *Revista Interuniversitaria de Formación del Profesorado, 94*(33.3) 121–140.

Cardinal, T., Murphy, M. S., Huber, J., & Pinnegar, S. (2023). Editorial: Assessment practices with Indigenous children, youth, families, and communities. *Frontiers in Education, 7.* https://doi.org/10.3389/feduc.2022.1105583

Chambers, C. (1999). A topography for Canadian curriculum theory. *Canadian Journal of Education 24*(2), 137–150.

Chung, S. (2009). A reflective turn: Towards composing a curriculum of lives. *LEARNing Landscapes*, 2(2), 123–137. https://www.learninglandscapes.ca/index.php/learnland/article/view/A-Reflective-Turn-Towards-Composing-a-Curriculum-of-Lives/299

Clandinin, D. J., & Connelly, F. M. (Eds.) (2000). What do narrative inquirers do? In *Narrative inquiry: Experience and story in qualitative research* (pp. 48–62). John Wiley & Sons, Inc.

Connelly, M., & Clandinin, J. (1988). *Teachers as curriculum planners: Narratives of experience.* New York Teachers College Press.

Couture, J., & Cheng L. (2000). Teachers' work in the global culture of performance. *Alberta Journal of Educational Research, 46*(1), 65. https://journalhosting.ucalgary.ca/index.php/ajer/article/view/54793

Egan, K. (1978). What is curriculum? *Curriculum Inquiry, 8*(1), 65–71.

Eisner, E. W. (2017). What does it mean to say a school is doing well? In D. J. Flinders & S. T. Thornton (Eds.), *The curriculum studies reader (*5th ed., pp. 313–321). Routledge.

Eljaji, A. (2021). Interrupting and disrupting single stories: Working with Muslim youth to provide (counter)stories and (re)shape our world(s). *Annals of Social Studies Education Research for Teachers, 2*(1), 8-18. https://doi.org/10.29173/assert18

Greene, M. (1993). Diversity and inclusion: Toward a curriculum for human beings. *Teachers College Record, 95*(2), 211–221.

Kanygin, J., & Marks, S. (2021, March 30). "Deeply disappointing": Educators, parents voice concerns as Kenney defends new Alberta curriculum. *CTV News*, https://calgary.ctvnews.ca/deeply-disappointing-educators-parents-voice-concerns-as-kenney-defends-new-alberta-curriculum-1.5368873

Lessard, S. M. (2010) *Skye's story in Two-stones "stories": Shared teachings through the narrative experiences of early school leavers.* Unpublished Master's thesis, University of Alberta.

Lugones, M. (1987). Playfulness, "world"-travelling, and loving perception, *Hypatia, 2*(2), 3–19. https://www.jstor.org/stable/3810013

Merriam-Webster. (n.d.). Curriculum. In *Merriam-Webster.com dictionary*. https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/curriculum

Minde, R. (2021). *Walking with children and families.*
https://drive.google.com/file/d/1pPADjbruzSvbZvmJD8Mz_ihePN14f7Kp/view?usp=sharing

Morcom, L. (2017). Indigenous holistic education in philosophy and practice, with wampum as a case study. *Foro de Educación. 15*(23), 121–138. https://doi.org/10.14516/fde.572

Noddings, N. (2017). The false promise of the Paideia: A critical review of the Paideia proposal. In D. J. Flinders & S. T. Thornton (Eds.), *The curriculum studies reader* (5th ed., pp. 197– 206). Routledge.

Paley, V. (1986). On listening to what the children say. *Harvard Education Review, 56*, 122–131.

RSA Animate. (2010). *Changing education paradigms* [Video]. TED: Ideas worth spreading.
https://www.ted.com/talks/sir_ken_robinson_changing_education_paradigms

Sleeter, C., & Stillman, J. (2017). Standardizing knowledge in a multicultural society. In D. J. Flinders & S. T. Thornton (Eds.), *The curriculum studies reader* (5th ed., pp. 279–297). Routledge.

Styres, S. (2010). Land as first teacher: A philosophical journeying. *Reflective Practice 12*(6), 717-731.
https://www.researchgate.net/publication/241736750_Land_as_first_teacher_A_philosophical_journeying

Swanson, C. (2014). Unbundling stories: Encountering tensions between the familial and school curriculum-making worlds. *LEARNing Landscapes, 7*(2), 299–317.
https://doi.org/10.36510/learnland.v7i2.667

Tyler, R. W. (2017). Basic principles of curriculum and instruction. In D.J. Flinders & S. J. Thornton (Eds.), *The curriculum studies reader*, 5th Ed., (5th ed., pp. 73–82) Routledge.

Vinz, R. (1997). Capturing a moving form: "Becoming" as teachers. *English Education, 29*(2), 137–146.
https://www.jstor.org/stable/40172926

York University (n.d.). Curriculum. Retrieved May 15, 2024, from
https://www.yorku.ca/unit/vpacad/curriculum-development/curriculum/

Young, M. (2003). *Pimatisiwin: Walking in a good way—a narrative inquiry into language as identity.* [Doctoral dissertation, University of Alberta.] https://doi.org/10.7939/r3-s0je-mq67

Alyssa Mayer is a 2023 graduate of the University of Alberta's Master of Education Program, with a focus on Indigenous and relational curriculum-making and pedagogy. She comes alongside elementary-aged children in a public school on land now known through colonization as Western Canada. Her role in the learning process supports children's life-making through differentiated instruction, the interweaving of natural curiosities with curricula, and inclusive and representative assessment practices.

Come, I Will Walk With You

Kate McCabe

Abstract

A cancer diagnosis enlivens the question of what it means to live well with the Earth and its multidimensional beings, including the children I teach. A cancer diagnosis provides a necessary push to step out from the confines of a self and toward and into the wild fray of this life. I interpret my lived experiences through the practical philosophy of hermeneutics. Hermeneutics has helped me perform and write my lived experience, which I hope will draw in readers and listeners to a recognition of their inescapable ecological interdependence. Cultivating an ability to listen and interpret the world and the human and more-than-human kinships is important to me. Listening to words that children speak helps me learn to be open to the fullness of life, how life is lived, how life can be remembered and suffered and let go. I am gathering sense of being in the world and of understanding the offering that arrives when I nurture a commitment to care for the Earth.

Fáilte. A Warm Welcome to the Reader.

Fáilte. This work honors my grandmother who has walked this world with me in spirit since I was born. Lee Maracle (2002), a member of the Stó:lō Nation, who died November 11, 2021, writes, "Grandmothers are doorways to different points of view" (p. 69). Kathleen Mary McCabe was born in Ireland on August 4, 1898, and I knew she had died the day I saw my dad crying out by the tomato plants in 1980. My days with her were mostly spent at the water's edge. I still see Granny and her daughters laughing and basking in the sun as I played nearby with a sand pail and diggers. I still feel her small home at the end of the cul-de-sac in Donnycarney, on the North side of Dublin. There she gave birth, cooked, and read the Sunday papers. I often wondered if she ever got a good night's rest. At the age of 20, I went to Ireland to sit at her grave with its dust and cement. The summer day was hot and the soil dry and cracked. I sat for some time letting her laughter, the serious expression she wore when she saw trouble coming, her length of stride, and the stories about her, settle inside me.

~

Writing these opening words helps me unforget that I am of that dry, cracked soil *and* of my grandmother's bone and breath. I know my connection to my grandmother is more than blood quantum. Reflecting on that day by her grave, I deepen my understanding of my journey as I struggle to learn how to experience presence and to attend to how I am being invited to listen, see, and feel the Earth and all its inhabitants, in all those (artificial) spaces of past, present, and future. Yet I have been fortunate to have been gifted moments of presence and connection to Earth on my pedagogical journey, moments I share with you now.

As I engage in the writing that follows, I am cognizant of the risk of objectifying things and enforcing dichotomies. I find it challenging to move beyond the subject/object grammars of the language I have been taught and the histories I have experienced. Reengaging with my writing, returning again and again, I learn to recognize that choice of wording can point to hidden and not-so-hidden mis/understandings. Hermeneutics encourages me to see that such mis/understandings are invitations for scrutiny. Consider my sentence above: *At the age of 20, I went to Ireland to sit at her grave with its dust and cement.* I marked the gravesite as an "it." There is objectification and distance implied even while I am sitting nearby. As Robin Wall Kimmerer (2013a) states, "we 'it' what we don't understand" (Vimeo, 33:13). The gravesite becomes the "it" of my attention and I layer upon that "it" the loneliness and longing I feel for my grandmother. Sitting longer, words and memories are released, experiences, feelings, recognitions arise, illuminating what I have yet to notice.

As a hermeneutic inquirer, Martin Buber's (1937) discussion of *I and Thou* helps me make sense of the confusions I feel when encountering the dichotomies and objectifications that shape my life and writing. He reminds me that "we live in the currents of universal reciprocity" (p. 67). He writes:

> Once the sentence "I see [the grave[1]]" has been pronounced in such a way that it no longer relates a relation between human I and a [grave] You … the basic word I-It, *the word of separation* [emphasis added], has been spoken. (p. 75)

It is worth repeating, that in the original sentence I wrote, I failed, as Kimmerer says, *to understand*. When I "it" something it becomes rigid and broken from my relation to it. The potential for me to find places of appreciation, respect, and reciprocity are diminished. My reading of Buber attends to the liminal space of relationship and connection, *co-created* and full of presence; a presence that confronts me.

As I practice presence, "I-It" has the potential to be newly understood as "I-Thou" (p. 8); a recognition of the interconnections between myself and the human and more-than-human. Buber's word *I-Thou* invites me to see the cracked earth of my grandmother's grave not as a "thing among things" (p. 8) but as a living entity, a gift, within an interconnected world of human and more-than-human relations. Such a reading of Buber resonates within Kimmerer (2013b): "A great longing is upon us, to live again in a world made of gifts. I can scent it coming, like the fragrance of ripening strawberries rising on the breeze" (p. 32).

~

Roots of my understanding of the world of relations began to lengthen. Roughly 10 years ago, I was sitting in a sunny spot in my home reading David Jardine's (2012) *Pedagogy Left in Peace: Cultivating Free Spaces in Teaching and Learning*. I read throughout the day as the sun shifted from east to west. His words resonated the sense of fragmentation I had been feeling in my teaching/life. Had I been cut out for the work of teaching at all? Throughout the chapters I felt heard and seen and thus began a reinvigoration of my work with children. With no thought of receiving a response, I wrote to David and told him how I appreciated his words. His weave of Buddhist philosophy, Gadamerian hermeneutic philosophy, and ecology, brought new energy to my inquiry into my life of teaching. He wrote back—and again and again—and so, my practice of hermeneutic pedagogy was born.

The study of hermeneutics offers a walking stick, a gift from a windstorm, that helps me navigate familiar routes of uncertainty and risk that comes with the ever-changing living and teaching of young children. Learning that "suffering and impermanence" (Jardine, 2014, p. 162) *are* life, has given me a sense of calm to weather the confusions and uncertainties that followed these last 10 years. Hermeneutics invites spiraling inquiries of return to moments that call me to attention, again and again, learning something anew. Hermeneutics has given me the heartfulness needed to celebrate what Hannah Arendt (1958) called "natality: the fact that we have all come into the world by being born and that this world is constantly renewed through birth" (p. 196). As am I, again and again. Hermeneutic pedagogy helped me feel the wondrous beauty of the world and later, the gifts that come from the openings that cancer can bring.

Hermeneutics does not offer explanations, conclusions, nor lesson plans. Instead, hermeneutic pedagogy invites me to note ephemeral opportunities for stillness and how I might attend to and care for the living fields of relations to which I am connected. Each encounter of interconnection became one of the action sites for curriculum I began to explore with children. Having undergone the experience of cancer, I knew how important it was for me to face the fact that death was with every breath—each and every breath. Thus, hermeneutics has been put to work in my research through which curiosities, offerings, moments of encounter, and inquiry arise.

Inquiries arose as I walked with children and my growing awareness of how to listen and look with wonder. What follows is an expression of how I learned to listen, remember, suffer, and let go. I hope the reader will notice, connect to, or resonate with these research engagements that this found poem points us to thinking about together:

> The stories we tell
> about scraped knees
> or pillbugs
> or cancers
> or silent screams
> are living paths
> we dance
> and help to shape
> We are one another's world.

Once I was asked what I might say to a person who asked, "How can you teach me about this work?" My heart-response was, *Come, I will walk with you*. My practical response is to tell you to wear something light on your feet and be prepared to stop along the way; wear something that can be slipped off easily when the moist, soft, ground beckons.

~

Stories pick me up in their kaleidoscopic whorl of twists and turns, their patterns and geometry. Stories are in me. Stories carry me away. Living as a woman, teacher, mother, lover, friend—and the list can go on just as it does in you—is complex, daunting, and mysterious. One thread tugs on another in shifting geometries, perspectives, and choices of action. Being swept away in the arms of a story isn't always good, even if it's my own. I bear witness to these stories, unravel them, and sometimes leap out of some of the tangles they bring. It is not always easy because the stories are part of my skin.

Curled by the fire with my laptop or staring out a snow-patterned window, I find it challenging to imagine you, the reader, reading this work. I can't see you or hear you—or touch you, or weep with you. I imagine us, though. I draw on memories of conversations along winding forest walks, dinner gatherings, and conference discussions. "The word becomes binding, as it were: it binds one human being with another. This occurs whenever we speak to one another and really enter into genuine dialogue with another" (Gadamer, 2002, p. 106).

I know that without you this story is silent. Stay with me now. The cast iron wood stove, filled with last year's labor of chopping and stacking, will keep us company. Put on the kettle and let's have a cup of tea.

Fig. 1: Stacked wood

~

I am learning to make sense of things that show themselves sometimes so fleetingly that I am left gasping and grasping. I ask, *How can I learn to walk without tripping over myself? How can I learn to walk with grace*?

The Greek god-nymph Hermes, born of the god Zeus and the nymph Maia, from whom the practice of hermeneutics is derived, served as a messenger between the gods and mortals, between what is foretold and what is learned. He (she? they?) *is* the *in-between*. Hermes' job was to keep the gates open, so that

a portal to new learning might be possible. Just when I *think* I have the (right*)* way that will help me understand my actions or the children or the students I teach, something arises to turn me upside down. Hermes is a trickster.

Hermeneutic inquiry, which I enact in my research, requires that I go *through* landscapes and seascapes of challenges and dangers. It's the kind of risk that I feel, with my whole body. Hermeneutics asks me to face the important questions that come from such a meeting. What is going on here? How did I end up in this place? The words that come begin to set down paths for walking.

It is in the *movement* of walking that I come to know my body and the history my body holds. When I walk, thoughts relax, and clusters of images find their way into words and sentences. Meaning, arriving in my lived experience, is not readily accessible, but the hints are there, and *I am here,* ready for the engagement. Writing, at least for now, is as stumbling as thoughts that ache to birth meaning. Yet the topics under consideration—my life, early childhood education, encounters with children, my cancer diagnosis—call me to take risks and to search for the words that attend and care for phenomena that I have left unsaid. Coming to learn how to slow down as I approach an idea doesn't necessarily make what I encounter and offer less challenging, but it does allow some distinctions to come to the surface.

~

I fear the closeness. Courage is needed to explore openings for humility, vulnerability, questions, and anxieties. Poetry helps balance me. Within these pages I have attempted to create a hermeneutic text that invites listening. Certain words and phrases within an author's text carry an energy that calls me to attention. I try to reflect my embodied understanding of each chosen quote and create a found poem from within its landscape of words, images, and breath. I bring an author's text onto my page, generous with space and line breaks, not to reduce nor dishonor each quote but as an offering so that you and I might linger with the *in-between* (Hermes) spaces. And *then*, I feel compelled to respectfully respond in kind—in a poetic way that I hope leaves room for ever-expanding possibilities to arrive. My poems are offered as moments for pause and reflection and an act of reciprocity. In call-and-response, we work together to move the song along and in so doing, something arrives that is inventive and collective. I invite you, my reader, to linger as you read, that you may bring your memories, experiences, and interpretations to the found poems and my poetry, which may perhaps awaken or reveal something to help us, you and I, make sense of our lives (together). Poetry and textual dialogue is a reminder that we are never alone in this hermeneutic task of finding out where we are and what we are to do next. Dialogue is one of the best forms of play I know, *shadows and all*.

> *Wild spaces—*
> *opening, withdrawing.*
> *Even cancer*
> *Spills out.*

As Celeste Snowber (2016, p. 3) writes in her poem "BodyPsalm for Playing":

Now is the season
to call back your heart
to live with lightness
and cherish the chance
to take back what you deeply know
find the joy in movements
which sweep your being
into first utterance

I place one of Renata Aebi's (2023)[2] line drawings in this space to invite you to attend to the place that you are now sitting and, for a moment, this moment, to rest, to linger, to reflect, to breathe. Perhaps encountering Renata's drawing here will encourage and remind you, throughout the text, to pause, to linger, with your life experiences, learnings, curiosities, wonderings, pedagogical or otherwise, and be present in a reflective dialogue that this text invites. Imagine a space that is free from constraints and expectations, breathe in the fresh sea air, the cedar boughs, feel the wind on your face. Here is my hope for your reading: that you will be present in dialogue and in reflection, and feel the gift of a pill bug offered, by a quiet child, in your hand. The white spaces on these pages, whether they be within the lines of this drawing, the images that are offered in the text, in the call and response between the poems or between the lines of the text, are invitations to think about the ways you want to act well in the world— as a scholar, an educator, a human in this more-than-human-world. I hope this moment of reflection I offer will be a reminder to take time with the text. We are in no hurry.

Fig. 2: Renata Aebi's line drawings

I invite you now to imagine yourself walking with me into wild spaces. Imagine a spring in our steps and a little skip and jump when an idea feels worth following. Imagine too the little bits we trip over. Let's take time to stand in those tangles in the landscape. They are exactly the right spot to be in together. As David Jardine once wrote to me, "We both have knots to untie; different open invitations to offer and in meeting in that spot, (we are) able to remember to let go of something, let it go the way it will, and try not to argue it back over here" (personal communication, March 18, 2022).

Walking (Merriam-Webster, n.d.)

move at a regular pace,
lifting and setting down each foot in turn,
never having both feet off the ground at once.

to advance by steps
to come or go easily or readily,
for exercise or pleasure.

walking the plank
walking on eggshells
walking (someone) through steps in a procedure
walking through the early stages of rehearsal

walk the talk
a walk in the park

walking my body
of research—

wind rain and river
noticing
witnessing

breaths held
lungs tight against
destinations
away from here
anywhere away from here

yet

here

knife slices
a gaping hole

silent scream's tendrils
threads
traces of
longing
capture attention

spaces expand

self appears and disappears in cycles
conversations between stones

Into the wild (Merriam-Webster, n.d.)

not ordinarily tamed
or domesticated
growing or produced without human aid
uncultivated
unruly
beyond convention
off an intended or expected course
a wild, free, or natural state or existence
like wild honey
indicative of strong passion, desire, or emotion
cosmic web

plants that grow wild
wild ideas

wild with grief and
anger

into the wild

walking backward and forward
and trying
to write what happens

when a cut—
a shaft of light,
becomes a
sacred doorway

into Earth-bound beauty of
connections and
tangles
and searing tears

or a whispered lyric
full of promise

blending
claiming and being claimed
back and forth

unforgetting the stories helps

haze lifts
and fear and
belonging
exchange glances

a new beginning
revives a forgotten call to sit up, see, listen
commit to the obligations and
rise to meet one another
in liveliness

As I undo silence.

I am open to renewal. Renewal depends on taking time to understand my own twitches and knee-jerk actions, sleep-deprived states, my wrong-headedness that arises from a sense that boundaries, binaries, and constraints really do exist.

~

My finitude flashes before my eyes on that day of my diagnosis: a life visible, then invisible. At that moment, my life is struck clean. "Having steeled ourselves by confronting the prospect of death, the scales of everydayness drop from our eyes, the authentic being of Dasein is disclosed and Dasein resolves upon its own most proper way to be" (Caputo, 2018, p. 51). Almost immediately, I was consumed by an urgency to get off the path I had been traveling. I wanted to learn to live and love well with others and to learn about my becoming in the world, with the fullness of knowing my human limits nested within this time and place. Thankfully, cancer treatments and academic school assignments slowed the rush. The period of diagnosis was a call for compassion for a heart that had been silenced long ago and had forgotten itself. Starting a journey when the end seems near made me connect *the river in the raindrop,* as the saying goes. In this way, I come close to understanding Buber's (1937) sense of *encounter* whereby the entire universe exists through this drop of rain.

Through *this* drop of rain.

Fig. 3: Drop of rain

I am learning to teach rhythmically and openly as I come to know the world and those I teach. Living is a dance of relationships that hold and sustain me—but it is not always the kind of dance I wish for or appreciate. Cancer evokes in me a desire to know these relationships in greater detail.

Let me bring you to the forest with Zoe.[3]

~

The children love to play in the forest 100 meters from the childcare program, along a fence that reverberates with years of sticks playing its metal, diamond-patterned weave. The fallen cedar is a pirate ship one afternoon and a hospital the next. The leaves and sticks are the stuff of ice cream shops and swords. The children play back and forth across the trail where horses and dogs are announced with a clear "dog on the trail" voice from early childhood educators and children alike. Some children leap quickly to the side while others marvel at the animals as they brush along the low huckleberry bushes and mounds of sword ferns. The summer has been mild; it hasn't rained for a few days and the old fallen trees capture our attention. Their drying bark, lying low to the ground and shaded by the big leaf maples, invites the children to prod and watch what shows up.

Zoe had been playing a game of "baby" before walking over to a decomposing cedar tree where two other children were trying to draw the attention of pill bugs. Zoe caught my eye as we stood watching the interplay of gaze and pill bugs. When the other children left, Zoe started to poke a small stick into the surface of the wood. I asked, "What do you think the pill bugs might be telling each other?" Zoe was silent. I waited wondering if she was thinking out a response or if she had not heard. Then she started gently poking at wood around the larvae. We watched them move between the tiny levels of wood, wiggling their way to darker spaces, their tiny heads raised and turning as though to tell us off. Then I asked another question: "Do you think the larvae are tasting the wind?" Still Zoe provided no comment. Close by was a pill bug, scurrying to safety. Before curling into its tiny-ball-self, she picked it up between thumb and forefinger. Zoe looked and looked and then placed it in my hand, catching my eye again.

Then without a word, she ran off to other games. A tumble and jumble of thoughts swirled as I held the little creature in my palm.

~

I tell this story of Zoe, me, and the pill bug to emphasize the idea of relationship and how learning to understand pedagogical relationships is important in my teaching life. I want this story and smaller ones that I tell to form a kind of weave of trails on the landscape of my life as a teacher, friend, and student. I want the uncertainty, the silence, the questions, and the quiet inquiry to be carried along with me as I explore the ideas.

I am learning from my time with Zoe. Her short but important eye contact was a gift to me that I only recognized properly long after I had left the forest. Buber's (1937) *I-Thou* relationship is one where the potential for mutual understanding is noticed and nurtured: where the we-ness of the relationship is held. This moment is an empathic place for us. My inability to honor this gaze was lost because of my prejudices related to my narrow understanding of the role of teacher.

My questions seem to have been motivated by a desire to help Zoe think about the nature of homes and our responsibility to ensure the insect's security. Zoe's silence might attest to the need for me to refrain from teaching children about morality in such a sideways manner and to attend deeply to the way silence is a yielding—an intentional creation of space for pill bugs and their larvae and for watching and for opening me to beings—and a generative act conducive to deeper listening as I step out of myself and into this place of silence and forest: the wild not-yet-or-may-never-be-known.

Another way I might interpret my encounter with Zoe is to see her as embodying the quiet absorption that comes with study. In Zoe's case, her focus might have been the study of larvae and pill bugs, or it might have been of tree trunks and teachers. She embodies the art of questioning in her disposition to quietness and silence in the earth's company. When Zoe follows her wonder in relation to the pill bug, she lets the world express itself to her. Instead of being seen as noncommunicative with me, it may be that she already sees herself and her inquiry as recognized and supported through the past experiences I have had with her.

Human communication is meaning-making and connection. I am learning to understand that the role I play in my interactions with a child is to carefully choose when and how to go beyond the world of boundaries and correct answers. I am learning to wait carefully on the edge of the child's world so that the children and I might walk together. The dance to coordinate our actions begins, fails, succeeds, and stutter-steps along. Accepting my evolving interpretations of Zoe's *being with me* is an integral part of understanding itself. "Understanding always involves something like applying the text to be understood to the interpreter's present situation" (Gadamer, 2004, p. 308). And yet, something more than that is happening.

By our very attitude to one another we help to shape one another's world.

Zoe hints at steps a teacher could take amid moments of ambiguity and indecision. When I revisit Zoe's attention to the pill bug, I learn to bring my heart to the moment. The subject of our attention—the pill bug, and perhaps its relationship to the log, the larvae, and beyond—"is not merely an arbitrary object of discussion, independent of the process of mutual understanding, but rather is the path and goal of mutual understanding itself" (Gadamer, 2004, p. 180). An experience like my encounter with Zoe invites me to attend to how I am called out of myself and into the world of other beings. My experience with her provides an opportunity to find times when instead of issuing questions, I might thoughtfully express openness and receptivity to what might be arising. Zoe had knowledge: she may have understood the pill bug had something to say. The forest, its cedar logs, the squeals of children chasing each other, all helped me become aware of the importance of the space between teacher and child. The ways I honor this space are becoming increasingly important for me to learn. I interpret this event as a moment where Zoe stepped back and away as a yielding: an invitation to encounter the pill bug and all its connections—quietly.

As I deepen my interpretation of my time with Zoe, I am learning to be grateful for understanding what it means to encounter myself and others in teaching; from such encounters, renewal is possible. Zoe and her capacity to stay quiet despite my questioning is a gift: an opportunity to develop a commitment to make ongoing adjustments, of stepping back, yielding, listening, watching, and feeling my way in life. Walking backward and appreciating the offered free spaces marks the condition and the result of my practice. Doing so may allow me to preserve the pill bug within its forested world and its relationship to Zoe so that these relationships among humans and animals and the forest can be returned to again and again.

Words can be such piercing things.
Silence is something I must listen to and
when I do, it catches hold of me. It tells me how to know things,
like if the river is about to swell or
if
the Steller's Jay is on the hunt.

In silence
I become aware of something larger
opened by the light
dancing
between the trees.

The child and I gather an energy that helps us notice ambiguity and yield to it when necessary, allowing it the space it needs to loosen its own knots. Studying myself within relationships with children, decaying cedar trees, pill bug larvae—all nested within the dappled light of the forest—helps me understand myself as one of many co-arising actors on this Earth. I am trying to act in ways that may help get myself out of the present downward-spiraling conditions that a cancer diagnosis can engender.

Zoe demonstrated to me that I had not yet learned to release my agenda. I am learning now to abandon my overreliance on an ordered system that mirrors curriculum guides; instead, I am learning to be in a child's midst so that I might understand what I am being asked to consider, interpret, and interpret again and again. I am learning to be near in terms of the dialogue I have with each child while backing up and giving space for our dialogue to find its footing. I do not have an expectation for one solid, end-all answer, although this feeling creeps into my stories sometimes. I understand many interpretations will arise and that I will be carried into the next interpretation, and then the next. Nourishing a greater understanding of myself and the ways I am being called to act in the world requires attending to ideas and interpretations and then letting go—about unlearning some things and unforgetting others.

A friend, fluent in Japanese, showed me the Japanese characters for forgetting. Using a small yellow notepad, she wrote the characters:
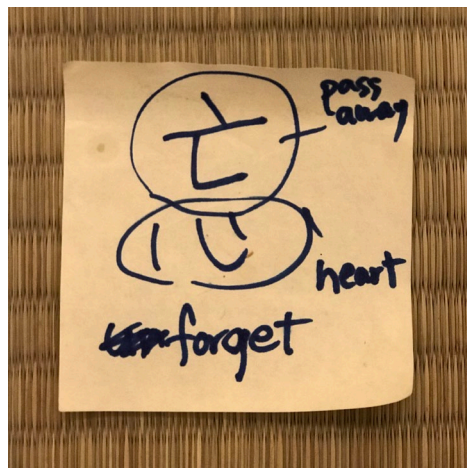

Fig. 4: Japanese characters for forgetting

One part of the character means *passing away* and the other part means *heart*. Forgetting is a little like allowing the heart to pass away. Through cancer I have become acutely aware of forgotten kinships, interrelations, and interdependencies of this life. Sometimes this coming to awareness is painful learning and with practice I am, on occasion, learning to suffer life's generosities with gratitude. Recovery needs patience and determination. These kinships show themselves among and between my teaching experiences with preschool children, my walks on mountains and by the shore. Reflection in, and after, these experiences leads me increasingly to complex understandings of myself and of my connections to Earth. I am reminded of Lee Maracle's (2002) novel, *Daughters Are Forever*, in which protagonist Marilyn walks and stills herself to listen to Westwind's messages as she explores the impacts of colonialism and patriarchy. Lee Maracle—like many Indigenous authors of fiction such as Linda Hogan (1998), Craig Womback (2001), Louise Erdrich (2008)—call me to

walk in a graceful manner
and learn to
carry the composing cosmos
in my steps.

Relationships to others—those here now, particularly small children, and those who have come before, be they family or scholars—awaken me to the steps I take. I feel my relationship to my body and its intimate connection to Earth when I attend to my walking. "The body I am is my most intimate point of entry into the world" (Kohak, 1984, p. 105). In me, I am becoming aware of the complexities of relationships: between older and younger; teacher and learner; and the private realm of home and the public, organized body. I am answerable to these relationships.

Listening is no simple or easy task, and it is especially challenging when some voices are silenced. Christina Lee Countryman (2016) comments that

> [e]ach stone in the stream helps the water have a different voice,
> a unique song.
> We humans are like that too.
> Each responding to the current of life in our own way.
> The river spirit tells me though, we are all the same stream.
> Each individual bears a personal responsibility
> for the behavior of the species

Calls for understanding the interrelationships and co-emergence of beings in the world require me to de-center myself. In my role as teacher, I have found that my understanding of the knotty and often dazzling interconnections of this Earth entice me to keep the world open by keeping myself open. Each informs the other and nurtures a deeper understanding of ways to act in the world.

Writing has helped me open and nurture a sensitivity to "a hermeneutical ear, [and] hermeneutical tact" (Caputo, 2018 p. 35). I am becoming aware of myself as a finite flicker of energy on this Earth alongside and woven with rich, complex, surging beings. I am learning how to love the intricacies, the cracks, crevices, and challenges along the way. "It is good to have an end to journey toward; but it is the journey that matters, in the end" (Le Guin, 1969, p. 109).

This break from my desire for stasis arose out of the cancer that showed itself to me. Arendt (1958) asserts that while we "must die [we] are not born to die but in order to begin" (p. 246). Again and again, I need breath for these waking moments where

> opportunities
> are not plain, clean gifts;
> they trail dark and chaotic attachments to their unknown backgrounds,
> luring us
> further.
> One insight leads to another;
> one invention suggests another variation;
> more and more
> seems to press through the hole,
> and more and more

> we find ourselves drawn out into a chaos
> of possibilities (Hillman, 2013, p. 94)

I listen to learn what path to "lay down in walking"[4] (Machado, 1987, as quoted in Fels, 1999). Louise Erdrich (2008), a Chippewa author and member of the Turtle Island Band, notes that "when we are young, the words are scattered all around us. As they are assembled by experience, so are we, sentence by sentence" (p. 268). The language of description is an inheritance that brings its own worlds. I am trying to say that my shared stories mean something to me now even though some of a story might *come to mean* something else later, as presuppositions are tested and released, and new stories enliven understanding. The storied past—my own and others'—puts me into question. Doing justice in this moment has something to do with trying to notice when I want to outrun the past and all its interpretations. I am called to stay with the past, called to suffer it, to be freed from it. I step back into the memories in ways that allow the previous understandings to shift in response to new information, the telling of what I think I know, yet unfinished.

I tell my stories to share my struggles and joys and to connect with those who live in this wildness of not knowing, undoing, and unlearning. When I respect, regard, and nurture all relationships

human and more-than-human

through the committed exchange of attention, I celebrate our differences and take strength from what is un/common.

Doing justice to any moment can be, and often is, difficult and different at different times. I accept its work in composing me. I am steeped, like a good cup of tea, in the words and models of those I admire. The ideas have taken shape and found themselves some footing through the writing and the walking. Increasingly, I have become sensitive to nuances in familiar and new contexts.

What came before enriches today's commitment. All that I have experienced and interpreted is carried along with me. But I am coming to understand that I don't really possess those experiences. There's freedom in knowing what is important to call upon at *this* moment.

Learning to listen and to make the right-as-possible choice from what is already there and being offered is a practice that helps me sort my way out of the *stuckness* that often happens, or the weightiness I sometimes feel. The fleeting sense of lightness—it doesn't often last long as there is work to be done— that comes from an interpretation that was dug into, that was given its due, is one mark of being fully engaged in this practice of dwelling with a boundless heart.

Through my slowly increasing understanding of hermeneutics and how it can be practiced, new questions have begun to form. The practice of hermeneutics as inquiry helps me to develop an ability to see and be grateful for experiences of the past. We always have an experience *of* something (Gadamer, 1989; Jardine, 1998) and learning to listen to my heartbeat and its rhythms is a step in learning how to

name those experiences. What openings are being created through this practice? What steps am I being asked to take? How will I take those steps?

Opening to, rather than bracing myself against, the full impact of reading, thinking, loving, walking, and responding in this more-than-human world (Abram, 1997) means recognizing that the air rustling in those trees that sway outside my window and the curl of a pill bug have always been here—with me.

The openness and willingness to be tested in this way—to let go of a limited sense of self, gather again, re-enliven—does justice to the moment. Each instance shows its powerful abundance. By courageously venturing into, dwelling on, and interpreting these moments with an open heart, I experience the generative effect of this work whereby the interweavings show up in the foreground of my everyday world.

I am learning to express joy and surprise when the *new* bursts forth, especially when it bursts from the familiar. Meaning making is lively, living. Through openness, I am coming to ask questions of myself such as "why I teach" rather than "what I teach." When I aim to unhinge my own conceptual approaches from their moorings enough to venture into uncharted spaces, I begin to realize the importance of making my beliefs and values about teaching and learning matter to myself, with the children who live here with us: born strangers and welcomed into a web of human relations within a world to which we all belong and owe a responsibility to (Arendt, 1958, p. 54). In this way I am learning to respond to the questions: *How can I learn to walk without tripping over myself? How can I learn to walk with grace*?

<center>~</center>

I return to the introduction when I invited you to wear light shoes and carry a readiness to be open to what arises. As we sit on a log and retie our shoes, we can hear each other's breathing. Sitting to tie our shoes, we notice how important it is to stop and listen. Our breaths dance together slowly and rhythmically. We become aware of our bodies in relation to this landscape. Usually, I think slowing and breathing deeply should happen when I am suffering, or in conflict with myself or another. I am learning that slowing to stillness, and listening, is needed beyond times of tension. When I listen, I stop trying to push answers out of children, out of myself, out onto the Earth. Questions, connections, and hermeneutic inquiries are released and enlivened when the children and I walk slowly together and listen. If we, as educators, are willing to listen, to be still and present to our students, to ourselves, with an open heart, we may become aware of our assumptions, resistances, expectations and where and when they conflict with what the Earth is saying.[5] In my retelling of the places where I tripped and the places I blithely traversed uneven terrain, in this shared experience of slowing to stillness and listening, I am learning to walk with grace and the potential for renewal is possible.

Notes

1. Here Buber uses the example "tree."

2. Gift of unpublished drawing, Renata Aebi, Doctoral Candidate (SFU).

3. Not her real name. The selection of the name came because I have always liked it for its playfulness on my tongue. I look at the roots or meanings of words. The Greek name Zoe means life, and for my purposes, it offers a generous place to learn. Rosi Braidotti (2019) notes Zoe is "the power of life 'as potentia'" (p. 177). Braidotti's exploration of this word left me with a strong image of Zoe as generative and resistant and has given me a complex understanding of what life means. This is certainly a disposition to hold when working through the curriculum guides that stand steadfastly in binaries and dictates. I have learned from this exploration of Zoe to be wide-eyed and all ears to the things that show themselves.

4. In her work, Fels (1999) quotes Antonio Machado's poem, as translated by Francisco Varela.

5. I would like to thank Dr. Lynn Fels for continuing to walk beside me in this study. Her review of my words strengthens my writing and my teaching.

References

Abram, D. (1967). *Spell of the sensuous. Perception and language in a more-than-human world.* Vantage Books.

Arendt, H. (1958/1998). *The human condition.* University of Chicago Press.

Braidotti, R. (2019). *Posthuman knowledge.* Polity Press.

Buber, M. (1937). *I and thou.* Touchstone Books

Caputo, J. D. (2018). *Hermeneutics. Fact and interpretation in the age of information.* Random House.

Countryman, C.L. (n.d.). https://idlenomore.ca.

Erdrich, L. (2008). *The plague of doves.* Harper Collins.

Fels, L., (1999). *In the wind clothes dance on a line. Performative inquiry as a (re)search methodology* (Unpublished dissertation). University of British Columbia.

Gadamer, H-G. (1989). *Truth and method*. Sheed and Ward Ltd. and Continuum.

Gadamer, H-G. (2002). *The relevance of the beautiful and other essays* (N. Walker, Trans.). Cambridge University Press.

Gadamer, H-G. (2004). *Truth and method* (Second revised edition). London: Continuum. https://mvlindsey.files.wordpress.com/2015/08/truth-and-method-gadamer-2004.pdf

Hillman, J. (2013). Notes on opportunism. In J. Hillman, *Senex and puer* (pp. 91–107). Spring Publications.

Hogan, L. (1998). *Power*. Norton Publishing.

Jardine, D. W. (1998). *To dwell with a boundless heart: Essays in curriculum theory, hermeneutics, and the ecological imagination*. Peter Lang Inc.

Jardine, D. W. (2012). *Pedagogy left in peace. Cultivating free spaces in teaching and learning*. Continuum Books.

Jardine, D. W. (2014). *On the pedagogy of suffering*. Hermeneutic and Buddhist Meditations. Peter Lang Inc.

Kimmerer, R. W. (2013a) *Learning the grammar of animacy: Subject and object* [Video presentation]. https://vimeo.com/showcase/2905962/video/488276804

Kimmerer, R. W. (2013b). *Braiding sweetgrass*. Milkweed Editions.

Kohák, E. (1984). T*he embers and the stars*. University of Chicago Press.

Le Guin, U. K. (1969). *The left hand of darkness*. Ace Books. https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/7870/4ac9727a3e69fe09dbeec9d2e5c3005fbac4.pdf

Maracle, L. (2002). *Daughters are forever*. Raincoast Books.

Merriam-Webster. (n.d.) Walking. In Merriam-Webster.com dictionary.

Merriam-Webster. (n.d.) Wild. In Merriam-Webster.com dictionary. Retrieved April 19, 2023.
Seidel, J. & Jardine, D.W. (2014). *Ecological Pedagogy, Buddhist Pedagogy, Hermeneutic Pedagogy: Experiments in a Curriculum for Miracles*. Peter Lang Inc.

Snowber, C. (2016). "BodyPsalm for Playing" in Poetic Inquiry of and on Play. *Canadian Journal of Education*, *39*(3), 2–26.

Womback, C. (2001). *Drowning in fire*. University of Arizona Press.

Kate McCabe is the founder of a preschool program that has been operating for 42 years on the edge of a forested area in Vancouver, BC. Kate offers a Registered Early Childhood Education training program and teaches children in Grades K to 9 in a distributed learning program. Kate enjoys singing and finding new stories to share and study. She likes to feel the wind in her face when walking along the beach and is grateful for the push of it when she turns around.

Learning From Indigenous Perspectives:
Wellbeing in the Early Years

Monica McGlynn-Stewart, Nicola Maguire, Lori Budge, Ana-Luisa Sales, and Elise Patterson

Abstract

This three-year qualitative research study examined the knowledge and experiences of 20 early years educators while introducing Indigenous perspectives and pedagogies on Land-Based Learning in 10 urban childcare centers. Educators were introduced to Indigenous perspectives and pedagogies through workshops with Indigenous speakers and Indigenous-authored picture books. These perspectives included the importance of supporting children to develop responsive and caring relationships to the Land for their own wellbeing and for the wellbeing of all their fellow creatures. Supported by their educators, the children increased their sense of belonging in the world, expressed gratitude for their fellow creatures, and recognized and enacted their responsibility to care for nature.

Introduction

Despite the growing body of research on the mental and physical health, developmental, and learning benefits for children's wellbeing of active outdoor play (e.g., Brussoni et. al, 2015; CPS, 2012; WHO, 2020), many young children in urban mainstream early learning centers have limited access to natural outdoor spaces to play and learn. Urban playgrounds are often paved and fenced with few trees, plants, or natural surfaces. Furthermore, early years educators typically receive little training in nature-based pedagogy. Outdoor play pedagogy is often characterized by educators observing children as they play on climbing frames, play with plastic toys, or ride wheeled vehicles.

Indigenous perspectives on Land-Based Learning offer alternative ways to promote children's wellbeing, and the wellbeing of educators, through learning with and from traditional teachings. These include greeting and expressing gratitude for the gifts of nature; recognizing human interconnectedness with the natural world; and building reciprocal relationships with, and showing care and responsibility for, nature. This paper reports on a three-year qualitative research study (2020–2023) exploring the impact on early years educators' knowledge, perspectives, and pedagogies when introduced to Indigenous perspectives on Land-Based Learning in 10 urban preschool urban early learning centers (ages 2.5–4 years). The families and staff at the centers in the study reflected the demographics of the city of Toronto. That is, they were a mixture of people from a large range of countries, cultures, and religions who spoke a range of languages. Many of the families in the centers were low-income. All but one of the sites offered subsidized spots for low-income families. In eight out of 10 of the sites, between 75% and 100% of the families were on partial or full subsidy, another site had 20% of families on subsidy, and the final site did not offer subsidized spots.

The research team was mostly non-Indigenous. We were grateful to learn from our advisor and team member Lori Budge, who is an Indigenous faculty member at George Brown College, as well as from our workshop speakers who brought teachings from different First Nations: Lori Budge (Ojibwe and Odawa teachings), Dr. Hopi Martin (Ojibwe teachings), Carolyn Crawley (Mi'Kmaw teachings), Natasha Bascevan (Anishinaabe and Metis teachings), and Emma Greenfield (Mohawk teachings). Throughout the project our understanding of Indigenous Knowledge regarding cosmology, pharmacology, environmental science, spirituality, and education evolved through our weekly gratitude circles, and through listening, reading, viewing, discussing, and consulting with Indigenous writers, educators, and Knowledge Keepers (e.g., Anderson et al., 2017; Bell et al., 2010; Courchene, 2016; Kimmerer, 2013; Martin, 2022; Restoule, n.d.). We also learned from the children as they developed relationships with the natural world around them. We shared our learning and provided resources for busy working early years educators; this new learning informed the way they spoke and acted with the children outdoors, and the way we understood what we were seeing and hearing in the centers. We hope our work contributes to decolonizing early years education and to reconciliation through centering Indigenous Worldviews, teachings, and pedagogies, and through aligning our methodology with Indigenous research methods.

Literature Review

Recent research has focused increased concern for the wellbeing of children in light of both the COVID-19 pandemic and climate change, highlighting children's fear, worry, sadness, anger, and anxiety (e.g., Burke & Moore, 2021; Lawrence et al, 2022; Pickett et al, 2022). Nature-based and place-based education have been shown to support children's mental health and wellbeing and provide a buffer in times of stress (e.g., Chawla, 2015; Chawla 2020; Tillman et al., 2018; Hernandez Gonzalez, 2023). Within the research on the benefits of nature-based education, it has been found that knowledge about nature alone is less effective than developing relationships with nature while learning (Otto & Pensini, 2017). A close relationship with nature is a much stronger predictor of ecological behavior than academic learning alone, but fostering this type of relationship is not common in educational settings. It is more common to learn about nature than develop relationships with nature (Otto & Pensini, 2017).

Despite the reported benefits of nature-based and place-based approaches, they have been criticized for "persistent colonialist and capitalist values that continue to permeate popularized early childhood environmental education frameworks in North America" (Nelson et al., 2018, p. 5). Nelson et al. (2018) argue that in these approaches, nature is objectified as a resource to support children's development, and that Indigenous peoples who were displaced for colonial purposes are disregarded.

Indigenous Worldviews, perspectives, and pedagogies offer ways to rethink how young children's well--being can be supported through developing their relationship to the Land. However, the distinctiveness of Indigenous Worldviews needs to be acknowledged and respected in education (Little Bear, 2000). Elder Albert Marshall's concept of Two-Eyed Seeing teaches that we need to respect the value and contribution of both Indigenous and Western worldviews: "Two-Eyed Seeing refers to learning to see from one eye with the strengths of Indigenous ways of knowing and from the other eye with the strengths of Western ways of knowing and to using both of these eyes together for the benefit of all"

(Barlett et al., 2012, p. 335). Indigenous Worldviews include developing relationships of gratitude, reciprocity, and care with the Land (Kimmerer, 2013) and have been largely missing from early childhood education programs in Canada with their focus on developmentalism (Callaghan & Taylor-Leonhardi, 2018). Their inclusion in early years programs can not only support children's wellbeing, but also contribute to the decolonization of education (Absolon, 2019; Tuck & Yang, 2012) and serve as progress towards fulfilling The Truth and Reconciliation Commission's Calls to Action (TRC, 2015) regarding the inclusion of culturally relevant programming and connecting with our responsibilities to the Land (TRC, 2015). Chawla (2020) noted that there is little research on children's connections with nature in the early years, and very little that explores the topic from Indigenous or other non-Western perspectives. This research explores how early years educators in mainstream urban settings can learn with and from Indigenous perspectives on Land-Based Learning to support the wellbeing of the young children in their care.

Methodology

This paper reports on a three-year study of 10 preschool classrooms in Toronto, Ontario, as they learned about, from, and with Land-Based Learning from Indigenous perspectives. The learning experiences occurred mostly outdoors in the playgrounds, but also in the classrooms. All classrooms had two educators. The educators, Registered Early Childhood Educators (RECEs), Ontario Certified Teachers (OCTs), and early learning assistants were all interviewed individually before the study began (Fall 2020) to document their knowledge, experience, and comfort level with Indigenous perspectives and pedagogies. They were interviewed individually again in the spring of 2021, 2022, and 2023 to explore any changes in attitudes, knowledge, perspectives, and pedagogies. The educators also attended two virtual workshops per year (six in total) during which they were asked to present stories and photos of the ways they and their children were learning about, with, and from Land-Based Learning. The interviews were recorded and transcribed, and detailed notes were taken during the workshops. Playgrounds were observed bi-weekly using participant observation. Research team members also worked with small groups of children during these bi-weekly visits to support them in their engagement with the natural world.

The research approach was primarily qualitative, as defined by Merriam (2009) and Punch (2009), but some quantitative data was collected. It involved a small sample of teachers who were studied in depth, the interview sessions were largely open-ended, and the themes emerged as the study progressed. The transcripts and observation data were read several times to identify themes or "codes" related to the research questions, using an inductive approach (Thomas, 2006). The educators were interviewed at the beginning of the study about their perspectives and practices regarding outdoor play, nature-based learning, and Indigenous perspectives and pedagogy.

This research was initially undertaken with little understanding that Indigenous Land-Based Learning encompasses a completely different worldview and pedagogies than Western environmental learning. Through weekly research meetings in which we discussed Indigenous-authored articles and videos, as well as observations of children and educators engaged with Indigenous Knowledges, Worldviews, and perspectives, our understanding was transformed by Lori Budge's Indigenous lens. This process helped

us to understand more about what Indigenous Land-Based Learning is, how it differs from conventional ideas of outdoor and nature play, and how it can be incorporated into early years education. These conversations also shifted how we understood the research process, how we engaged with the participants, and how we understood what we were learning.

We aspired to enact Two-Eyed Seeing (Barlett et al., 2012) in our research approach by engaging with both Western and Indigenous methodologies. Our methods aligned with some key Indigenous research principles as outlined by Indigenous scholars Tuhiwai Smith (2012) and Kovach (2017). We sought to center Indigenous Worldviews (Tuhiwai Smith, 2012) and acknowledge Indigenous Knowledges and philosophies throughout the process (Kovach, 2017). In addition, the research was anchored in Indigenous teachings (Kovach, 2017) and grounded in relationships with the community of participants (Tuhiwai Smith, 2012). As a primarily non-Indigenous research team, we approached this work with humility and open hearts (Kovach, 2017; Tuhiwai Smith, 2012). Throughout the three-year project, we centered Indigenous voices and perspectives through Indigenous workshop speakers, and Indigenous-authored picture books, articles, videos, and websites.

Findings

We have divided the findings section into four themes based on Indigenous teachings: engaging with the senses and the heart, belonging, gratitude, and reciprocity. It is important to note that the themes are intertwined and unfolded in tandem over the course of three years as the educators learned about and engaged with Indigenous perspectives on Land-Based Learning. All four themes were introduced in the first year of the project through workshop speakers, newsletters that included Indigenous-authored videos and articles, as well as Indigenous-authored picture books. The themes were reinforced throughout the three years of the project by subsequent workshops and resources, and through regular opportunities for the teachers to share what they were learning and practicing with others in the project.

Engaging with the Senses and the Heart

As a research team, we were very moved by a video that we shared with the participants entitled, "What is Land-Based Learning? A Digital Forum" (Brass et al., 2020). In it, Willie Ermine, a Cree Elder, Knowledge Keeper and Ceremonialist from Sturgeon Lake First Nation, Saskatchewan, speaks about introducing young children, aged 2 to 5 years, to Land-Based Learning. Elder Willie Ermine encourages adults to respect children's perspectives and responses to the natural world, and to resist imposing adult perspectives. After they bring children out to a natural area, he recommends that adults:

1) Encourage children to observe nature closely: Ask them, "What do you see?"

2) Encourage children to connect emotionally with nature: Ask them, "How do you feel?"

3) Encourage children to engage with all their senses playfully, and follow their lead.

4) Value children's intuition.

5) Learn from the children. (Brass et al., 2020)

Over the course of the three years of the project, educators reported new perspectives and approaches to witnessing and supporting children as they engaged with the Land through close observation, tactile exploration, emotional connections, and playful engagement. The first interviews with the educators occurred before the project began but after the centers had been spending the majority of their time outdoors in the spring and summer of 2020 due to pandemic restrictions designed to control the spread of infection. In addition to spending far more time outdoors than was typical, the restrictions also meant that the children were using fewer commercial toys and resources and their days were less structured. The educators had not yet been introduced to the Indigenous-authored resources in the project, nor were they modeling or encouraging engagement with the natural world, but they saw the social and emotional benefits for the children from being outdoors. As this educator put it,

> Sometimes when the children are outside, they express how they feel. It helps them emotionally and socially. They learn to share, they learn to take turns, and they love to incorporate everything in their imaginative, creative play. So, I think that outside is a very good play area for them to come out of their boxes. (Early years educator, Fall 2020)

Although the early months of the pandemic were a very stressful time, some educators noted that they were feeling less stressed than usual at work since most of their day was being spent outdoors. They attributed this to the children being calmer outside, but also to the effect of being out in nature themselves. One educator explained, "I associate [being outside] as a way to decompress and de-stress for sure. I find that nature does that for me." (Early years educator, Fall 2020).

Noticing and Valuing Nature-Based Play

By the end of the first academic year of the project, the educators reported a new awareness regarding how children were engaging with the natural world, and they were more inclined to follow their lead rather than turn their engagement into a "lesson." They were supporting children to engage playfully and recognizing the holistic nature of that playful engagement. One educator put it this way:

> The children recognize different things [outside]. They recognize the birds. They recognize the sky. They recognize small aspects of the environment that we normally don't pay attention to. So, they're using it to support their play in all different aspects. The building aspect, creating stories about different things in their pretend play. It's really supporting the children to just kind of deep dive into their minds, their body, their senses, all of it into their play. (Early years educator, Spring 2021)

Fig. 1: Children observing the sunset from their playground.

The educators noted that the children hadn't changed over the course of the first year. It was the educators themselves who had changed. They had begun to take more notice of children's interest in and interactions with the natural world, and to value and support them differently. Whereas at the beginning of the study they noted the social, emotional, and playful learning benefits of simply being out in the playground, by the end of the first year, they recognized how much the children gained by playing with and learning about the natural world.

Sensory and Heart-Based Learning

The educators' interviews at the end of the second year illustrated that there had been a shift from considering nature as a resource that could benefit children, and adults, to responding to the natural world with empathy. The educators reported that it was the children who led the way in this shift. As one educator explained, "It's a constant learning opportunity. They come to us with these ideas, and sometimes we had never thought of them, and pretty profound ones as well. What's important, too, is their understanding and empathy for animals" (Early years educator, Spring 2022). By the end of the second year, the educators were recognizing that children's sensory engagement can build an emotional connection with nature. As one educator explained:

> I think the more they are allowed to touch and taste and feel and they're not redirected, not told, "No, you can't do that. No, you can't do this," the better. It's positive, right? So, it builds their self-esteem and I think they naturally will like the environment more if they're allowed to touch it. (Early years educator, Spring 2022)

Fig. 2: Children playing in a puddle realize they can see their reflection.

In response to their growing awareness of the value of sensory and emotional engagements with the natural world, the educators described how they were shifting their pedagogical practices. Their understanding of the value of children's direct contact with nature, in context, led them to a greater focus on outdoor learning, even after the pandemic restrictions had been lifted, as this educator explained:

> At the beginning of the study, we looked at nature the way we learned how to implement it in daycares—bring the outside inside. Now, it's the opposite. Now, we go outside, and we set up outside and we give the children the opportunity to be connected with nature by playing directly with the Land, with the soil, with the sand, with grass, with water, and observe how nature changes. (Early years educator, Spring 2022)

Furthermore, the educators recognized that Indigenous perspectives on Land-Based Learning had led to new understandings and practices in their own lives. One educator explained it this way:

> Things that, you know, you never gave a second glance over are becoming more meaningful to you … I'm literally stopping to take time to share what's around me. I'm looking at the changes that are unfolding and then trying to see it also through the children's eyes. So yeah, there's more of me standing still and taking time to appreciate …. So it gives me a broader perspective of nature and how much more I'm aware of and in tune with it. (Early years educator, Spring 2022).

Deeper Appreciation and Empathy

By the end of the third and final year of the project, the educators reported that the children were more curious, more engaged, and were forming a deeper appreciation of nature. One educator put it this way: "So, it's just a deeper appreciation and understanding. Like, that connection in terms of emotional and spiritual connection to the Land and how we treat it. I think it's really important and that children are being mindful of that" (Early years educator, Spring 2023).

When asked about the benefits of outdoor play and nature-based play at the beginning of the study, most educators mentioned the physical, mental, and learning benefits for children. By the end of the third year of learning about Indigenous Knowledge through listening to Indigenous speakers, reading picture books

by Indigenous authors, and observing and supporting the children outside, this list had expanded to include awareness and empathy for humans and non-humans in the environment. Here's how one educator described it:

> I mean, being outside is, as we all know, a great benefit—the exercise, the fresh air. But, also the awareness, being aware of others. And it starts with being aware of the grass you walk on, the air you breathe, and the water you drink. Really brings a whole sense of self, the need to become aware of other people and what your impact on the world is, right? (Early years educator, Spring 2023)

The approach to engagement with the natural world that Elder Willie Ermine teaches, grounded in a deep respect for children's perspectives, provides a very different picture of wellbeing than Western approaches to nature-based curriculum. By emphasizing the importance of emotional and intuitive connections to the Land, as well as physical and cognitive engagements, it offers a more holistic approach. Children can integrate their whole selves and provide leadership to the adults in their lives.

Belonging—All My Relations

> "All my relations" is the English equivalent of a phrase familiar to most Native peoples of North America. It may begin or end a prayer or speech or a story, and, while each nation has its own way of expressing this sentiment in its own language, the meaning is the same. "All my relations" is at first a reminder of who we are and of our relationship with both our family and our relatives. It also reminds us of the extended relationship we share with all human beings. But the relationships that Native people see go further, the web of kinship to animals, to the birds, to the fish, to the plants, to all the animate and inanimate forms that can be seen or imagined. More than that, "all my relations" is an encouragement for us to accept the responsibilities we have within the universal family by living our lives in a harmonious and moral manner (a common admonishment is to say of someone that they act as if they had no relations). (King, n.d.)

Over the course of the project, educators and children grew in their understanding of the Indigenous principle that humans belong to an inter-connected web with other creatures in nature, both human and non-human, and they have a responsibility to live in a moral manner with all their relations. At the beginning of the project, a few educators who had had some professional learning on Indigenous perspectives had a sense of this principle, but most did not. A few others spoke of the importance of empathy and of understanding how elements of nature are connected, but they viewed humans as separate and superior beings.

Bugs Have Mommies Too

At the end of the first year, the educators discussed how the children recognized other non-human living beings in the playground and saw connections between them and their own lives. This was evident in many playgrounds as the children interacted with insects, worms, squirrels, and birds. This had become a focus for the children, as one educator explained:

> Their focus right now—it's a lot with insects and bugs and the animals outside. That's a lot where their connection is. I don't know if the connection maybe has something to do with seeing them as another living thing that physically moves around. (Early years educator, Spring 2021)

As the children began to feel a sense of connection with their non-human relatives in the playground, they began to identify with how they would feel in similar circumstances. This often took the form of wondering where their family members were or if they were missing their mothers, as this quote exemplifies, "When we took the fly outside, they were like, 'Oh is it going to be OK out there? Is it missing its mommy?' So, we started talking about different potential reasons that this poor fly would be sad" (Early years educator, Spring 2021).

The educators reported a change in how both they and the children were more focused on their connections with nature and their desire to care, as described by this educator:

> It's just part of our learning process—how much more devoted we've been to nature and taking care of what we see and having a better understanding of how to connect as adults outside. I can see the change, you know? And then with the children, I definitely see where they just want to see so much more outdoors and are not scared of the bugs but wanting to touch them gently. (Early years educator, Spring 2021)

Belonging and Interdependence

In the year two interviews, the educators talked less about the benefits of nature for children, and more about how children (and adults) are connected to nature and have a responsibility to act morally towards all creatures. One educator put it this way:

> But now I talk more about, you know, we thank the ant because it helps bring food to its family and then the birds eat the ants, and more. It's not just, "Don't step on the ants," but more of what's happening in the ecosystem. (Early years educator, Spring 2022)

They also recognized that with this understanding of interdependence, comes a sense of belonging, "I believe Indigenous principles usually stress that sense of belonging, right, and we can definitely facilitate that. Through Indigenous teaching and being reciprocal with the Land—we take care of the Land, the Land takes care of us" (Early years educator, Spring 2022).

The educators in the study found the concept of All My Relations particularly powerful. It gave them a new perspective on their relationships and responsibilities to the Land, as educators and as people. In the following quote, one of the educators echoed Dr. Leroy Little Bear's (2015) cautions about the need to respect the narrow set of natural circumstances on which all life depends:

> If you think deeply about nature, it gives us everything, not only food. Nature is everything. Any imbalance in nature will lead to disaster, right? So, we have to take care of nature and connect with nature, to animals, to everything around us because we all need to live in harmony. And we have to respect that, and we have to work on that. And really, I've changed my concept of nature. (Early years educator, Spring 2022)

Fig. 3: A child creates a house for a squirrel with snow, sticks, pinecones, and rocks.

Deeper Connection, Love, and Respect

At the beginning of the project, the educators spoke very little about their own views and relationships with nature. However, by the end of the third year, many spoke of a deepened sense of connection, respect, and love for the natural world, as this educator explained:

> I think it's really important to understand nature and connect with nature ... So, don't take it for granted as something that is around us that we can just use …. Land-Based Learning amplifies, I would say, some things that we were doing before, like recycling, but it was just a human approach. Now we know that we should be taking care of nature. But it's more than that. There is now a more emotional connection with nature. (Early years educator, Spring 2023)

The educators understood that they had developed new perspectives and connections with the Land over the course of the project. One of the big learnings was a change in the way they viewed the position of humans in the world:

> When we step outside and when we immerse ourselves in nature, it is a reminder and it really places us in this vast web of life in which we are not in control, in which we follow. We are made by that system. It wasn't made by us. So, I think it re-positions us in a really important way that can evoke both awe, and connection, and in the right way, humility. (Early years educator, Spring 2023)

The Indigenous principle of All My Relations emphasizes that humans are not alone. We are part of a network of relations who care for us and in turn need our care. These connections provide a sense of comfort and belonging that can lead to a feeling of wellbeing. This is absent from Western approaches to nature-based learning that typically position humans as separate and superior.

Gratitude

> We are thankful to our Mother the Earth, for she gives us everything that we need for life. She supports our feet as we walk about upon her. It gives us joy that she still continues to care for us, just as she has from the beginning of time. To our Mother, we send thanksgiving, love, and respect. Now our minds are one. (Kimmerer, 2013, p. 108)

In this retelling of part of the Thanksgiving Address of the Haudenosaunee Confederacy, Robin Wall Kimmerer (2013) shares the teaching of gratitude to Mother Earth for all we have been given. This teaching was shared early in the first year of the project and was the Indigenous perspective that seemed to first capture the imagination of both the children and adults in the project. As we have seen in the previous educators' quotes, gratitude was often mentioned when talking about engagement with the senses and the heart, and about belonging and connection. Gratitude was both a result of holistic engagement and a sense of belonging, and an impetus to further engage and connect with the natural world.

Appreciation Turns to Gratitude

The project began with only a few educators speaking of appreciating that their playground had some trees and bushes—a distanced, cognitive response. By the end of the first year, educators were reporting that they and the children were showing appreciation *to* nature for the gifts they were receiving—a more emotional, personal response:

> We've definitely taken more of an appreciation towards nature, things that we may have taken for granted before. We're showing appreciation and we're actually giving or feeling appreciation for what the tree provides, for the warmth that the sun provides, just for all of those things. (Early years educator, Spring 2021)

Fig. 4: Children hugging a tree in gratitude after learning that it provides pine cones for the squirrels.

Expressing gratitude became an integral part of the day in many programs. One educator explained how they thanked the rain rather than talking about "bad weather" as they would have done before the project began:

> When it's raining, we go outside to a little hut in our playground, and we stand there, and we say "Thank you" to the rain. "Thank you for feeding the grass, thank you for feeding our fruits and vegetables so we can eat, thank you for washing our cars!" [laughing] "Thank you for letting us splash in the puddles!" (Early years educator, Spring 2021).

The educators mentioned that the sense of gratitude that they were feeling went beyond their professional roles as educators, and extended into their personal lives, as one educator reported:

> Whenever I take a little walk or jog or explore nature on my own, I take a little time to—you know, if I see a beautiful tree or walk through a forest, I say thank you. I express thanks to nature, the Land, the trees, the water. I'm learning why this is important. So, I should do that myself. I also try to teach my own children, my 21-year-old at home, too [laughing]. (Early years educator, Spring 2021)

Gratitude Comes with Responsibility

By the end of the second year, the educators reported that the children were spontaneously expressing gratitude to the natural world around them, as this story illustrates:

> For me, the gratitude piece has just been really what we sort of latched onto. So, one day we came outside, and the snow had melted, and it had made this huge water pile. They were so excited to have this hands-on experience with the water and they thought that it had rained, so one of them threw their hands up at the beginning and said, "Thank you rain." And then it was like this snowball thing and everybody who was at this puddle was like, "Thank you sky" and, "Thank you clouds for bringing rain." (Early years educator, Spring 2022)

Through the Indigenous perspectives shared in the project, educators also became aware that it was not enough to express gratitude for the gifts of nature. Gratitude needs to be accompanied by responsible behavior, as one educator explained:

> People say, "Well I'm so grateful that I have this grass in front of my house and beautiful flowers." But then we have to be very careful not to behave in a way that will destroy that. It's not something people are thinking of. Children have to understand not to take nature for granted. We really have to focus on, you know, taking care of the water, taking care of the Land. This is something that I think is great, it's amazing. (Early years educator, Spring 2022)

Gratitude Leads to Changes in Practice

At the end of the third year, the educators explained that they and the children had changed many practices as a result of what they were learning about Indigenous perspectives on gratitude. Out of gratitude for the gifts of the Land, they and the children were trying to conserve water, use fewer paper towels, care for the insects, birds, and animals who shared their playgrounds, and pay more attention to the changes that occur in nature over the seasons. Understanding what nature provides led to children, and adults, paying more attention. This, in turn, led to respect and gratitude for what they had received,

which led to a desire to care and give back. This educator explained how she saw this operating in her preschool class:

> We do understand what trees do for us, we do understand why we're going to take care and clean up litter in our park, and we do understand why we're going to leave those leaves there so the squirrels can take them and use them for their nests. So, I think that gratitude piece has been one of the biggest highlights in this program for me and for the children in just having that respect level that we never really talked about before. We never really talked about how it gives back to us. We talked a lot about what we do, but we never talked about why we're doing the things that we're doing. (Early years educator, Spring 2023)

Gratitude to the Land is rarely mentioned in non-Indigenous approaches to nature-based learning. An Indigenous approach to gratitude positions all of nature, including humans, as a benevolent collection of gift givers. Children, as well as adults, are worthy recipients of bountiful gifts—a very affirming view that could enhance wellbeing.

Reciprocity

> We are responsible to all things around us, not out of superiority to them, but because we are part of them, and cannot be safely disconnected from them. Our lives need to be an expression of this truth: whenever we take something—and we are always taking something—something should be given back. (Anderson et al., 2017, p. 134)

In the interviews before the study began, none of the educators referred to a responsibility to give back to the natural world. Some educators spoke of gardening as an academic concept, that is, to help children understand the process of growing food. No educators referred to reciprocity in their own lives. By the end of the first year, however, many educators were reporting that the children were moving beyond learning about gardening to recognizing their connection and responsibility towards their gardens, as this educator explained, "It's not just looking. But it's now more of the involvement, being something sacred in the sense that plants—the importance of plants—the responsibility that follows in actually planting" (Early years educator, Spring 2021).

Fig. 5: A child collecting rainwater to water the plants in their playground.

Fig. 6: A child watering the garden they helped to plant.

This sense of responsibility extended beyond gardening to all aspects of the natural world. Children began to be concerned about what the birds, animals, and insects in their playgrounds ate, where they lived, and how they felt. They wanted to care for them by making homes in the snow or soil and by feeding them. This principled approach to the world is part of Traditional Indigenous Education that Indigenous children learned historically (Hansen & Antsanen, 2018).

In one center in the project, an educator described a dramatic change in how the children responded to birds. Before being exposed to Indigenous perspectives, the children used to yell at and chase the birds who came into the playground. Afterwards, they began to show concern for the birds and want to feed them, as this educator explained:

> The children will take a handful each [of birdseed] and they will throw it and say that this is our way of helping the birds to eat, to grow, and to be strong. It is our way of giving back to nature. (Early years educator, Spring 2021)

Understanding Give and Take

By the end of the second year, the educators reported a clear understanding that they were the recipients of gifts from the natural world, and that they had a responsibility to care in return. After two years in the project, the educators had come to a new understanding of their relationships and responsibilities to nature, and how that could be enacted in an early years setting:

> Before I thought it's just play … Land-Based is how we play in the playground. But now it's incorporating nature and taking care of nature. What we have we are giving back to nature as well. Before it's just taking everything to ourselves. Now it's time for us to give back to nature instead of taking everything. (Early years educator, Spring 2022)

From Objects to Subjects

By the end of the third year, it was evident that the children and the educators had moved from considering natural items as resources, to considering what they owe to their non-human relatives. The educators commented that the children were taking greater leadership to care for, and give back to, the plants and animals in their playgrounds. One educator described how this was happening in her playground:

> I think the children grasp it more and they demonstrate it. They choose it, they hug the trees. It's spring, so we have been bringing out our plants. And for example, if a child would climb on it or step on it, the other children would say, "Don't hurt them. We don't hurt the plants." (Early years educator, Spring 2023)

As was seen in the previous themes, feeling connected and grateful to the Land led children to express empathy and care for the plants, animals, and insects around them and to seek to give back by saying "thank you," and trying to understand what plants and animals need and providing it. The children recognized their responsibilities and took on the role of caring for their fellow creatures. This reciprocal relationship gave the children a sense of purpose and agency that can lead to enhanced wellbeing.

Land-Based Wellbeing

The findings from this study suggest that developing and enacting reciprocal relationships of gratitude, respect, and care with the Land enhanced the holistic wellbeing of both the children and the educators. The sense of belonging, of being cared for by the Land, and of having a responsibility to care in return led to feelings of peace, joy, contentment, purpose, agency, a reduction in stress, and overall wellbeing, according to their educators. Over the course of the project, the educators witnessed the children developing many aspects of overall wellbeing as they introduced Indigenous perspectives and pedagogies on Land-Based Learning into their preschool urban programs. They discussed that a sense of belonging, connection, meaning, and support emerge from a strong relationship between humans and non-humans, and leads to overall health, as one educator explained:

> It's in that human/non-human relationship, it's in this place that we belong and are part of that we are healthy, that we find home, and that we can start to live with a kind of sense of what matters and what really supports us. And I think that is part of what kids will get if we have them developing their memories and their relationships with the outside world. (Early years educator, Spring 2023)

Another educator pointed out that children have increased self-esteem and sense of purpose when they enact their responsibility towards nature, "Because if you're caring for nature, you feel good about yourself and about, you know, you're productive" (Early years educator, Spring 2023). Relationships with nature lead to physical health as well as a sense of belonging; according to one educator, "That relationship connection with nature—they feel a sense of belonging. Physically, the children jump here and there, and it's healthier, to connect with fresh air. And all these elements come together" (Early years educator, Spring 2023).

Resilience was also highlighted as a result of connecting to the Land:

> I think around that gratitude piece, and I think understanding a little bit more about what the earth gives to us, and I think—which I didn't really appreciate before this project—that resilience piece too, about being able to connect and contribute, has been a really important piece. (Early years educator, Spring 2023)

The Worldview represented in the four Indigenous teachings explored in this project—holistic engagement with the Land, connection with All My Relations, gratitude for the gifts of the Land, and reciprocity—strengthens connections with others and with the environment. It offers a view in which the child is connected and belongs in a web of gifts givers and receivers and has a responsibility to contribute to the wellbeing of others. This responsibility and role as both recipient and contributor give a sense of agency, purpose, identity, and wellbeing. These are all aspects of Traditional Indigenous Education (Brokenleg, 2015).

Before the study began, the educators already had a sense that being outdoors was good for children's physical and mental wellbeing. However, through learning about and learning to enact Indigenous perspectives and pedagogies on Land-Based Learning, they grew to recognize a broader sense of wellbeing for the children, themselves, and the world around them. They began considering humans as part of a web of interdependency with other aspects of the natural world, and realized the power of responding to the Land with the heart and spirit as well as mind and body.

Western perspectives on wellbeing focus on human wellbeing, and typically the wellbeing of individual humans. However, from Indigenous perspectives, the wellbeing of individual humans cannot be separated from the wellbeing of all human and non-human beings. Humans can't ensure their own wellbeing without ensuring the wellbeing of the environment. In this way, Indigenous perspectives can lead to systemic change in how we relate to one another and the world around us. This is a transformative approach to wellbeing that looks beyond the individual and links it to the wellbeing of others, both human and more than human.

Conclusion

There is an urgent need for Canadian educational programs at all levels to include Indigenous histories, Knowledges, perspectives, and pedagogies, and for educational research to include Indigenous methodologies. This project contributes to decolonizing research in early education and care, the professional learning of early years educators, and curriculum and pedagogy for young children, by centering Indigenous Worldviews, Knowledges, pedagogies, and research methods. The research team and the educators evolved in their understandings of Indigenous Knowledges, perspectives, and pedagogies. Early on we realized how colonized our thinking and methods were. What we learned gave us the tools to unpack our assumptions and begin to move to new ways of thinking and being. This happened through engaging with Indigenous-created practices and resources. These included gratitude circles, observation strategies based on the Medicine Wheel (Martin, 2022), and ongoing learning and reflection through workshops and newsletters.

During gratitude circles in the early learning programs, children shared their experiences which reflected three main Indigenous principles of sustainability, reciprocity, and connection to the natural world. Adopting the lens of Medicine Wheel teachings (e.g., Martin, 2022) enabled educators to shift how they characterized children's learning and relationships with the natural world. The shift was away from a Eurocentric view of children as being disconnected from the rest of nature to a view that is aligned with an Indigenous view that all things including humans are interrelated (All My Relations). Through workshops and newsletters, we shared our ongoing learning with the participants, which began a process of decolonizing our thinking and practices. All this learning was mediated by our team member Lori Budge who continually informed our shifting paradigm and deepened our understanding of Indigenous cultural ways of knowing and being. These practices embodied the Two-Eyed Seeing perspective (Barlett et al., 2012) by increasing our understanding of how non-Indigenous educators understand Indigenous perspectives on Land-Based Learning, and how they can benefit from both Indigenous Knowledges and pedagogies and Western knowledges and pedagogies in early years programs.

Indigenous histories, cultures, and Knowledges have been ignored or misrepresented in Canadian culture and education for too long. This research will help educators, children, and their families learn about treaty obligations and our need to respond to the Truth and Reconciliation Calls to Action. Furthermore, it will highlight the important contribution Indigenous Knowledge and perspectives can play in learning, holistic wellness, and the creation of a more sustainable approach to the environment.

References

Absolon, K. (2019). Decolonizing education and educators' decolonization. *Intersectionalities: A Global Journal of Social Work Analysis, Research, Polity, and Practice, 7*(1), 9–28.

Anderson, D., Chiarotto, L., & Comay, J. (2017). *Natural curiosity: A resource for educators: The importance of Indigenous perspectives in children's environmental inquiry*. Laboratory School, Dr. Eric Jackman Institute of Child Study, Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University of Toronto.

Bartlett, C., Marshall, M., & Marshall, A. (2012). Two-eyed seeing and other lessons learned within a co-learning journey of bringing together Indigenous and mainstream knowledges and ways of knowing. *Journal of Environmental Studies and Sciences*, 2, 331–340.

Bell, N., Conroy, E., Wheatley, K., Michaud, B., Maracle, C., Pelletier, J., Filion, B., & Johnson, B. (2010). *The Ways of Knowing Guide.* Toronto Zoo. https://www.torontozoo.com/pdfs/tic/Stewardship_Guide.pdf

Brass, D., Ermine, W., & Michano-Courchene, L. (2020, January 8). *What is land-based learning? A digital forum* [Video]. YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tOUBbsNswLY

Brokenleg, M. (2015, October 26). *First Nations principles of learning: An Introduction* [Video]. YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0PgrfCVCt_A

Brussoni, M., Chabot, G., Herrington, S., Janssen, I., Pickett, W., Power, M., Stanger, N., Sampson, M., & Tremblay, M. S. (2015). What is the relationship between outdoor time and physical activity, sedentary behaviour, and physical fitness in children? A systematic review. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health, 12(*6), 6455–6474. https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph120606455

Burke, A., & Moore, S. (2021). Children's wellness: Outdoor learning during Covid-19 in Canada. *Education in the North*, 28(2), 24–45.

Callaghan, H., & Taylor-Leonhardi, L. (2018). Decolonizing and co-constructing contexts that welcome Indigenous practices and knowledges in early childhood education. *Association of Early Childhood Educators Ontario (AECEO)*, 2, 17–26.

Canadian Pediatric Society (CPS). (April 1, 2012). *Healthy active living: Physical activity guidelines for children and adolescents*. https://www.cps.ca/en/documents/position/physical-activity-guidelines

Chawla, L. (2015). Benefits of Nature Contact for Children. *Journal of Planning Literature, 30*(4), 433–452. https://doi.org/10.1177/0885412215595441

Chawla, L. (2020). Childhood nature connection and constructive hope: A review of research on connecting with nature and coping with environmental loss. *People and Nature,* 2(3), 619–642. https://doi.org/10.1002/pan3.10128

Courchene, D. (2016, Dec 8). *Manitou Api: Where the sun rises—The seven sacred laws* [Video]. YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=icDxjMh7Xng

Hansen, J. G., & Antsanen, R. (2018). What can traditional Indigenous Knowledge teach us about changing our approach to human activity and environmental stewardship in order to reduce the severity of climate change? *The International Indigenous Policy Journal*, 9(3). https://doi.org/10.18584/iipj.2018.9.3.6

Hernandez Gonzalez, F. (2023). Exploring the affordances of place-based education for advancing sustainability education: The role of cognitive, socio-emotional and behavioural learning. *Education Sciences*, *13*(7), 676. MDPI AG. http://dx.doi.org/10.3390/educsci13070676

Kimmerer, R. W. (2013). *Braiding sweetgrass: Indigenous wisdom, scientific knowledge, and the teachings of plants*. Milkweed Editions.

King, T. (n.d.). *Walking together: First Nations, Metis, and Inuit perspectives in curriculum*. Government of Alberta. https://www.learnalberta.ca/content/aswt/well_being/documents/all_my_relations.pdf

Kovach, M. (2017). Doing Indigenous methodologies. *The SAGE handbook of qualitative research*, 214–234.

Lawrence, E., Jennings, N., Kioupi, V., Thompson, R., Diffey, J., & Vercammen, A. (2022). Psychological responses, mental health, and sense of agency for the dual challenges of climate change and the COVID-19 pandemic in young people in the UK: An online survey study. *The Lancet,* 6 (9), E726–E738.

Little Bear, L. (2015, January 14). *Indigenous Knowledge and Western science: Contrasts and similarities* [Video]. YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gJSJ28eEUjI

Little Bear, L. (2000). Jagged worldviews colliding. *Reclaiming Indigenous voice and vision*, 77, 85–108.

Martin, H. (2022). *A seasonal pedagogy*. Edge of the bush: Where worldviews meet. https://edgeofthebush.ca

Merriam, S. (2009). *Qualitative research: A guide to design and implementation*. Jossey-Bass.

Nelson, N., Pacini-Ketchabaw, V., & Nxumalo, F. (2018, Spring). Rethinking nature-based approaches in early childhood education: Common worlding practices. *Journal of Childhood Studies,* 43(1), 4–14.

Otto, S., & Pensini, P. (2017). Nature-based environmental education of children: Environmental knowledge and connectedness to nature, together, are related to ecological behaviour. *Global Environmental Change,* 47, 88–94.

Pickett, K., Yassaman, V., Mathai, M., & Small, N. (2022). The social determinants of child health and the inequalities in child health. *Paediatrics and Child Health,* 32(3), 88–94.

Punch, K. (2009). *Introduction to research methods in education*. Sage.

Restoule, J. (n.d.). *We are all treaty people*. University of Toronto. https://www.oise.utoronto.ca/abed101/we-are-all-treaty-people/

Thomas, D. R. (2006). A general inductive approach for analyzing qualitative evaluation data. *American Journal of Evaluation*, 27(2), 237–246.

Tillmann, S., Tobin, D., & Avison W. (2018). Mental health benefits of interactions with nature in children and teenagers: A systematic review. *Journal of Epidemiology & Community Health,* 72, 958–966.

Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (TRC). (2015). *Calls to Action*. trc.ca/websites/trcinstitution/File/2015/Findings/Calls_to_Action_English2.pdf

Tuck, E., & Yang, K. (2012). Decolonization is not a metaphor. *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society,*1(1), 1–40.

Tuhiwai Smith, L. (2012). *Decolonizing methodologies: Research and Indigenous peoples (2nd ed.)*. Zed Books.

World Health Organization (WHO). (2020). *Physical activity*. https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/physical-activity

Monica McGlynn-Stewart (PhD, OCT, RECE) is a professor in the School of Early Childhood at George Brown College, Toronto, Ontario. She teaches courses in curriculum, policy, and research methods. Currently, she is the principal investigator on the SSHRC-funded research project "Designing and Implementing Environmental Inquiry Strategies in Urban Early Years Programs in Canada" (2020–2024). Her research interests include learning from Indigenous perspectives on environmental education, literacy learning in the early years, and digital technology-mediated learning and teaching.

Nicola Maguire (MA, RECE) is Director of Research and Pedagogical Leadership at the Learning Enrichment Foundation and a co-researcher on the SSHRC-funded research project "Designing and Implementing Environmental Inquiry Strategies in Urban Early Years Programs in Canada" (2020–2024). Previously, she was a part-time faculty member in the School of Early Childhood at George Brown College. Her research interests include children's outdoor play, digital technology uses for learning and teaching, and arts-based curriculums.

Lori Budge played a key role in establishing Indigenous Education and Services at George Brown College. She served as its first coordinator from 1991 to 2022, where she led the establishment of two Indigenous students centers and secured the necessary funding for a Knowledge & Wisdom Keeper. Lori provided assistance to other Indigenous Education and Services staff, served on numerous internal and external boards and committees, and designed and taught the general education elective Introduction to Indigenous Studies. She is now a full-time professor in Liberal Arts & Sciences. Lori is a member of the Wikwemikong Unceded First Nation and an advisor and guide on the project "Designing and Implementing Environmental Inquiry Strategies in Urban Early Years Programs in Canada" (2020–2024).

Ana-Luisa Sales (BA, B.ECL, RECE) is a graduate of the Early Childhood Leadership program at George Brown College and an experienced Early Childhood Educator. Currently, she is the Research Coordinator for the SSHRC-funded project "Designing and Implementing Environmental Inquiry Strategies in Urban Early Years Programs in Canada" (2020–2024). She also works as a RECE in a Kindergarten program. Some of her research interests include Indigenous ways of being and knowing, Land-based education, and public policies within the early childhood education and care (ECEC) sector.

Elise Patterson (B.A. RECE) is a student in George Brown College's Bachelor of Early Childhood Education program. She currently works as an ECE with George Brown's lab schools and research assistant for the project "Designing and Implementing Environmental Inquiry Strategies in Urban Early Years Programs in Canada" (2020–2024). Elise also contributes to Building Blocks for Child Care as a member of their Advisory Working Group and to Toronto Children's Services as part of their Black Leaders Advocating for Combatting Anti-Black Racism in the Early Years working group. Her research interests include Land-Based Learning, anti-racist education, and public policy in the early years sector.

Monica McGlynn-Stewart, Nicola Maguire, Lori Budge, Ana-Luisa Sales, and Elise Patterson

Seeking Care: Youth's Counterstories Within the Context of Mental Health

Jinny Menon, Michelle Lavoie, Vera Caine, Margot Jackson, and Holly Symonds-Brown

Abstract

In this article, we draw on a narrative inquiry into the experiences of children, youth, and families waiting for mental health support during the COVID-19 pandemic in Western Canada. We foreground two youths' experiences (Gillian, who self-identifies as transgender, and Malek, who self-identifies as racialized) to highlight the complex barriers and supports each encountered while attempting to secure appropriate care as they navigated moments of crisis within their worlds of home, school, and communities. By inquiring into their mental health stories, we foreground the unique ways these youth enacted counterstories to disrupt hegemonic constructions of their identities, build agency, and support their wellbeing.

Background

This paper is drawn from a two-year Canadian Institute of Health Research (CIHR) funded study that narratively inquired into the experiences of diverse children, youth, and families awaiting mental health services (MHS) during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. Marietta et al. (2023) found that during the pandemic there was not enough attention paid to early interventions; accessing and receiving MHS was further complicated by slow assessments, insufficient supports for all family members, little follow-through, and a lack of coordination amongst services and providers. These challenges were characterized by long wait times that perpetuated further distress (Children's Mental Health Ontario, 2020; Eichstedt et al., 2024).

Our study focused on participants' experiences of waiting for formal MHS prior to and during COVID-19. Participants negotiated their ongoing challenges, often by carving out spaces of wellbeing as a means of coping while waiting for support. Youth participants recounted experiences of racism, discrimination, being un/supported, and offered little/no guidance while waiting for MHS. They shared their mental health (MH) stories and desire for agency. Evident within these stories were the counterstories that the youth both told and lived. Lindemann (2020) explicates the transformative power of counterstories as:

> a story that is told for the purpose of resisting a socially shared narrative used to justify the oppression of a social group. The socially shared story enters the tissue of stories that constitute the group's identity, damaging that identity and thereby . . . the counterstory sets out to uproot some part of the oppressive story and replace it with a more accurate one. (p. 286)

In this paper, we focus on the experiences of Malek, a young Muslim youth, and Gillian, a young trans woman, to highlight the complex challenges each faced alongside their determination to tell and live counterstories. Counterstories were both told and lived by both participants to resist, rewrite, and recompose hegemonic stories (e.g., racism, cisgenderism) that were incessantly imposed upon them. Working within the narrative considerations of temporality, sociality, and place (Clandinin, 2013, 2023; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000), we share select moments of Malek's and Gillian's experiences, along with art and poetry co-created with their stories to show the worldmaking effects of seeking and waiting for care.

Literature Review: COVID-19 and Youth Mental Health

The emergence of COVID-19 complicated youth mental health (YMH) outcomes by increasing anxiety, depression, and behavioral issues (Markoulakis et al., 2022; Nearchou et al., 2020; Ravens-Sieberer et al., 2023). Multiple aspects of COVID-19 also disproportionately and negatively impacted racialized populations (Castro-Ramirez et al., 2021; Williams et al., 2023) as well as sexual and gender minority youth (Hawke, Hayes, et al., 2021; Jones et al., 2023). Marginalized and structurally vulnerable youth faced increased barriers and challenges (e.g., discrimination) in public spaces and/or while seeking care (Everest et al., 2023; Hilario et al., 2023). Additionally, social isolation due to gathering restrictions, coupled with the shuttering of community spaces, was linked to increased symptoms of anxiety, loneliness, and depression (Al Omari et al., 2023; Lips, 2021; Reiriz et al., 2023).

Racialized Youth

Racialized youth contending with preexisting mental health (MH) conditions typically report lower levels of resilience (Collin-Vézina el al., 2022) than their non-racialized peers. Yet they experience differential and/or insufficient treatment compared to these peers (Bulloch et al., 2021; Nguyen et al., 2022). The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic intensified inequities for racialized youth. Gajaria et al. (2021) troublingly observed, "Systemic racism clearly influences access to, and experience of mental health care for racialized Canadians" (p. 133). Micro and macro aggressions of racism, discrimination, and lack of cultural sensitivity adversely impact racialized youth's MH (Eboigbe et al., 2023; Liu et al., 2023; Quinn et al., 2023). During the pandemic, these acts accentuated the harms faced by young people of color who attempted to seek support for their MH (Bath & Meza, 2023; Salami et al., 2021; Sheikhan et al., 2023). For instance, experiences of hatred, violence, and racism perpetuated by others were associated with increased health concerns (Liu et al., 2023), internalization or self-blame by victims (Nguyen et al., 2022) and heightened instances of COVID-19 directed discrimination (Fisher et al., 2023). Complicating their relationships with MHS, racialized youth regularly contend with different kinds of stigma. Membership within certain communities can hinder seeking help for MH (Basri et al., 2022). Moreover, self-stigma and stigma among peers can also influence whether youth of color seek help (Sheikhan et al., 2023). Such membership can disenfranchise racialized young people who fear further prejudice. Service providers outside the community who purport to help vulnerable youth can instead aggravate emotional harms of stigma related to ethnic and cultural differences (Banks, 2022; Williams et al., 2023). Kamali et al. (2023) ascertained "racial and ethnic families, are almost 40% to 50% less likely

to make contact compared to self-identified White families" (p. 601), emphasizing the urgent need for equitable access to care for racialized children and youth (Bath et al., 2023).

2SLGBTQ+ Youth

For 2SLGBTQ+ youth, the impacts of COVID-19 were compounded by pre-pandemic stressors and exacerbated preexisting social and health inequalities (Everest et al., 2023; Hawke, Szatmari, et al., 2021). Kneale and Bécares (2021) help us understand the complex interdependence of intersectional impacts on 2SLGBTQ+ people, arguing that "mental health inequities during and predating the pandemic are a product of complex processes of discrimination and exclusion" (p. 22). Prior to the pandemic, Canadian transgender and nonbinary youth navigated more MH issues than their cisgender peers (Veale et al., 2017). COVID-19 worsened MH impacts on transgender and nonbinary youth by compounding health inequities unique to this population (e.g., gender affirming surgeries) with preexisting stressors (e.g., transphobia) (Hawke, Hayes, et al., 2021). Research demonstrates how lack of access to gender affirming care (Everest et al., 2023) and increased minority stress (Salerno et al., 2020) may have fostered substance use (Hawke, Szatmari et al., 2021), and increased incidents of anxiety, depression, and suicidal ideation (Jarrett et al., 2021; Taylor et al., 2020). For transgender and nonbinary youth, these factors may have been further complicated by increased frequencies of gender-based violence that emerged during the pandemic, including increased verbal and physical attacks against 2SLGBTQ+ people (Everest et al., 2023; Kneale & Bécares, 2021; Salerno & Boekeloo, 2022), and lack of access to critical 2SLGBTQ+ community supports and connections (Everest et al., 2023; Kia et al., 2022). Town and colleagues (2022) also noted that 2SLGBTQ+ youth may shun formal YMH services because these services are often viewed as discriminatory by 2SLGBTQ+ communities and are perceived as heterocentric and overly generic (Chaiton et al., 2021).

Turning to Narrative Inquiry

Our Study and Research Puzzle

In response to research indicating that the pandemic disproportionately affected marginalized populations (Laurencin & McClinton, 2020) and made visible gaps in health equity (Alegría et al., 2022; Rees et al., 2021), we came alongside children, youth, and families over 18 months to better understand their stories of waiting for MH care. We used narrative inquiry to understand participants' experiences from their unique perspectives and positionality. Narrative inquiry is primarily a way to understand experience (Clandinin, 2013, 2023; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000); put differently, "to use narrative inquiry methodology is to adopt a particular view of experience as a phenomenon under study" (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006, p. 375). Clandinin and Caine (2008) elucidate that, "prior to engaging with research participants, narrative inquirers need to undertake a reflective inquiry process into their narrative understandings in relation to the particular research phenomenon with its attendant research puzzle" (p. 543). These insights, in turn, helped us to compose our research puzzle. Shaping a research puzzle, instead of a research question, offers opportunities to explore ambiguity and complexity. It allows us to

attend to the perplexities surrounding the research phenomenon through a process of wondering. Wondering is a means of exploring the phenomenon from diverse vantage points (Clandinin, 2023). Our research puzzle of what can we learn from narratively inquiring into the experiences of waiting for MHS was shaped around several wonders:

- How were participants negotiating their MH experiences?
- What challenges were they experiencing in their MH journeys?
- What MH resources and supports did they use to cope as they waited for care?
- How did they feel supported (or not) in their mental wellbeing as they waited?
- How do these experiences converge/diverge for marginalized children and youth?
- What resources and strategies can be used to strengthen the current child and youth MH care system?

Framing our narrative inquiry in these ways invited us to shift away from certainties and move towards exploring possibilities.

Methodology and Methods

Narrative inquiry is a relational ontology, grounded in both epistemology and ethics which honors people's lived experiences as important sources of knowledge (Clandinin, 2023). These experiences are embedded in and contextualized by "larger cultural, social, familial, institutional and linguistic narratives" (Caine et al., 2021, p. 23). Within narrative inquiry, knowledge is co-created in relation to the people we come alongside within research, and "woven into experiences are, always, the complexities of life and living" (Caine et al., 2021, pp. 12–13). In this manner, narrative inquiry does not position the researcher in aloof distance from the participant, but always in relation. Narrative inquiry's three commonplaces of inquiry—temporality, sociality, and place—enable a comprehensive understanding of experience. More explicitly, temporality is understood through:

> multiple interactions with participants … through participants' reflections on and of earlier life experiences. Sociality directs attention inward toward the participants' thoughts, emotions, and moral responses and outward to events and actions. Place directs attention to places where lives were lived as well as to the places where inquiry events occur. (Clandinin & Caine, 2008, p. 544)

In using narrative inquiry, we show the interconnectedness of participants' storied experiences over time, across diverse contexts and social interactions. We share excerpts of narrative accounts, including researcher reflections to make visible our inquiry into these three commonplaces.

Participants

Research participants included children and youth between the ages of 12 to 17 years of age and their families who reside in Western Canada. They were recruited from formalized MHS waitlists from within the provincial child and youth MH care system, as well as through community agencies, public libraries, and social media. A total of 20 participants took part in this study. Children, youth, and family members from various backgrounds (including racialized and 2SLGTBQ+), residing in urban and rural communities,

were invited to take part in this narrative inquiry. Within our study, almost half self-identified as 2SLGBTQ+ and half self-identified as racialized, with one youth identifying as both racialized and gender diverse. Researchers met with participants over 18 months in a variety of home and community spaces. They had three to eight open-ended conversations ranging from one to three hours to discuss their MH experiences. Participants were invited to reflect upon their understandings of their mental wellbeing through their interactions with both informal and formal support in varied contexts, with different people and across time while they waited for formal care.

Narrative Accounts and Analysis

Transcribed research conversations and detailed field notes were used to compose narrative accounts for each participant. This was an iterative process where participants helped to shape their accounts, from deciding which aspects would be discussed to how their experiences could be represented. The narrative accounts detailed participants' MH experiences, underscoring their respective challenges and supports. Various coping strategies were also named in the accounts. To deepen our analysis, we used different kinds of poetry (Butler-Kisber, 2021; Lavoie, 2021a; Menon, 2020, 2021, 2024), creative nonfiction (Griffin, 2015; Lavoie, 2021a; Richardson, 1994; Sinner, 2013), and art-making by participants and researchers (Caine & Lavoie, 2015; Lavoie, 2021a, 2021b, 2022; Lavoie & Caine, 2022; Menon, 2019, 2020, 2021, 2024) to make participants' stories visible. Researcher reflections are often added to narrative inquiry texts to highlight ethical and relational commitments to participants and make transparent narrative thinking alongside participants' stories (Lavoie, 2021b, 2022). These methods help to amplify the voices of participants in ways which honor their experiences (Menon, 2020, 2021).

As we looked within and across accounts, we engaged in an intensive and recursive process of locating and identifying narrative threads (patterns that resonated across accounts). These included (a) waiting and witnessing; (b) system responsiveness; (c) mis/matches; and (d) resistance, agency, and silenced stories.

The use of different artful methods for each of their narrative accounts pays homage to their personal perspectives, attends to narrative threads in un/alike ways, and importantly, permits us to think *with* participants' stories (Morris, 2001). Jinny introduces Malek's stories of (un)wellness that emerged in their research conversations together through found poetry of Malek's words. The dynamic interplay of font, images, placement of words, and emphasis purposely shifts away from traditional or positivist understandings to create opportunities for insights that otherwise might be silenced and/or hidden. For Gillian's narrative account, based on conversations held with Margot, Michelle uses "the liminality at the core of creative nonfiction writing . . . to speak about liminality, refuse binary definitions, and creatively and relationally attend to . . . complex stories with care-filled attention" (Lavoie, 2021a, p. 95). Moreover, Michelle created artworks in response to Gillian's stories to think and imagine alongside her.

Coming Alongside Malek and Gillian

Introducing Malek

During the height of the pandemic, Malek, a South Asian youth of Muslim faith who uses the pronouns she/her, was a Grade 11 student attending high school. During this time, Malek was experiencing a great deal of stress which influenced her sense of wellbeing in complicated ways. Malek's words, through found poetry, helped us to metaphorically travel to her worlds (Lugones, 1987) of home, school, and community. Malek's stories of (un)wellness make visible some of the challenges and creative ways she dealt with these considerations in her ongoing MH journey. Striving to compose wellness amidst waiting, Malek frequently drew on her personal, familial, and cultural stories that shaped her identity as a Muslim young person.

Yeah, normally I'm stressed, but it was just like **really** bad. I was just **FREAKING** out every day. I was crying and I didn't know what I was gonna do and I was just **FREAKING** out, having outbursts.

I JUST THOUGHT MY LIFE WAS OVER…

Yeah.
Something small
Would be something **BIG**,
But it really would only be something small…
I would **FREAK** out at my parents,
And they were so confused on what was going on.

Fig. 1: Freaking Out

Family photographs graced the walls of the home of Malek and her mother, Anna. Nestled among the photos of Malek smiling at different ages were pictures of the family engaged in various activities together. Though the summer sun was shining brightly and filling the house with light, Malek's words brought a sense of gravity to our conversation, which up until this point had gently meandered. Jinny, who was the researcher, wondered at the type of stressors that Malek might have been facing that had brought about the change in her behavior, the "outbursts" that worried her parents. Malek and her mom were seated across from her on a comfy couch, and so Jinny was able to see Anna lightly touch Malek's hand as if to reassure her. This would become a familiar scene in their conversations.

In Malek's World of School

*I think it was because I was home **SO MUCH**!*
And, I wasn't going anywhere so...
*You're **JUST ALONE** with your thoughts*
And, then you just think about things...
It was hard because like you know,
You were just in class and then you gotta like go to the next one

Like the middle year was kind of like,
Sometimes you were in person,
Sometimes you were online,
Like it was very back and forth.

Fig. 2: School

Akin to other youth, Malek found that the pandemic aggravated certain feelings, including a profound feeling of isolation. This sense of isolation was compounded by Malek's worries about doing well in school. Always a high achiever, Malek constantly felt the pressure to maintain good marks at school. However, one day the pressures became too much for Malek and she had a "meltdown." These outward manifestations of her anxiety caused bodily harm to Malek. She ended up having to go to Emergency to deal with problems with her stomach. Malek was given medication but continued to grapple with pain. She was no longer able to eat what she wanted and had to be careful not to let stress build lest she experience intense stomach pain. She would later share that her physical problems also intensified her sense of unwellness. In her research notes, Jinny had written:

> *Malek, I hear the notes of pain in your voice.*
> *I see the way your eyes blink away tears.*
> *Your hands twist nervously in your lap.*
> *Your mouth turns upward, but the smile is missing.*

As Jinny listened to Malek speak, she wondered how being caught within this vicious cycle of poor physical health and impoverished mental health was shaping Malek's stories of identity. She further wondered how Malek's stories of wellbeing had shifted over time.

I was getting stressed out over silly things.

I remember I wouldn't go to the bathroom.

I'd be so scared to go to the bathroom at school.

I didn't want to get up and walk in front of people to go to the bathroom.

I would hold my pee and Mom would get so mad at me.

Or I'd bite my nails off...

Like, I remember I would be holding on by a thread.

I was in this really hard

math class...

And I was going every day,

It was early morning ...

I didn't really need it! It was really advanced, and **I was flunking.**

Every SINGLE test I had **I was flunking.**
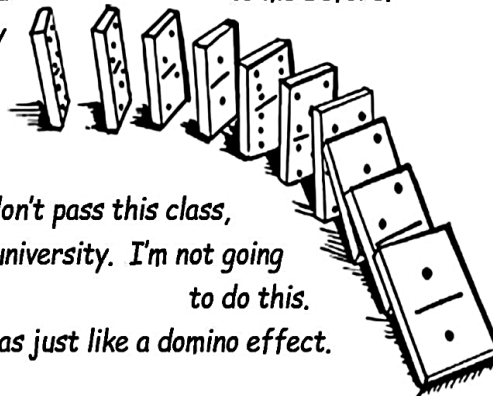
I got a tutor. It didn't help.

I was just flunking and that never happened   to me before.

Academically I think I was just, I really

wanted to be smart.

I didn't know how to ask for help. I didn't.

And I was like, if I don't pass this class,

If I don't do good, I'm not going to get into university. I'm not going

to do this.

It was just like a domino effect.

I just thought my life was over!

Fig. 3: Stress

In Malek's World of Home

Jinny was distressed to learn that while school was working on Malek in challenging ways, she was also contending with difficult circumstances at home. Malek's uncle (her mother's brother) had moved into their household of three. This abrupt transition was marked by tragedy. Unbeknownst to Malek at that time, her uncle had almost succeeded in committing suicide. After being discharged from the hospital, he could no longer live on his own. Since he had no other close relatives to care for him, Malek's parents had agreed for him to stay with them. Accustomed to a certain amount of privacy, Malek was uncomfortable with the situation at home and could not understand why her uncle was now living with them. Malek sensed that her parents were keeping things from her and that the uncle she knew and loved was not behaving in the ways she was used to. At the same time, Malek was feeling neglected by her parents. Living in a household where certain stories were being silenced and even actively kept from

her was taking an emotional toll on her. Though she had not been explicitly told by her parents that her uncle had attempted suicide, Malek became aware of the situation. Despite this knowledge, Malek adhered to the unvoiced hope of her parents to not talk overtly about her uncle's MH.

I didn't know what was going on.
Mom wouldn't tell me...
But I kind of knew,
I was putting it together,
But she didn't want to come out and say...
I think it took her like a week or 2,
And I was like,
"Yeah, I know."

Fig. 4: Puzzling It Out...

Jinny already knew from their previous conversations that MH was not easily spoken about within Malek's cultural and faith-based community. While Malek's mom, Anna, was more open about talking about Malek's own mental wellbeing, she did not feel the same way about her brother, Malek's uncle. Malek shared that stigma around MH still prevailed. Referring to her particular Muslim community, Malek disclosed: "They're very judgy. Like it's a secret but it's not really a secret." (In)directly Malek understood that stories of mental unwellness could not be shared within the family and larger community without fear of reprisal. Later that day, Jinny, reflecting on her wellness stories as a person of color (POC) alongside Malek's stories, wrote in her research notes:

> *Why do our communities, continue to punish us for having such challenges? Why must everything be swept under the proverbial rug? Why does our hurt, our pain need to be hidden? This pretense only serves to harm us. So many people in pain... Malek, her uncle, her parents... How can I not remember how my own uncle's suicide was not talked about? The loud silence continues to reverberate...*

It was during this time of disruption that Malek's life once more was shaped by trauma.

Malek's physical health and mental wellbeing were profoundly impacted by Malek's father's health. He was not in good health. When Malek was around two years of age, Malek's dad had a heart attack. In March of 2020, when COVID-19 was making itself more widely known, Malek's father had another heart attack. Malek had no memory of his first attack, only having been told stories about it. This time, however, Malek was present when he collapsed. While her mother and her uncle helped her dad downstairs for the waiting ambulance and emergency responders dressed in overalls and masks, Malek was on the phone with 911. Her father had turned to her and said, "Goodbye." Malek felt these heartfelt words uttered by her father meant that he was going to die.

Yeah, he said,
"GOODBYE."
He was like, "I love you,"
*Like if this is it,*
"I'm sorry."

goodbye

Fig. 5: Bye

Jinny listened with mounting sadness as Malek shared she hadn't been able to see her dad in the hospital due to the restrictions placed on visitors during the pandemic. She witnessed how even retelling this experience brought to the surface Malek's fears for her dad. Updates on his critical condition were difficult to obtain. Many days later, when her father was released from the hospital, Malek became overwhelmed with the feeling that he would leave her at any given moment and would urge him to become healthy. Jinny could hear the anger in Malek's voice as she related that her dad made light of his situation and repeatedly laughed off her concern.

Composing Counterstories of Wellbeing as a Muslim Youth

In their research conversations, Malek also spoke about how her wellbeing was very much intertwined with her experiences as a young person of color. Wanting to learn more about her experiences, Jinny asked her what she meant. Malek divulged that her stories of identity and identity-making were complicatedly connected with how she perceived herself and how she, in turn, was viewed by others. Parts of her childhood and schooling were painful for Malek. Malek had experienced discrimination because of the color of her skin and also, because of her faith.
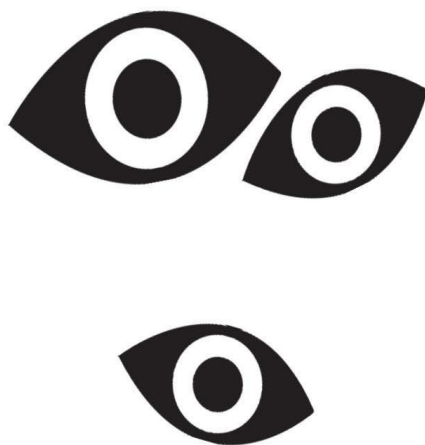
In my experience,
Being a person of colour,
Has impacted my life in many ways,
Some negative and some positive.
As a child, growing up as a POC [Person of Colour],
Opened my eyes in many ways,
specifically, how I was
DIFFERENT
from those around me
AND
those who I looked up to.

Fig. 6: Weight of Eyes

Malek recounted violent and hateful acts of being targeted in school and work. Indicating that intergenerational stories continued to reverberate in harmful ways, she also discussed experiences of her mother, Anna, being repeatedly thrown into a school locker by some older Islamophobic youth. Malek suggested that as a means of protecting herself from racism and other harm, she would try and act as inconspicuous as she could. At times this meant silencing her stories of heritage and faith and even denying them altogether. Jinny recognized that because she shared similar experiences, Malek and her mother felt safe retelling these hard stories.

I think that racism has affected me and my mental health,
Particularly growing up and causing me to have a sense of anxiety.
Starting at school, a lot of racism goes unnoticed—
Until you begin to understand the small ways it's been present.
From a very young age I never wanted to be called out
For being different

So I would lie and try and disassociate
As much as I could from my racial identity,
BUT as a result of this,
I've also gained a sense of anxiety,
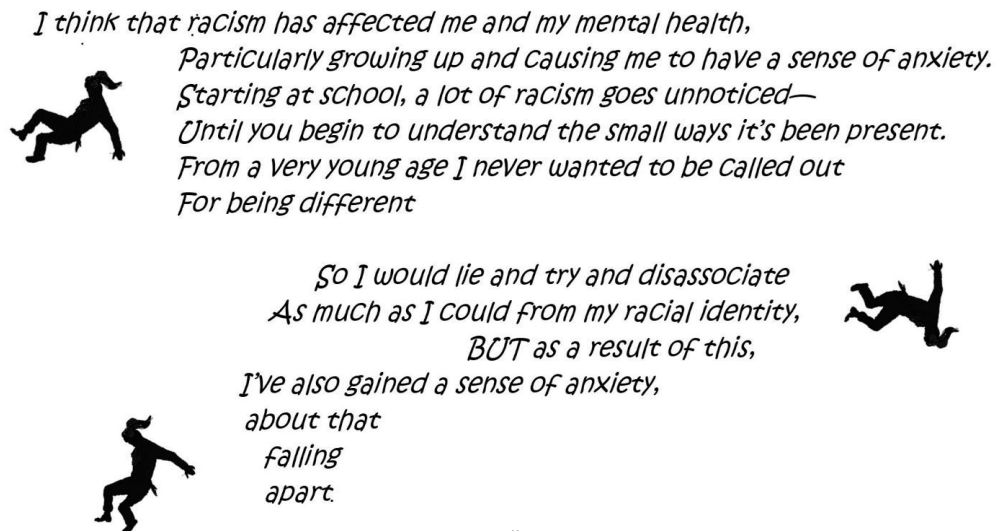about that
falling
apart.

Fig. 7: Falling Apart

Reflecting upon her understandings of her identity as a Muslim youth, Malek expressed distress over her sense of wellbeing. Caught within the borderlands of her various identities—her multiplicities of who she was, and who she was becoming—was causing Malek great conflict. Feeling isolated during the height of the pandemic and in the days after, Malek questioned her stories of self.

Along with this, due to the cultural standards,
that come along with my life,
the anxiety has only heightened,
as there's expectations that I feel I must meet,
and the idea of failure
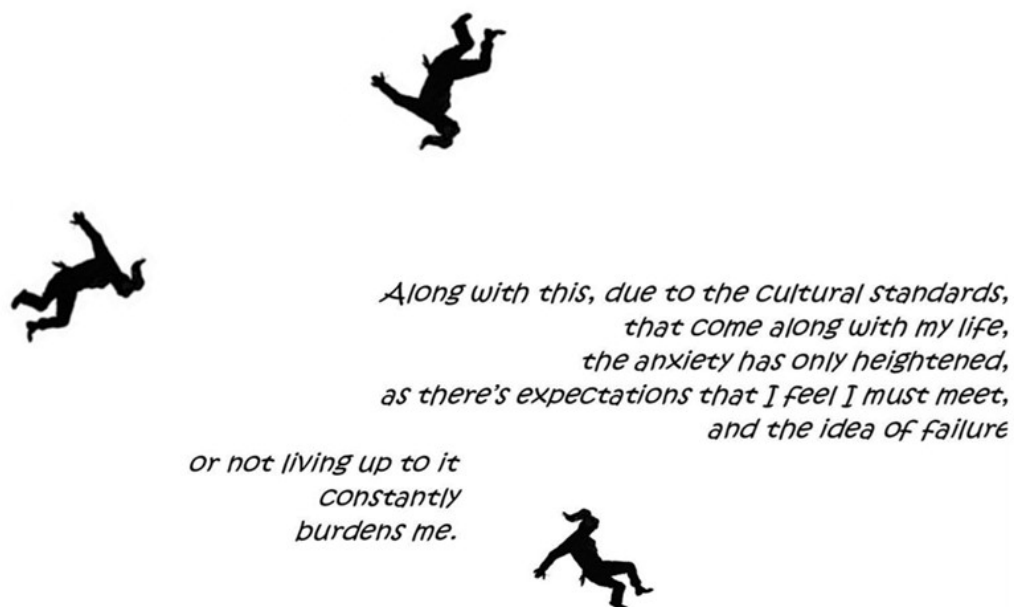
or not living up to it
constantly
burdens me.

Fig. 8: Burden

Part of Malek's MH journey entailed online therapy with a psychologist. While she and her mother would have preferred in-person visits, the persistent climate of the COVID-19 pandemic did not allow for such engagements. Subsequently, the need to find a therapist who would understand Malek and see her in her wholeness was vital. The stressful situation was exacerbated by the financial costs of finding affordable therapy. Malek's father could no longer work as a result of his heart attack and Malek's mom was struggling to hold down several jobs to make ends meet while caring for her husband, brother, and daughter. Through trial and error and long periods of waiting, Malek found someone whom she felt comfortable speaking with about her sense of wellness. Jinny learned that for Malek, talking to a professional was an important means for her to cope with her MH concerns. After the first session, Malek and the therapist met every two weeks. The time spent with someone that Malek connected with was helpful in rebuilding and recomposing her stories of herself. Malek described strategies she learned to help her cope with her ongoing stressors. For Malek, feeling heard enabled her to imagine and live counterstories of wellbeing. Lindemann (2020) illuminated that it is through our interactions with others that we build our stories of who we are. Our identities are held by others as theirs are held by us. When a holding is done well, it "supports an individual in the creation and maintenance of a personal identity that allows [them] to flourish personally and in [their] interactions with others" (p. 287) The problem arises when the holding is done poorly or in such a way that demoralizes a person and/or group of people. While Malek encountered poor holdings of her lived multiplicities, she also found sustaining stories of mental wellness in positive holdings.

Gillian's Counterstories of Being and Becoming a Trans Woman

Gillian is a 17-year-old transgender female youth. She is currently undergoing hormone therapy and hopes to access gender-affirming surgeries in the future, so her body better aligns with her gender identity. Gillian joined the research study, as she is experiencing anxiety and depression. She shared deep reflections about who she is and is becoming, as well as the impact that waiting for both mental health care and gender affirming care has had on her.

Gillian's Experiences at School

Looking back, Gillian's MH journey began when she was a child of eight or nine. Gillian's mom recalls her being a happy and outgoing child. She remembers Gillian unabashedly performing in school assemblies and taking up the microphone. Gillian's anxiety and depression began in Grade 4. Her teacher noticed that she was having trouble writing and reading. Later she was tested and moved to another school.

> I was sent to a school that's supposed to help kids with learning disabilities. It was a garbage school. I didn't make friends there. I didn't talk to anyone. I didn't learn how to socialize there. I don't think I learned anything there.

Reflecting on her school experiences Gillian notes what would have helped:

> *I've heard that school isn't necessarily to teach you information, but to teach you how to socialize. I basically can't do that at all. I'm not getting useful information and I'm not learning how to interact with my peers.*

Gillian's counterstories of school demonstrate that she knows what she needs to support her MH and wellbeing. In Junior High, a school counsellor helped her. He introduced Gillian to a couple of outgoing and bubbly girls. They pulled her into their friendship circle, and for a time things seemed better.

Gillian's Experiences with Therapy

In Grades 7 and 8, Gillian also saw a therapist she really liked. She was in therapy for two years. During this time, she was diagnosed with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), anxiety, and autism. She took medication for ADHD, but stopped when the medication made her feel unwell. After a hiatus from therapy, Gillian sought help again when coming out. Without support or counsel, Gillian tried to navigate her gender identity on her own.

> *Around 15, I began to think I was trans. But I was terrified to tell anyone. Terrified. I told my mom when I was 17 and she was like, "Oh shit, we have to stop puberty, like right away, and we'll figure it out from there." By that time, I was 17. I began going through puberty at 12, so by 17, I was well along.*

After waiting months, Gillian accessed YMH services. Her experience was heartbreaking.

> *I got in to see a therapist. And that was the worst! You can't pick who you see. So, I guess I understand that, but you need to have a choice in case you don't mesh. My therapist could not get over the fact that I am a trans woman. She misgendered me constantly…. He, he, he…. I quit, right. I just couldn't do that.*

Being misgendered by her therapist put Gillian in an extremely vulnerable position. After waiting months to see a therapist during COVID-19, Gillian would have to wait for several more months to see a different therapist, who may or may not be able to respond with appropriate and competent gender-affirming health care. Luckily, Gillian accessed gender-affirming care via a university study, through which she was given professional guidance and hormone therapy.

Turning to reflect on her school experiences, Gillian was not out, nor did she feel safe:

> *My anxiety transformed into panic attacks at school. I hung out in the men's bathroom for hours to have panic attacks. I was beginning to understand I was a trans woman, literally stuck in a man's body and in the men's bathroom. I came out to my parents, who were terrific, but I was not out at school and withdrew more and more.*

Gillian's mom confronted the school, once she found out what was going on. Gillian was upset about the whole situation.

> *Teachers got me a room other than the men's. But, they constantly asked if I was ready to go back to class. I'm not ready. I'm having a panic attack. Nobody addressed anything.*

Contemplating these experiences, Gillian suggested that counselors receive some MH training. During the transition from junior high to high school, Gillians found supportive peers. But there too, she found a different challenge. She explained:

> But there's this weird thing at school that I don't understand where a lot of people are like, "Oh yeah. I like being trans." And I don't understand it 'cause I hate it. Yeah, I accept it as a reality of my life. But I'm tired, I'm scared, and I have to take drugs to go through puberty … I'm not the standard for my school 'cause it's almost exclusively trans guys.

Transgender women often have a harder time passing in their chosen gender and taking up public space than trans men or their cisgender peers. What Gillian did not speak about is how transphobia, peppered with misogyny, sits in and increasingly pervades public spaces (Matsuzaka & Koch, 2019). Gillian spoke often of being misgendered and how hard that is. She knew that being constantly misgendered was taking a toll on her MH, and gender-affirming surgeries, along with appropriate therapy, would go a long way to support her identity and her wellbeing.

Gillian's Feelings About Her Gender Identity and Gender Expression

Gillian reflected on her feelings about her gender, body, and her plans for the future.

> And I do plan on getting face surgery when I'm older, like specifically to fix my nose and my forehead. Being an artist and being trans, I've learned how to draw faces and the differences between men and women's faces, all those little things, that everybody seems to be like, "Oh I don't know what you're talking about." I'm just like, trust me, it's a thing.

Fig. 9: Michelle Lavoie, *Gillian Dreaming Her Future Self*,
mixed media (graphite drawing and digital media), 2023, collection and copyright of the artist.

Michelle, who worked with the stories Gillian had shared with Margot, a researcher on the project, wrote:

> *Gillian, I created this image to respond to your stories and to dream alongside you and support your dreaming your future self into being. I, like you, hope there is a day when none of us feel the need to wear a mask to protect ourselves. I hope in future your beauty can just shine through in all the ways you wish.*

Margot noted during her time with Gillian that despite a lifting of masking requirements, Gillian kept her mask on. They engaged in a conversation about this:

> Margot: You're still wearing a mask all the time. Why is that?
>
> Gillian: 'Cause I hate my face.
>
> Margot: What do you hate about your face?
>
> Gillian: It's distinctly masculine. And this way I can deny it, like hard deny it. 'Cause I can be like, "No, I'm wearing a mask, you can't prove anything." And I usually wear my hair in my face too.
>
> Margot: Do you think you will ever stop wearing a mask?
>
> Gillian: I think I will eventually, but I don't know. I want face surgery pretty bad.

Michelle reflected on Gillian's stories:

> *Gillian's revelations remind me that counterstories are lived, as well as told (Lavoie, 2022). By donning a mask before going into public, Gillian is creating a safe(r) public space to live her gender identity, by literally denying others the opportunity to see her face and make gendered assumptions and expectations about her. Masking in public allows Gillian to perform gender her way, while disrupting questions about who she is and how she should be. By rebuffing opportunities to be perceived as other, she is protecting herself and her forming trans identity, at a time when public spaces are fraught and becoming more openly hostile to trans and queer people (Hobson, 2023; Skelton, 2023). She is also acting, when other actions are not yet possible.*

Gillian wished she received gender-affirming care earlier, noting it would have been easier for herself.

> *Everybody thought I was a little girl anyway, like whatever, it would've been better to start then 'cause then I started puberty. And I got real tall and my voice started getting deeper and my face changed and all the things. Now there's stuff that literally can't be undone that just happened.*

Gillian's counterstories highlight the necessity of gender-affirming health care. She understands these surgeries will support her MH and wellbeing. When asked what would she wish for, if she could take care of anything—would it be depression or social anxiety?—Gillian confided:

> *It's kinda everything, but I feel like the first thing I'd wanna deal with is the trans stuff 'cause once I got that outta the way, societally actually it might get rougher for a bit, but it would be better… It was horrible before, it's horrible now. It's definitely made the depression a lot worse.*

Michelle, speaking from her experience as a longtime 2SLGBTQ+ community member who has been misgendered and pejoratively named by strangers in public places countless times, reflected:

> *Although I'm not trans, I get it. It's hurtful to have someone say that you can't be who you are. When they tell you who you are and who you can become.*

Imagining Alongside Gillian and Malek

In coming closer to the youth, we were better able to attend to their stories of MH and waiting for MHS and how they were resisting monolithic constructions of their identities. Gillian's counterstories were both lived and told. Masking to protect herself from public scrutiny and refusing therapy that did not respect her gender identity are two examples of refusing heteronormative and cisgender assumptions. She also told counterstories about the challenges of becoming a trans woman. These are often still silent stories within 2SLGBTQ+ communities. For Malek, familial and intergenerational stories of impoverished wellbeing were enfolded in cultural and community narratives which relegated such stories as taboo. Malek's stories of MH, rooted in her (violent) experiences of school and faith, were inundated by dominant narratives that constructed her along opprobrious plotlines of racial identity. Being able to see herself as a strong Muslim young woman was integral to shaping her counterstories of wellness and navigating spaces of waiting.

Findings and Discussion

Participants recounted MH experiences in which their identity-making and how they perceived themselves were shaped by the arrogant perceptions of others (Lugones, 1987). We found that youths' experiences of absence of care or their experiences of inappropriate, culturally and/or gender-insensitive care, often meant youth and families were left to deal with continuous and emergent crises independently. Provided with little or no knowledge of whom they could turn to for support intensified their feelings of fear and distrust of the MH system. This, in turn, led to greater mistrust in MHS providers and the subsequent avoidance in seeking services. MH challenges, which may have been mitigated or prevented, were left to spiral into crises because appropriate care was inaccessible. Importantly, when children and youth did recount experiences of meaningful care (e.g., culturally affirming care, gender-affirming care), they felt that they were being heard and supported. Malek and Gillian's stories highlight the complexity and importance of such relational care.

Participants recounted MH experiences where their identity-making and how they perceived themselves were shaped by the arrogant perceptions of others (Lugones, 1987). Nevertheless, default and/or hegemonic constructions of race and gender were negotiated by participants throughout their MH journeys and their time of waiting for care. Interestingly, we found that youth and families actively fought to disrupt these dismissing, diminishing, and normalizing narratives through the stories they told and lived. One surprising finding in this study, which we have explicated in this paper, is how youth lived out stories and counterstories as a means of coping, self-reflection, and critical dialogue. Participants shared that discussing their MH in safe research spaces enabled them to affirm their sense of personhood and, concomitantly, their agency for their own wellbeing while also shedding light on issues of waiting.

Living Counterstories of MHS Within the Borderlands

In attending to stories of experience with seeking and waiting for care, we came closer to understanding how youth were resisting hegemonic constructions of their identity. These constructions served as oppressions on youth's attempts to overwrite their understandings of who they were in certain moments

and who they wished to become in their different worlds (Lugones, 1987) of school, home, and community. Eschewing deficient representations of their identities, Malek and Gillian enacted their own counterstories to the singular plotlines imposed upon them. Thinking with (Morris, 2001) Gillian and Malek's counterstories of becoming, we turn to Lugones' (1992) understanding of borderlands. For Lugones, borderlands are stuck places, where we are caught in a "state of intimate terror" (p. 32). There, we are stuck between two dualities—the self-oppressed by sociocultural norms and the self-becoming. These places intersect hegemonic narratives (e.g., cisgenderism and racism) with our lived experiences and embodied knowledges (Lugones,1992). While borderlands can be oppressing and silencing places, they are also potentially generative and can call forth resourceful adaptations, and creative solutions to thrive in relation (Lavoie, 2021a, b). In this manner, borderlands complicatedly serve as liminal spaces in which to dwell (un)easily (Menon, 2020). Transformation here is rooted in resistance, which "depend[s] on this creation of a new identity, a new world of sense, in the borders" (Lugones 1992, p. 33). Telling and living counterstories within familial, cultural, societal, and institutional narratives helped Malek to disrupt deficit and racist constructions of self and helped Gillian to disrupt hetero- and cis-normative assumptions.

Implications: Embodied Dreams and Forward Imaginings

Telling, retelling, and living their stories allowed Gillian and Malek to imagine their future selves by capturing hope in the present. For Malek, seeking and discovering stories of herself, which she could hold onto, that bespoke of love and care, invited her to craft and embody counterstories of wellness about who she is as a Muslim young person. Malek was learning to live in stories that healed her. For Gillian, telling and living counterstories seemed to enable her to create and hold open space for her present experience and future imaginings. Gillian engaged in relational learning alongside her telling and living counterstories both to disrupt hegemonic norms (e.g., cisnormativity) and actively embody her process of transforming her gender identity. Attending to their stories called us to envision meaningful MH interventions (e.g., where identity stories are not silenced, where racism and misgendering do not occur) and how spaces of waiting could be enacted differently.

Malek's and Gillian's counterstories served as touchstones of strength and wellbeing, often in the absence of other supports. Their experiences underscore the need for listening to the voices of youth and co-creating opportunities for developing agency. Heeding young people's stories of wellbeing helps to inform policy makers, YMH advocates, service providers, and program facilitators. Counterstories are not complaints; they are the lived experiences of youth. They might not fit comfortably with/in structures, norms and practices of waiting, but they showcase nuance and complexity, which are far too often missing in conversations on how to address YMH. We need to listen to youth, such as Gillian and Malek, to better shape meaningful MH interventions, including the spaces in which youth wait to access care. While the pandemic abruptly shifted the landscape of YMH supports, creating new problems and solutions, Malek and Gillian's experiences reveal longstanding gaps in services and offer lessons for future MH planning.

Acknowledgments

References

Alegría, M., O'Malley, I. S., DiMarzio, K., & Zhen-Duan, J. (2022). Framework for understanding and addressing racial and ethnic disparities in children's mental health. *Child and Adolescent Psychiatric Clinics of North America, 31*(2), 179–191. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chc.2021.11.001

Al Omari, O., Al Sabei, S., Al Rawajfah, O., Abu Sharour, L., Al-Hashmi, I., Al Qadire, M., & Khalaf, A. (2023). Prevalence and predictors of loneliness among youth during the time of COVID-19: A multinational study. *Journal of the American Psychiatric Nurses Association, 29*(3), 204–214.

Banks A. (2022). Black adolescent experiences with COVID-19 and mental health services utilization. *Journal of Racial and Ethnic Health Disparities, 9*(4), 1097–1105. https://doi.org/10.1007/s40615-021-01049-weferences

Basri, T., Radhakrishnan, K., & Rolin, D. (2022). Barriers to and facilitators of mental health help-seeking behaviors among South Asian American college students. *Journal of Psychosocial Nursing and Mental Health Services, 60*(7), 32–38. https://doi.org/10.3928/02793695-20211215-01

Bath, E. P. J., & Meza, J. I. (2023). Promoting racial/ethnic identity in child and adolescent mental health treatments. *Journal of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, 62*(8), 847–849. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jaac.2023.04.008

Bulloch, A., Zulyniak, S., Williams, J., Bajgai, J., Bhattarai, A., Dores, A., Lukmanji, L., Pham, T., Wiens, K., & Patten, S. (2021). Poor mental health during the COVID-19 pandemic: Effect modification by age. *The Canadian Journal of Psychiatry/La Revue Canadienne de Psychiatrie, 66*(9), 827–829. https://doi.org/10.1177/0706743721 994408.

Butler-Kisber, L. (2021). Poetic inquiry. In E. Fitzpatrick, & K. Fitzpatrick (Eds.), Poetry, method and education research: *Doing critical, decolonising and political inquiry* (pp.1–40). Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429202117

Caine, V., Clandinin, D. J., & Lessard, S. (2021). *Narrative inquiry: Philosophical roots* (pp. 12–13). Bloomsbury Publishing. Kindle Edition.

Caine, V., & Lavoie, M. (2015). Seeing through artistic practices: Collaborations between an artist and researcher. In D. Conrad and A. Sinner (Eds.), *Creating together: Participatory community-based and collaborative arts practices and scholarship across Canada* (pp. 179–189). Wilfred Laurier University Press.

Castro-Ramirez, F., Al-Suwaidi, M., Garcia, P., Rankin, O., Ricard, J. R., & Nock, M. K. (2021). Racism and poverty are barriers to the treatment of youth mental health concerns. *Journal of Clinical Child & Adolescent Psychology, 50*(4), 534–546. https://doi.org/10.1080/15374416.2021

Chaiton, M., Musani, I. Pullman, M., Logie, C. H. Abramovich, A., Grace, D., Schwartz, R., & Baskerville, B. (2021). Access to mental health and substance use resources for 2SLGBTQ+ youth during the COVID-19 pandemic. *International Journal Environmental Research and Public Health, 18*(21), 11315. https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph182111315

Children's Mental Health Ontario. (2020). *Kids can't wait: 2020 report on wait lists and wait times for child and youth mental health care in Ontario.* https://www.cmho.org/images/policy-papers/CMHO-Report-WaitTimes-2020.pdf.

Clandinin D. J. (2013) *Engaging in narrative inquiry*. Left Coast Press.

Clandinin, D. J. (2023). *Engaging in narrative inquiry*. Routledge.

Clandinin, D., & Caine, V. (2008). Narrative inquiry. In Lisa M. Given (Ed.), *The Sage Encyclopedia of Qualitative Research Methods* (pp. 542–545). SAGE Publications, Inc. https://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781412963909.n275

Clandinin, D. J., & Connelly, F. M. (2000). *Narrative inquiry: Experience and story in qualitative research*. Jossey-Bass.

Collin-Vézina, D., Fallon, B., & Caldwell, J. (2022). Children and youth mental health: Not all equal in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic. *Reference Module in Neuroscience and Biobehavioral Psychology*, 1–9. https://doi.org/10.1016/B978-0-323-9149-0.00072-2

Connelly, F. M., & Clandinin, D. J. (2006). Narrative inquiry. In J. L. Green, G. Camilli, P. Elmore (Eds.), *Handbook of complementary methods in education research* (3rd ed., pp. 477–487). Lawrence Erlbaum.

Eboigbe, L. I., Simon, C. B., Wang, Y. S., & Tyrell, F. A. (2023). The compounded effect of the dual pandemic on ethnic-racial minority adolescents' mental health and psychosocial well-being. *Current Opinion in Psychology, 52*(101626), 1–6. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.copsyc.2023.101626

Eichstedt, J. A., Turcotte, K., Golden, G., Arbuthnott, A. E., Chen, S., Collins, K., Mowat, S., & Reid, G. J. (2024). Waitlist management in child and adolescent mental health care: A scoping review, *Children and Youth Services Review*, 1–56, doi:10.1016/j.childyouth.2024.107529

Everest, L., Henderson, J., Dixon, M., Relihan, J., & Hawke. L. D. (2023) Experiences of gender-diverse youth during the COVID-19 pandemic in Canada: A longitudinal qualitative study. *PLoS ONE, 18*(11): e0294337. https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0294337

Fisher, C. B., Tao, X., & Yip, T. (2023). The effects of COVID-19 victimization distress and racial bias on mental health among AIAN, Asian, Black, and Latinx young adults. *Cultural Diversity & Ethnic Minority Psychology, 29*(2), 119–131. https://doi.org/10.1037/cdp0000539

Gajaria, A., Guzder, J., & Rasasingham, R. (2021). What's race got to do with it? A proposed framework to address racism's impacts on child and adolescent mental health in Canada. *Journal of the Canadian Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry/ Journal de l'Academie canadienne de psychiatrie de l'enfant et de l'adolescent, 30*(2), 131–137.

Griffin, R. (2015). Critical reception of "a special kind of fiction". In J. Ellis (Ed.), *Critical insights: American creative nonfiction* (pp. 15–28). Salem Press.

Hawke, L. D., Hayes, E., Darnay, K., & Henderson, J. (2021). Mental health among transgender and gender diverse youth: An exploration of effects during the COVID-19 pandemic. *Psychology Sexual Orientation and Gender Diversity, 8*(2),180–7. https://doi.org/10.1037/sgd0000467

Hawke, L. D., Szatmari, P., Cleverley, K., Courtney, D., Cheung, A., Voineskos, A. N., & Henderson, J. (2021). Youth in a pandemic: A longitudinal examination of youth mental health and substance use concerns during COVID-19. *BMJ Open, 11*(10), e049209. https://doi-bmjopen-2021-049209

Hilario, C., Louie-Poon, S., Taylor, M., Gill, G. K., & Kennedy, M. (2023). Racism in health services for adolescents: A scoping review. *International Journal of Social Determinants of Health and Health Services, 53*(3), 343–353. https://doi.org/10.1177/27551938231162560

Hobson, B. (2023, June 30). *Attacks on LGBTQ community largely influenced by events in the U.S.: Advocates: A look at Anti-LGBTQ events in the U.S. and Canada*. The Canadian Press.

Jarrett, B. A., Peitzmeier, S. M., Restar, A., Adamson, T., Howell, S., Baral, S., & Beckham, S. W. (2021). Gender-affirming care, mental health, and economic stability in the time of COVID-19: A multi-national, cross-sectional study of transgender and nonbinary people. *PLoS ONE, 15*(7), 1–17. https://doi/10.1371/journal.pone.0254215

Jones, B. A., Bowe, M., McNamara, N., Guerin, E., & Carter, T. (2023). Exploring the mental health experiences of young trans and gender diverse people during the Covid-19 pandemic. *International Journal of Transgender Health, 24(3)*, 292–304. https://doi.org/10.1080/26895269.2021.1890301PMID: 37519915

Kamali, M., Edwards, J., Anderson, L. N., Duku, E., & Georgiades, K. (2023). Social disparities in mental health service use among children and youth in Ontario: Evidence from a general, population-based survey. *Canadian Journal of Psychiatry, 68*(8), 596–604. https://doi-/10.1177/07067437221144630

Kia, H., Rutherford, L., Jackson, R., Grigorovich, A., Ricote, C. L., Scheim, A. I., & Bauer, G. R. (2022). Impacts of COVID-19 on trans and non-binary people in Canada: A qualitative analysis of responses to a national survey. *BMC Public Health, 22*(1), 1–11. https://doi.org/10.1186/s12889-022-13684-x PMID:35780082

Kneale, D., & Bécares, L. (2021) Discrimination as a predictor of poor mental health among LGBTQ+ people during the COVID-19 pandemic: Cross-sectional analysis of the online Queerantine study. *BMJ Open, 11*: e049405. https://doi.org/10.1136/bmjopen-2021-049405

Laurencin, C. T., & McClinton, A. (2020). The COVID-19 pandemic: A call to action to identify and address racial and ethnic disparities. *Journal of Racial and Ethnic Health Disparities 7*(3), 398–402. https://doi.org/10.1007/s40615-020-00756-0

Lavoie, M. M. (2021a). Mentorship as co-created relational learning alongside Trans and Non-binary young adults: A visual narrative inquiry [doctoral dissertation, University of Alberta]. University of Alberta Education and Research Archive (ERA). https://doi.org/10.7939/r3-wbx7-a898

Lavoie, M. M. (2021b). Walking alongside: Relational research spaces in visual narrative inquiry. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods, 20*(1), 1–13. https://doi.org/10.1177/16094069211053107

Lavoie, M. M. (2022). Trans young adults' building communities: Narratives and counternarratives of identity and world making. *LEARNing Landscapes, 15*(1), 215–232. https://doi.org/10.36510/learnland.v15i1.1072

Lavoie, M. M., & Caine, V. (2022). Contemplating framing: Unpacking the possibilities of printmaking in Narrative Inquiry. *International Review of Qualitative Research, 15*(1), 42-61. https://doi.org/10.1177/1940844721991088

Liu, S. R., Davis, E. P., Palma, A. M., Stern, H. S., Sandman, C. A., & Glynn, L. M. (2023). Experiences of COVID-19-related racism and impact on depression trajectories among racially/ethnically minoritized adolescents. *The Journal of Adolescent health: Official Publication of the Society for Adolescent Medicine, 72*(6), 885–891. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jadohealth.2022.12.020

Lindemann, H. (2020). Counter the counterstory: Narrative approaches to narratives. *Journal of Ethics and Social Philosophy, 17*(3), 286–297. https://doi.org/10.26556/jesp.v17i3.1172

Lips, A. (2021). The situation of young people at home during COVID-19 pandemic. *Childhood Vulnerability 3*, 61–78. https://doi.org/10.1007/s41255-021-00014-3

Lugones, M. (1992). On borderlands/la frontera: An interpretive essay. *Hypatia, 7*(4), 31–37. https://doi.org:10.1111/j.1527-2001.1992.tb00715.x

Lugones, M. (1987). Playfulness, "world"-travelling, and loving perception. *Hypatia, 2*(2), 3–19.

Marietta, J.T., Holdsworth, L., & Gamage, J. (2023). Youth and family mental health in Southern Alberta, Canada. In C. Fourali, J. French (Eds.), *The Palgrave Encyclopedia of Social Marketing*. Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-14449-4_188-1

Markoulakis R, Khalid M, Da Silva A, Kodeeswaran S, Sinyor M, & Cheung A. (2022). Cross-sectional survey of the mental health and addictions effects, service impacts and care needs of children, youth and families during the COVID-19 pandemic: The COVID-19 MASC study protocol. *BMJ Open, 12*(10): e066190. https://doi.org/10.1136/bmjopen-2022-066190

Matsuzaka, S., & Koch, D. E. (2019). Trans feminine sexual violence experiences: The intersection of transphobia and misogyny. *Affilia, 34*(1), 28–47. https://doi.org/10.1177/0886109918790929

Menon, J. (2019). A story cloth of curriculum making: Narratively s-t-i-t-c-h-i-n-g understandings through arts-informed work. In B. W. Andrews (Ed.), *Perspectives on Arts Education Research in Canada, Vol. I: Surveying the Landscape.* (pp. 92–110) Brill.

Menon, J. (2020). An artful narrative inquiry into the curriculum-making experiences of South Asian girls, mothers, and teachers in Canada. [Doctoral dissertation, University of Alberta]. University of Alberta Education and Research Archive (ERA). https://era.library.ualberta.ca/items/d645fd12-68c1-45a9-a7b6-6116224bcc69

Menon, J. (2021). Brown bodies, brown worlds: Creating cadence and crafting karma. *Journal of Motherhood Initiative for Research and Community Involvement, 12*(2). Fall 2021. https://doi.org/jarm.journals.yorku.ca/index.php/jarm/article/view/40631

Menon, J. (2024). The crooked path: Storied moments in my doctoral journey. In C. Parker-Shandal. *First-Gen Docs: Personal, political, and intellectual perspectives from the first-generation doctoral experience* (pp. 27–48). Brill. https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004690479_002

Morris, D. B. (2001). Narrative, ethics, and pain: Thinking with stories. In R. Charon & M. Montello (Eds.), *Stories matter: The role of narrative in medical ethics* (pp. 196–218). Routledge.

Nearchou, F., Flinn, C., Niland, R., Subramaniam, S. S., & Hennessy, E. (2020). Exploring the impacts of COVID-19 on mental health outcomes in children and adolescents: A systematic review. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health, 17*(22): 8479, 1–19. https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph17228479

Nguyen, L. H., Anyane-Yeboa, A., Klaser, K., Merino, J., Drew, D. A., Ma, W., Mehta, R. S., Kim, D. Y., Warner, E. T., Joshi, A. D., Graham, M. S., Sudre, C. H., Thompson, E. J., May, A., Hu, C., Jørgensen, S., Selvachandran, S., Berry, S. E., David, S. P., Martinez, M. E., … Chan, A. T. (2022). The mental health burden of racial and ethnic minorities during the COVID-19 pandemic. *PloS ONE, 17*(8), 1–12. https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0271661

Quinn, K. G., Harris, M., Sherrod, D., Hunt, B. R., Jacobs, J., Valencia, J., & Walsh, J. L. (2023). The COVID-19, racism, and violence syndemic: Evidence from a qualitative study with Black residents of Chicago. *SSM - Qualitative research in health, 3*, 100218. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ssmqr.2023.100218

Ravens-Sieberer, U., Kaman, A., Erhart, M., Otto, C., Devine, J., Löffler, C., Hurrelmann, K., Bullinger, M., Barkmann, C., Siegel, N. A., Simon, A. M., Wieler, L. H., Schlack, R., & Hölling, H. (2023). Quality of life and mental health in children and adolescents during the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic: Results of a two-wave nationwide population-based study. *European Child & Adolescent Psychiatry, 32*(4), 575–588. https://doi.org/10.1007/s00787-021-01889-1

Rees, S. N., Crowe, M., & Harris, S. (2021). The lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender communities' mental health care needs and experiences of mental health services: An integrative review of qualitative studies. *Journal of Psychiatric and Mental Health Nursing, 28*(4), 578–589. https://doi.org/10.1111/jpm.12720

Reiriz, M., Donoso-González, M., Rodríguez-Expósito, B., Uceda, S., & Beltrán-Velasco, A. I. (2023). Impact of COVID-19 confinement on mental health in youth and vulnerable populations: An extensive narrative review. *Sustainability, 15*(4), 3087. https://doi.org/10.3390/su15043087

Richardson, L. (1994). Writing: A method of inquiry. In N. K. Denzin & Y. Lincoln (Eds.), *Handbook of qualitative research* (pp. 516–529). Thousand Oaks.

Salami, B., Denga, B., Taylor, R., Ajayi, N., Jackson, M., Asefaw, M., & Salma, J. (2021). Access to mental health for Black youths in Alberta. L'accès des jeunes Noirs de l'Alberta aux services en santé mentale. *Health promotion and chronic disease prevention in Canada: Research, policy and practice, 41*(9), 245–253. https://doi.org/10.24095/hpcdp.41.9.01

Salerno, J.P. & Boekeloo, B. O. (2022). LGBTQ identity-related victimization during COVID-19 is associated with moderate to severe psychological distress among young adults. *LGBT Health, 9*, 303–12. https://doi.org/10.1089/lgbt.2021.0280 PMID: 35537518

Salerno, J. P., Devadas, J., Pease, M., Nketia, B., & Fish, J. N. (2020). Sexual and gender minority stress amid the COVID-19 pandemic: Implications for LGBTQ young persons' mental health and well-being. *Public Health Reports,135*(6), 721–727. https://doi.org/10.1177/0033354920954511

Sheikhan, N. Y., Kuluski, K., McKee, S., Hiebert, M., & Hawke, L. D. (2023). Exploring the impact of engagement in mental health and substance use research: A scoping review and thematic analysis. *Health Expectations, 26*(5), 1806–1819. https://doi.org/10.1111/hex.13779

Sinner, A. (2013). *Unfolding the unexpectedness of uncertainty: Creative nonfiction and the lives of becoming teachers.* Brill Sense.

Skelton, W. J. (2023, June 30). University of Waterloo stabbings: We all need to teach "gender issues" to protect our communities from hate. The conversation.com. *Handbook of qualitative research* (pp. 516–529). SAGE.

Taylor, A. B., Chan, A., Hall, S. L., Saewyc, E. M., & the Canadian Trans & Non-binary Youth Health Survey Research Group (2020). *Being safe, being me 2019: Results of the Canadian trans and non-binary youth health survey.* Stigma and Resilience Among Vulnerable Youth Centre, University of British Columbia. http://www.saravyc.ubc.ca/

Town, R., Hayes, D., Fonagy, P., & Stapley, E. (2022). A qualitative investigation of LGBTQ+ young people's experiences and perceptions of self-managing their mental health. *European Child & Adolescent Psychiatry, 31*(9), 1441–1454.

Veale, J. F., Watson, R. J., Peter, T., & Saewyc, E. M. (2017). The mental health of Canadian transgender youth compared with the Canadian population. *Journal of Adolescent Health, 60*(1), 44–49. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jadohealth.2016.09.014

Williams, J. C., Ball, M., Roscoe, N., Harowitz, J., Hobbs, R. J., Raman, H. N., Seltzer, M. K., Vo, L. C., Cagande, C. C., Alexander-Bloch, A. F., Glahn, D. C., & Morrow, L. (2023). Widening racial disparities during COVID-19 telemedicine transition: A study of child mental health services at two large children's hospitals. *Journal of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, 62*(4), 447–456. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jaac.2022.07.848

Jinny Menon, PhD, is a Postdoctoral Fellow in MacEwan University's Faculty of Nursing and an Adjunct Professor at Concordia University of Edmonton's Faculty of Education. Her doctoral research alongside South Asian families and teachers disrupts taken-for-granted understandings of curriculum-making, difference, and identity through artful means. For this antiracist work, Jinny received the University of Alberta's (2021) Outstanding Teacher Education Doctoral Dissertation Award and the CASWE Graduate Award (2020). Drawing upon her experiences as an educator-learner, she uses artful means and narrative inquiry for co-creating sites of possibility and hope.

Michelle Lavoie, PhD MFA, is a Postdoctoral Fellow at MacEwan University's Faculty of Nursing researching strategies to support youth mental health. Her previous postdoctoral research (2021-22) supported the creation and guided the development of the Edmonton Queer History Project website. Michelle's SSHRC-funded doctoral research focused on finding new ways to mentor trans and nonbinary youth through art practice and was awarded The Governor General's Academic Gold Medal (2021). Her work as a narrative inquirer and art-based researcher ties visual and narrative ways of thinking and knowing to mobilize knowledge to support vulnerable communities, inform inclusive policies, and educate publics.

Vera Caine, PhD, RN, is a Professor in the School of Nursing at the University of Victoria. The focus of her work is on the development of narrative inquiry as a methodology and phenomena under study. Her latest book (2022) was co-authored with D. Jean Clandinin and Sean Lessard and is entitled "Narrative Inquiry: Philosophical Roots."

Margot Jackson is an Associate Professor with the Department of Human Health and Science in the Faculty of Nursing at MacEwan University in Edmonton, Alberta, Canada. Her program of research focuses on child and youth mental health as well as marginalized populations. She has a strong background in qualitative methods, particularly narrative research and participatory action research.

Holly Symonds Brown, PhD, RN, is an Assistant Professor in the Faculty of Nursing at the University of Alberta. Holly's work is focused on community care infrastructures shaping everyday life of people who are marginalized due to cognitive or mental health differences.

An Early Childhood Educator's Learning Story in the Time of COVID

Frances E. Moore and Peter Gouzouasis

Abstract

While it began with a variety of narrative representations of writing personal experiences, since Ellis (2004; Bochner & Ellis, 2016), evocative, performative, and creative nonfiction forms of storying have coalesced to form contemporary autoethnography. For over a decade, Canadian arts education researchers have blazed trails to employ those forms of autoethnography as "learning stories" (Carr, 2001; Carr & Lee, 2012) to study teaching and learning practices in a variety of school and community educational contexts. Learning stories enable educators to reveal teaching and learning experiences that cannot be represented by, or communicated through, other research forms. The present inquiry, which begins with the story of an early childhood educator, is rooted in the fusion of evocative autoethnography and learning stories with arts-based research, particularly a/r/tography.

Prelude

In early 2020, I (Frances) was preparing to write a thesis that examined arts-based practices and aesthetic experiences in the early childhood classroom. Eagerly anticipating the third term with my pre-kindergarten class, I wondered about the epiphanies/epiphonies (Gouzouasis, 2013) that would present themselves and transform my understandings around the relationships that can be developed between young children and the arts. I knew that I would be swimming in the "unknown," but at that time I didn't understand how rapidly my life as a teacher would change. As my advisor and I were reworking the final details of our behavioral review application, we found ourselves encapsulated by a looming cloud of uncertainty. How would we be able to take photographs of us and the children in movement and music activities? How could we take photos of their creative schoolwork? Where would we create a documentation wall of our upcoming classroom project? Will the review board question the very essence of creative, nonfiction infused autoethnography as research? With each passing day, the world became increasingly dark until I could no longer see. Mired in defeat, we accepted a reality that I would no longer be able to write a thesis as planned. It was simply not possible to teach in my classroom or bear witness to the children's artmaking processes. Thanks to a supportive writing climate and encouraging creative process, I did not abandon my studies. Rather than begin with a formal research proposal outline, I was encouraged to write stories of everything I was experiencing—even if the plots strayed from the paths I'd planned in our initial conversations and thesis proposal drafts. Using autoethnography as a form of living inquiry in a/r/tography (Gouzouasis & Lee, 2002; de Cosson, 2003), and inspired by the a/r/tographic notion of (s)p(l)ace, the following story is how I began to write my teaching experiences in the pandemic storm called COVID-19.

Manic Monday Musings: A Fragment of Teaching From an Apartment Dwelling

"What's the time, Matt?"

I'm uncertain whether or not he heard me, so I deliver a piercing holler this time.

"Matt," I holler from the bedroom, "what time is it?"

"Just wait a second, France."

My throat feels raw now, as if it has been scoured with sandpaper.

"It's 8:04."

"Are you serious? Oh my God," I shriek.

"Um…yeah," Matt replies sarcastically, "aren't you supposed to be on camera at 8:30?"

I regret looking in the mirror this morning. My wrinkly dress, mismatched socks, and wiry mane of hair are artifacts of the frenzy that inhabits me and never leaves. I have every good reason to evict this tenant that continues to dwell in me for forgetting to pay rent. But I fear that it has infiltrated my system like a parasite.

Frenzied Frances.

Frenetic Frances.

Frantic Frances.

The alliterations seem to roll off the tongue. I really don't have time for playful word games. Forget changing my dress.

The way Matt says "on camera" makes it sound as if I'm about to be interviewed on a talk show, and a team of stylists are about to primp me with hair curlers and fake lashes. I could sip on soda water with lemon. But instead, being "on camera" is pretty well the new normal. It's the only way to see other humans beyond the walls of this cramped apartment. The only way to socialize with friends and to have meetings with colleagues. I never imagined myself in a situation in which it was the only way to teach.

"Frances, what are you doing? Don't you need to get going?" Matt calls. His face appears genuinely perplexed, accompanied with raised eyebrows and a slight grin.

"Yeah, I know," I snap defensively. "It's just that," my head begins to hang like a limp noodle, "I kind of lost track of time."

My lips tremble. I really did lose track of time. I spent the past hour organizing my essential oil collection. This is a perfect example of how I experience time strangely. Often a single moment feels as though it's dragging on for eternities. My boredom feels so laborsome that my joints ache. Then there are the times when hours glide by as if they are minutes and I realize that I am struggling to remember the events of the past hour. It's as if moments of my life are waiting for me in a mysterious vortex. I yearn to open that capsule of moments full of times that I was too dazed to truly experience.

Matt widens his eyes and claps his hands swiftly, as if he is shooing away a flock of seagulls.

"Well get a move on, then," he exclaims.

I have no idea where I left the phonics book that I need for my lesson. Darting hurriedly around the living room is not accomplishing anything more than making me look like a panicked mouse. The rug is littered with a flurry of paper clips, hole punch confetti, and receipts I'd been meaning to submit for reimbursement. Finally, I spy the corner of that blasted phonics book. It's hard to miss with its flamboyant red, blue, and yellow colors. Nothing cries "school" louder than a garish arrangement of complementary colors. "The ghastly trio" as I like to call it. I suppose it's in vogue these days for teachers to revolt against the conventional image of "elementary education" as we tend to go for the "natural" look in favor of the notorious apple motif that seemed to dominate my own kindergarten days. Strangely enough, the hokey phonics book has outlived my purge of kitschy bulletin borders.

I always teach phonics on Mondays, ushering in a fresh week with a new letter to learn. This week it is "W." A typical Monday morning would be spent at the carpet with 16 sets of eager little eyes ready to be introduced to a letter as if they were meeting a new friend. But this is not a typical Monday morning.

"Dammit," I mutter under my breath.

I realize that the ever-important phonics CD is probably still in the CD player at school. Here I am, a frazzled teacher starting her workday in her own chaotic apartment. My heart desperately longs for my classroom. It's also a hectic space at times, but a chaos that just feels more… right.

In contrast to my apartment, I envisage my classroom in its ghostly form. It's dark there. The lights are off and it's absolutely silent. Typically, it would be brimming with life, echoing with the sounds of hysterical giggles, squeaky shoes shuffling, and boxes of pencil crayons being dropped. Even so, little traces of life remain: unfinished art projects, paint stains on the floor, and rock collections sitting in now vacant cubbies. It is a snapshot of stillness. A moment frozen in time. My apartment is not my classroom but I'm doing my best to make it work. I don't have the CD I need, but I don't even have a CD player to begin with. YouTube it is. If I can find the darn TV remote.

"Matt," I anxiously shout, "What is the time now?"

He walks over to the kitchen and glances at the oven. I could have easily done that myself. What is becoming of me? He looks at me softly and pauses.

"It's 8:11 now."

His voice is steady and calm, such a far cry from how I'm feeling right now. My body is carrying the weight of all the words I cannot seem to articulate, the ones that remain frozen at the tip of my tongue. I close my eyes and line up my palms and fingers as if I am praying.

"Thank you."

My vision is blurred as I open my eyes. The tears that I'd been holding back are beginning to crawl out of hiding. A single tear flows down my cheek, landing on my wrinkled dress. With a deep exhale, my eyes are fully open and my vision is clear. Matt and I are gazing at each other. In fact, I presume that he's had his eye fixed on me for a few seconds at least.

"Well," I begin to chuckle, "8:11 isn't that bad."

Matt's gaze hasn't yet broken.

"You've got this," he mouths to me.

"I've got this," I think to myself.

This pandemic virus cannot steal my love of teaching and my commitment to these children. Suddenly, my facial muscles relax as I find myself untensing my shoulders. For the first time this morning, I crack a smile. All will be well, and I know it. I know it because I'm excited to see the children this morning.

And I can see the remote control sandwiched between the sofa cushions.

Exegesis

Teaching and Learning in the Age of COVID-19

Since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, a handful of Canadian scholars and educators (e.g., Whitley et al., 2021; EdCan NETWORK, 2023) have published works that speak to the intersectional impact of this trauma, including the intricacies that teachers continue to live with as they adapt their teaching practices through this precarious *kairós*.[1]

As the global threat of COVID-19 intensified, educators transitioned to distance-oriented models of teaching as they endeavored to continue engaging their students in learning (Allen et al., 2020). Along with adapting the delivery of curricular content, given the fear and uncertainty many of them experienced and continue to live with, responding to the social and emotional needs of the children and their families became an especially tremendous responsibility. As schools closed their facilities, families experienced significant disruptions as they found themselves making swift transitions in their work arrangements. All the while, they took on uniquely active roles in their child's education.

Each individual educator's experience of teaching in the time of COVID-19 has been impacted by a constellation of dynamics influencing their personal and professional lives. Some teachers faced a substantial burden when it came to meeting the needs of their students and families, many suddenly found themselves parenting their own young children on the job, while others carried the accompanying anxiety, or in some cases, the grief of witnessing their own family members contract COVID-19, and posing dangers to health and wellbeing of families and friends. These stressors were amplified further by factors such as overcrowded or unstable housing and limited employment flexibility, largely faced by vulnerable communities (Fisher et al., 2020). In the midst of these chaotic times, educators such as elementary school teacher Elizabeth Watson (2020) reflected on their hardships and accomplishments as they adapted their pedagogical practices to meet the needs of their students. For Watson, this included an illustration of how she strived to meet her students' social and emotional needs as well as the restriction in her power to alleviate the systemic barriers families faced in accessing this new model of education.

The Pedagogical Role of Digital Technology in Early Childhood Education

The transition to virtual teaching as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic required creativity and adaptability from teachers of all grade and age levels. Nevertheless, our experiences led us to believe that tensions around the role of digital technology were especially apparent in early childhood classrooms. The absence of a physical gathering (s)p(l)ace (de Cosson, 2003)[2] in which children can tangibly engage their bodies and senses invited early childhood educators to carefully consider the affordances and constraints of using digital technology in educating such young people.

When it comes to defining the role of technology in ECE practice, the field is far from reaching a consensus. That perspective is manifested in a study by Zabaterio et al. (2018), where they reported a diverse range in beliefs and assumptions among Australian early childhood educators around the pedagogical role of digital technology in their practices. Conversely, in advocating for the possibilities afforded through technology, McClure (2018) writes about the "collaborative space in-between adults and children" (p. 159) that inherently exists within the intergenerational use of digital media. She suggests moving beyond the narrow focus on limiting screen time toward considering the aesthetic potentials and future possibilities in supporting technology as a form of "playscape." For instance, digital playscapes offer prospects that are no longer limited by physicality, inviting novel modes of expression and engagement. Rather than segregating children from the process of culture, McClure further imagines digital technology as a facilitator in which young children can explore, create, and interact as citizens.

The necessity to close school facilities as a result of COVID-19 presented a quandary as to how to emulate a (s)p(l)ace for teachers and students to gather in a virtual sense. While there are obvious differences between cyber and geographic (s)p(l)aces, Nichols and Nixon (2013) argue that virtual spaces are constructed using strategies of representation, manipulated through human actors, and embedded in "other" social spaces. For instance, Han (2015, 2017) discusses the opportunities afforded through using virtual worlds to support educational learning environments, noting how they provide a platform "…in which young people can live, play, create, and learn" (Han, 2015, p. 2). Virtual worlds, which are networked environments visually presented to foster social interaction (Han, 2017), provide an illustration of how digital technologies can be accessed beyond a vessel for delivery toward a dynamic learning space (Han, 2015). Considering such dialogue speaking to the sociology of space and place, "cyberspaces" need not be precisely defined or categorized but instead considered in light of their complexities. In tracing possibilities of rhizomatic connections, de Cosson's (2003) discussion around (s)p(l)ace raises the consideration of how we can exist *in-between* the plasmatic boundaries of spaces, places (also see Gouzouasis & Leggo, 2016; Gouzouasis & Yanko, in press), and the process-oriented, shifting temporality of *kairós*.

A/r/tography and Autoethnography

> At heart is the issue of identity; bound up in the autoethnographic process is the exploration of identity, by asking questions such as: Who am I? Who was I then? What am I about? (Nutbrown, 2011, p. 235)

Through the recollections of our lived experiences engaging with research and teaching during a global pandemic, and drawing from the notion of autoethnography as pedagogy (Banks & Banks, 2000), we strive to ignite a process of reflexivity through writing and rewriting the self (see Gouzouasis, 2020; 2024). We endeavor to capture the teacher's learning, through visual and textual representations, with the intent of fostering an emotionally evocative cultural analysis (Heyward & Fitzpatrick, 2015; Bochner & Ellis, 2016) that speaks to the practice of an early childhood educator in the midst of a global pandemic.

It is worthwhile to clarify that while the discussion of pandemic experiences took place in the context of my (Frances's) teaching practice, the experiences were not centered on the learning of individual students.[3] Gouzouasis (2019; 2024) aptly suggests a differentiation between pedagogy, which focuses on the learning of the child, from *enìlikogy*. Enìlikogy derives from the Greek word "enìlikos" meaning *adult*, and in turn focuses on adult learning and teaching processes. Similar to how teaching practices such as pedagogical narration (Pacini-Ketchabaw et al., 2015) and learning stories (Carr, 2001) enable us to analyze student processes of learning, storying a teacher's own processes of teaching and learning serves to invite a reflexive inquiry in an *enìlikogical* sense of becoming an artist-researcher-teacher.

Our work is grounded in arts-based educational research, specifically a/r/tography—a hybrid form of action research used by artist-researcher-teachers—and the a/r/tographic rendering of *living inquiry* that is rooted in autoethnography (see de Cosson, 2003; Gouzouasis, 2006).[4] It deviates from more traditional formats of inquiry where researchers propose a specific question with the intention of finding a single, objective answer or truth. Maxine Greene (1994) suggested a paradigmatic shift from extracting a singular truth toward an openness to the "experiential and organic" (p. 504) is afforded through dialogue that expands the notion of what constitutes "culture." With that background in mind, we are inspired to approach our research as inquiry, and we acknowledge that the process itself may generate more questions or unexpected directions (Sinner et al., 2006). We elucidate our integration of features of a/r/tography into this methodology as a practice-based approach to inquiry (Irwin et al., 2006; Leggo et al., 2011; Gouzouasis & Leggo, 2016; Gouzouasis, 2018). Understanding a/r/tography through a hybrid lens, our intention is to weave multiple forms of inquiry, enabling us to embrace interconnected identities of an artist, researcher, and teacher. Moreover, we endeavor to experience and extend the possibility of embodiment and engagement with the world through publicizing our living practices in evocative ways (Springgay et al., 2005; Sinner et al., 2006). Understanding that a/r/tography is not a formulaic-based methodology, our objective is not to report decontextualized knowledge in the form of "results" but instead to express new understandings through aesthetic, embodied encounters (Leggo et al., 2011).

> A/r/tography allows for divergent, transformative artistic knowing to move through our research as a living practice. (de Cosson, 2003, p. xi)

Moreover, aligning our work with a/r/tographic practices means that there is a significant focus on research "process" rather than emphasizing the "product" in isolation (Gouzouasis, 2008). We approached the research process with the assumption that Frances was in a process of "becoming" an artist, teacher, and researcher (Barney, 2019; Gouzouasis et al., 2013), further reflecting Hannigan's (2012) sentiment that art will become a part of oneself when the process of artmaking is consciously situated within the context of place and study of self. As Hofsess (2013) suggests, arts-based research

facilitates and inspires multiplicities of engagement, inviting expansion across a diversity of vantage points. Fittingly, Eisner (2009) asserts that the open-ended prospects of art require the exercise of imagination, and further argues that, "imagination is the source of new possibilities" (p. 9). Furthermore, understanding arts-based research as rhizomatic and relational augments the possibilities for multiple entry points and understandings (Irwin et al. 2006).

Fig. 1: The gift of your wingspan

As we engaged in a/r/tographic practices to support our teaching and research, we revisited and reflexively wrote about the processes of artmaking that took place over a journey of teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic.[5] The process of writing *The Gift of Your Wingspan* (represented in Figure 1) provides one example of how poetic inquiry nourished and energized Frances through play. She initially became intrigued by the practice of found poetry, from Richardson's (1992a, 1992b) practice of reconfiguring words that she had reaped from sociological interviews and crafting them into poetic prose.[6] When used as a research approach, poetry has the propensity to "express both affect and context, or affect *in* context" (Furman et al., 2007, p. 303), inviting readers to relate to the text on emotional, spiritual, and existential levels.

Butler-Kisber's (2002, 2008) nuanced discussion of collage inquiry also ignited our curiosity around playing with space, shape, and texture to experiment and create a montage. Fusing the inspirational ideas of Butler-Kisber with Richardson's emphasis on word play, we started the a/r/tographic process with a focus on extracting words from existing texts. However, instead of drawing from participant interviews or scholarly literature (see Prendergast, 2006; 2009), I (Frances) selected words from brochures and

magazines scoured from my living space. Gathering and assembling the existing words, instead generating them myself, involved a surprising degree of patience and openness. I observed how the challenging aspects of the incubation period of poetic play can exercise our imaginative thinking and transform the manner in which teachers and learners interact with their surroundings. Cutting, tearing, layering, and gluing assorted materials against the words invigorated my creative sensibilities in how I endeavored to construct a multi-textural expression of feeling and experience through reforming found visual fragments (Butler-Kisber, 2008).

Both visually and textually, we interpret this poem as a love letter to herself (Frances), caringly and lovingly prompting her to walk mindfully and write boldly. As this poetic collage interacts with an audience, we have faith that its participatory nature will invite readers to be inspired in however may be most meaningful for them. In particular, we hope that fellow early childhood educators find strength in their wingspan and grant themselves permission to speak, write, and play with courage.

Not only do we understand poetic inquiry as a means of reducing our experiences and capturing the depth of human existence in a "compressed, consumable form" (Furman, 2006, p. 561, p. 565), we also imagine it as a way of living and being in the world (Leggo, 2005; Wiebe et al., 2016). Leggo (2005) ruminates about what it means to live poetically, as he calls upon educators to enter an existence centered on listening to and with all of their beings: engaging their spirits, hearts, imaginations, emotions, bodies, and minds.

Codetta[7]

While it seems difficult to fully describe, a multifaceted journey during a challenging timespan in virtual and actual (s)p(l)aces within a short story and brief interpretive essay, we hope to inspirit the sense that a/r/tographic research is about process. Those processes do not reflect a linear model of investigation (or writing) seen in more traditional qualitative studies. Because a/r/tographic practices are rhizomatic in nature, a researcher's experiences and inspirations drift through an ebb and flow beyond the realms of chronological time. We interpret that sense of floating timelessness as a form of *kairós*, and may elucidate our experiences akin to that suggested by Irwin et al. (2006):

> Situations may seem to occur chronologically, but they are rhizomatic. Learning/creating/inquiring in, from, through, and with situations occurs in the in-between spaces—those spaces that make connections that are often unanticipated. As a result, their timing cannot be planned either. Situations are complex, spatial, and temporal processes that reach beyond linear and binary ways of understanding the world. (p. 72)

In embracing a broadly interpreted notion of *kairós*, we are admittedly neither detached nor objective in this research (Gouzouasis & Ryu, 2015). We elected to use autoethnographically styled living inquiry as a vehicle for conceptualizing and analyzing the experiences (i.e., "empirical evidence") of an early childhood educator.[8] In recognizing our own worldviews, social influences, and biases, we concur with Ellis et al. (2011) that autoethnography opens a wider lens on the world for both the researcher and the readers. Furthermore, autoethnography enables researchers to become increasingly open to living in

the moment and aware of the existential intricacies that live within their practice (Gouzouasis & Yanko, 2018; 2019).

> We need more stories and autoethnographic research in the early years field as one way to provide such stories which not only stand powerfully alone but also resonate with the challenges of policy and practice—voicing realities beyond the reach of other methodologies. (Henderson, 2019, p. 41)

Historically, early childhood school educators have not had sufficient opportunities to share their stories in public spheres. Thus, many tales of their struggles, tensions, wonderings, and triumphs remain untold (Elliot & Gonzales-Mena, 2007). Henceforth, Elliot and Gonzales-Mena fervently advocate for educators to publicize their stories to ignite a culture of dialogue and practitioner research in the field. Moreover, the presence of emotion, dreamwork, and sensory experience in our stories serves to enable discussions around the complexities and embodied nature of ECE practice (Henderson, 2018).

Upholding the belief that human beings lead storied lives, Yanko and Yap (2020) advocate for practices that nurture rather than hinder the *livingness* that resides in one's experiences. As such, we use autoethnography as a means of reflexively storying lived experiences in ways that cultivate their livingness to create an a/r/tographic living inquiry. Although our storied experiences uniquely speak to particular worldviews, experiences, and existences, they also serve to provide a situated commentary that readers can vicariously engage with and relate to their own practices, unraveling what it means for them within a greater cultural context. From that perspective, we align with Denzin's (2014) belief that every life story fits within a multiplicity of other stories that could be told (within the "ethos" or cultural context), as well as the notion that ethos is one's character of being in relation to self and others (Gouzouasis, 2018). We contend that the publicization of these storied experiences offer an opportunity to critically examine the life of an educator and how it intersects with the stories of other early childhood educators who creatively learned and taught during the pandemic.

Notes

1. The concept of *kairós* may be interpreted as related to temporality (i.e., a temporal notion of space-place or (s)p(l)ace, in relation to the fleeting nature of time as concept). Also see Kohan and Weber (2020) for a discussion of the phenomenological experience of time and the relationships of *aion*, *chrónos*, and *kairós*. Weber urges us to consider time in terms of *aion*—an infinite, elusive, non-objective sense of time—rather than *chrónos*—a prescribed, structured, measured sense of time. Another interpretation of *kairós* exists in rhetoric (see Pender, 2003, p. 96) in the discussion of expressive discourse—the personal writing of experiences in *rhetorical situations*. Rhetorical situations are defined as any form of communication used to modify the perspectives of others. For us, all the visual and performing arts provide many rich forms of communication. There are many other applications of *kairós* in philosophy and developmental psychology.

2. The concept of (s)p(l)ace is a hybrid term that implies object, area, and positionality at the same time (de Cosson, 2003), as well as the relational concepts that emerge when we inter*lace* space and place in a metatheoretical relational manner (Overton, 2003; Gouzouasis, 2006, 2007). It is a metonymic word in that one (space) implies the other (place), one cannot exist without the other, and something new emerges from the relative-relativity of conceptual coaction. As Gouzouasis and Leggo (2016) explain, it is akin to how the notion of liminality "relates to (s)p(l)ace that exists at the surface of a lake, the "mist and midst" that is neither lake nor air, but the consubstantiation of both to create something that is holistic and new" (p. 454).

3. In April 2020, Peter was also forced to rapidly pivot and attempt to teach a graduate course in autoethnography via a new, foreign, online course platform at UBC. He too had never taught virtual lectures and directed virtual discussion groups in "chat rooms" and writing activities. Frances enrolled in the course, and perhaps the most positive outcome to emerge from that COVID-inflicted experience was a proto-draft, "Monday Rush Hour," of the story included herein.

4. The "livingness" of *living* inquiry may be achieved through making art (de Cosson, 2003), actively doing research (i.e., a/r/tography as a form of action research; see Gouzouasis et al., 2013), teaching, and writing (i.e., "graphy")—particularly in creative nonfiction stories where multiple voices help a story come alive (i.e., seem lifelike).

5. Peter wrote two chapters for an edited book in 2020, that are discussed in Gouzouasis (2020).

6. Frances was inspired by readings and experimentation time (6 hours) with a variety of forms of poetic inquiry in a course that Peter led in January–early March 2020 (Writing strategies: Forms of inquiry) with guest presentations by Monica Prendergast and Kendrick James, followed by the autoethnography graduate course that Peter led. An early lineage of poetic inquiry can be traced to autoethnography of the 1990s-early 2000s through the many research papers of Rich Furman (e.g., Furman, 2006; Furman et al., 2007) and Laurel Richardson (e.g., 1992a, 1992b, 1993).

7. We intentionally employ the term *codetta* to describe how we reconnect thematic concepts developed in the formative process of writing our creative nonfiction story and exegesis.

8. Ellis (2004) describes autoethnography as the practice of an "artful, poetic and empathic social science" (p. 30) supported by the joining of self (*auto*), culture (*ethno*) and writing (*graphy*). For expanded, etymologically based notions of autoethnography, see Gouzouasis and Ryu (2015), pp. 401–404 and p. 414; and Gouzouasis and Wiebe (2018), pp. 1–4.

References

A/r/tography: An invitation to think through art making, researching, teaching and learning. (2024). https://artography.edcp.educ.ubc.ca

Allen, J., Rowan, L., & Singh, P. (2020). Teaching and teacher education in the time of COVID-19. *Asia-Pacific Journal of Teacher Education, 48*(3), 233–236. https://doi.org/10.1080/1359866X.2020.1752051

Banks, S. P., & Banks, A. (2000). Reading "the critical life": Autoethnography as pedagogy. *Communication Education, 49*(3), 233–238.

Barney, D. T. (2019). A/r/tography as a pedagogical strategy: Entering somewhere in the middle of becoming an artist. *International Journal of Art and Design Education, 38*(3), 618–626. https://doi.org/10.1111/jade.12247

Bochner, A. P., & Ellis, C. (2016). *Evocative autoethnography: Writing lives and telling stories*. Routledge.

Butler-Kisber, L. (2002). Artful portrayals in qualitative inquiry: The road to found poetry and beyond. *The Alberta Article of Educational Research, XLVIII*(3), 229–239.

Butler-Kisber, L. (2008). Collage as inquiry. In J. G. Knowles & A.L. Cole (Eds.), *Handbook of the arts in qualitative research: Perspectives, methodologies, examples, and issues* (pp. 265–276). Sage.

Carr, M. (2001). *Assessment in early childhood settings: Learning stories*. Paul Chapman.

Carr, M., & Lee, W. (2012). Learning stories: Constructing learner identities in early education. Sage.

de Cosson, A. (2003). *(Re)searching sculpted a/r/tography: (Re)learning subverted-knowing through aporetic praxis*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of British Columbia, Vancouver, Canada.

Denzin, N.K. (2014). *Interpretive autoethnography* (2nd ed.). SAGE Publications, Inc.

EdCan NETWORK. (2023). The impact of COVID-19 on education. *Education Canada, 63*(2). https://www.edcan.ca/magazine/covid-19-impact-on-education/

Eisner, E. (2009). The Lowenfeld lecture 2008: What can education learn from the arts? *Art Education, 62*(2), 6–9.

Elliot, E., & Gonzales-Mena, J. (2007*). We're not robots: The voices of daycare providers*. State University of New York Press.

Ellis, C. (2004). *The ethnographic I: A methodological novel about autoethnography*. AltaMira Press.

Ellis, C., Adams, T. E., & Bochner, A.P. (2011). Autoethnography: An overview. *Historical Social Research, 36*(4), 273–290.

Fisher, J., Languilare, J., Lawthom, R., Niuwenheus, R., Petts, R.J., Runswick-Cole, K., & Yerkes, M. A., (2020). Community, work, and family in the times of COVID-19. *Community, Work, & Family, 23*(3), 247–252.

Furman, R. (2006). Poetic forms and structures in qualitative health research. *Qualitative Health Research, 16(*4), 560–566.

Furman, R., Langer, C. L., Davis, C. C., Gallardo, H. P., & Kulkarni, S. (2007). Expressive research and reflective poetry as qualitative inquiry: a study of adolescent identity. *Qualitative Research, 7*(3), 301–315.

Gouzouasis, P. (2006). A/r/t/ography in music research: A reunification of musician, researcher, and teacher. *The Arts and Learning Research Journal, 22*(1), 23–42. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/237067528_Music_in_an_artgraphic_tonality

Gouzouasis, P. (2007). Music in an a/r/tographic tonality. *Journal for the Association for Curriculum Studies, 5*(2), 33–59.

Gouzouasis, P. (2008). Toccata on assessment, validity, and interpretation. In S. Springgay, R.L. Irwin, P. Gouzouasis, & C. Leggo (Eds.), *Being with a/r/tography* (pp. 219–230). SensePublishers.

Gouzouasis, P. (2013). The metaphor of tonality in artography. *The UNESCO Observatory E-Journal, 3*(2). https://www.unescoejournal.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/3-2-10-GOUZOUASIS_PAPER.pdf

Gouzouasis, P. (2018). A/r/tographic inquiry in a new tonality: The relationality of music and poetry. In P. Leavy (Ed.), *Handbook of arts-based research* (pp. 233-246). Guilford Press.

Gouzouasis, P. (2019). What are ABER and CAP? *Action, Criticism and Theory for Music Education, 18*(2), 1–24. https://doi.org/10.22176/act18.2.1

Gouzouasis, P. (2020). *Autoethnography: A reflexive research process*. Keynote address at *The autoethnography of composition & the composition of autoethnography conference*. College of Arts School of Culture & Creative Arts, University of Glasgow. Glasgow, Scotland (June 17, 2020).

Gouzouasis, P. (2024). A (disruptive) walking enìlikogy (Feel the beat and you'll find the truth). In A. Baldus, R. L. Irwin, N. Y. S. Lee, D. T. Barney, J.M. Ursino, & Z. Valiary (Eds.), *Pedagogical propositions: Playful walking with a/r/tography [Book Two: Essays],* (pp. 142–157). InSEA Publications.

Gouzouasis, P., Irwin, R. L, Miles, E., & Gordon, A. (2013). Commitments to a community of artistic inquiry: Becoming pedagogical through a/r/tography in teacher education. *International Journal of Education & the Arts, 14*(1). http://www.ijea.org/v14n1/

Gouzouasis, P., & Lee, K. V. (2002). Do you hear what I hear? Musicians composing the truth. *Teacher Education Quarterly, 29*(4), 125–141.

Gouzouasis, P., & Leggo, C. (2016). Performative research in music and poetry: A pedagogy of listening. In P. Burnard, L. Mackinlay & K. Powell (Eds.), *The Routledge International Handbook of Intercultural Arts Research* (pp. 454–466). Taylor & Francis/Routledge.

Gouzouasis, P., & Ryu, J. Y. (2015). A pedagogical tale from the piano studio: autoethnography in early childhood music education research. *Music Education Research, 17*(4), 397–420. https://doi.org/10.1080/14613808.2014.972924.

Gouzouasis, P., & Yanko, M. (in press). A/r/tographic living inquiry: Designing music classroom (s)p(l)ace to support student identity. *International Handbook of A/r/tography*.

Gouzouasis, P., & Yanko, M. (2018). Reggio's arpeggio: Becoming pedagogical through autoethnography. In W. Parnell & J.M. Iorio (Eds.), *Meaning making in early childhood research: Pedagogies and the personal* (pp. 56–70). Routledge.

Gouzouasis, P., & Yanko, M. (2019). Learning stories and Reggio Emilia inspired documentation: Formative methods of assessment for the elementary school music classroom In P.P. Trifonas & S. Jagger, *Handbook of Cultural Studies and Education* (pp. 486–582). Routledge.

Gouzouasis, P., & Wiebe, S. (2018). A tetradic analysis of "auto" and Lebenswelt in currere. *Journal of Curriculum Theorizing, 32*(3), 13–25. http://journal.jctonline.org/index.php/jct/article/view/655/pdf

Greene, M. (1994). Carpe diem: The arts and school restructuring. *Teachers College Record, 95*(4), 465–506.

Han, H-C. (2015). Teaching visual learning through virtual world: Why do we need a virtual world for art education? *Art Education, 68*(6), 22–27.

Han, H-C. (2017). iSee: Teaching visual learning in an organic virtual learning environment. *International Journal of Education and the Arts, 18*(38), http://www.ijea.org/v18n38/.

Hannigan, S. (2012). A/r/tography and place ontology. *Visual Arts Research, 38*(2), 85–96.

Henderson, E. (2018). *Autoethnography in early childhood education and care: Narrating the heart of practice.* Routledge.

Henderson, E. (2019). Researching practitioner experiences through autoethnography: embodying social policy, exploring emotional landscapes. *Journal of Early Childhood Research, 17*(1), 32–43.

Heyward, P., & Fitzpatrick, E. (2015). Speaking to the ghost: An autoethnographic journey of Elwyn. *Educational Philosophy and Theory, 48*, 697–710.

Hofsess, B. (2013). Methodology in the afterglow. *International Journal of Education & the Arts, 14*(1.8). http://www.ijea.org/v14si1/.

Irwin, R. L, Beer, R., Springgay, S., Grauer, K., Xiong, G., & Bickel, B. (2006). The rhizomatic relations of a/r/tography. *Studies in Art Education, 48*(1), 70-88. https://opensiuc.lib.siu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1004&context=ad_pubs

Kohan, W. O., & Weber, B. (Eds.) (2020). *Thinking, childhood, and time: Contemporary perspectives on the politics of education*. Lexington.

Leggo, C. (2005). The heart of pedagogy: on poetic knowing and living. *Teachers and Teaching, 11*(5), 439–455. https://doi.org/10.1080/13450600500238436

Leggo, C., Sinner, A. E., Irwin, R. L, Pantaleo, K., Gouzouasis, P., & Grauer, K. (2011). Lingering in liminal space: a/r/tography as living inquiry in a language arts classroom. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education, 24*(2), 239–256. https://doi.org/10.1080/09518391003641908

McClure, M. (2018). Beyond screen time: Aesthetics of digital playscapes for young children. In C.M. Schulte & C.M. Thompson (Eds.), *Communities of practice: Art, play, and aesthetics in early childhood* (pp. 153–163). Springer International Publishing.

Nichols, S., & Nixon, H. (2013). Space, places and early childhood literacy. In J. Larson & J. Marsh (Eds.), *The SAGE handbook of early childhood literacy* (pp. 279–294). SAGE Publications Ltd.

Nutbrown, C. (2011). A box of childhood: Small stories at the roots of a career. *International Journal of Early Years Education, 19*(3-4), 233–248.

Overton, W. F. (2003). Development across the life span: Philosophy, concepts, theory. In R. M. Lerner, M A. Easterbrooks, & J. Mistry (Eds.) *Comprehensive Handbook of Psychology: Developmental Psychology (Volume 6),* (pp. 13–42). Editor-in-Chief: Irving B. Weiner. Wiley.

Pacini-Ketchabaw, V., Nxumulo, F., Kocher, L., Elliot, E., & Sanchez, A. (2015). *Journeys: Reconceptualizing early childhood practices through pedagogical narration.* University of Toronto Press.

Pender, K. (2003). "Kairos" and the subject of expressive discourse. *Composition Studies, 31*(2), 91–106.

Prendergast, M. (2006). Found poetry as literature review: Research poems on audience and performance. *Qualitative Inquiry, 12*(2), 369–388.

Prendergast, M. (2009). "Poem is what?" Poetic inquiry in qualitative social science research. *International Review of Qualitative Research, 1*(4), 541–568.

Prendergast, M., Gouzouasis, P., Leggo, C., & Irwin, R. (2009). A Haiku suite: The importance of music making in the lives of secondary students. *Music Education Research, 11*(3), 303–317.

Richardson, L. (1992a). Hide and seek. *Sociological Theory, 10*(1), 251–254.

Richardson, L. (1992b). The consequences of poetic representation. In. C. Ellis & M. G. Flaherty (Eds.), *Investigating subjectivity: Research on lived experience* (pp. 125–173). Sage.

Richardson, L. (1993). Poetics, dramatics, and transgressive validity: The case of the skipped line. *Sociological Quarterly, 34*(4), 695–710.

Sinner, A., Leggo, C., Irwin, R. L, Gouzouasis, P., & Grauer, K. (2006). Arts based educational research dissertations: Reviewing the practices of new scholars. *Canadian Journal of Education, 29*(4), 1223–1270.

Springgay, S., Irwin, R. L., & Kind, S. W. (2005). A/r/tography as living inquiry through art and text. *Qualitative Inquiry, 11*(6), 897–912.

Watson, E. (2020). One teacher's experience during the COVID-19 school closures. *Childhood Education, 96*(3), 42–45. https://doi.org/10.1080/00094056.2020.1766658

Wiebe, S., Guiney Yallop, J.J., Fels, L., Snowber, C., Richardson, P., Honien, N., S.L., Faulkner, Dark, K., & Leggo, C. (2016). Poetic inquiry of and on play. *Canadian Journal of Education, 39*(3), 1–26.

Whitley J., Beauchamp, M. H., & Brown, C. (2021). The impact of COVID-19 on the learning and achievement of vulnerable Canadian children and youth. *FACETS, 6*, 1693–1713. https://doi.org/10.1139/facets-2021-0096

Yanko, M., & Yap, P. (2020). A symbiotic link between music, movement, and social emotional learning: Mindful learning in early learners. *Learning Landscapes, 13*(1), 249–264.

Yanko, M., & Gouzouasis, P. (2019). The timbre of a rainbow: Storied forms of assessment and the aesthetic experiences of young learners. In P.P. Trifonas (Ed.), *Handbook of Theory and Research in Cultural Studies and Education* (pp. 1–18). Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-01426-1_61-1

Zabaterio, J., Straker, L., Mantilla, A., Edwards, S., & Danby, S. (2018). Young children and digital technology: Australian early childhood education and care sector adults' perspectives. *Australasian Journal of Early Childhood, 43*(2), 14–22.

Frances Moore is an early childhood educator with an arts-based practice. Her educational and artistic interests include using a/r/tography, poetic inquiry, and autoethnography to develop ECE praxis. She is passionate about integrating her experience with textile arts into her everyday encounters.

Peter Gouzouasis is a Professor in the Department of Curriculum and Pedagogy at the University of British Columbia. His research focuses on lifespan music learning employing both qualitative and quantitative research approaches. He recently edited the first journal issue dedicated to arts-based educational research in music education and led a research team (Guhn, Emerson, & Gouzouasis, 2020) in publishing a paper that has been extensively downloaded in the field of educational research. His latest edited book (2024), *The Routledge Companion to Music, Autoethnography, and Reflexivity,* features the a/r/tographic works of 21 international musician authors.

Reflexive Inquiry's Impact on Mindful Teaching for Student Wellbeing

Melissa Morris

Abstract

This inquiry investigates the effects of trauma on students by analyzing personal experiences and teaching methods. Through the lens of autoethnography, a nonfictional storytelling approach, I reflect on my learning journey to identify compassionate and mindful teaching practices, aiming to foster a trauma-sensitive classroom environment. Emphasizing the significance of teachers sharing their stories through autoethnography, this exploration contributes valuable insights to the ongoing discourse on trauma-informed pedagogy for student wellbeing.

The Role of Reflexive Inquiry in Mindful Teaching Practices

Untangling myself from grief has taken an incredible amount of time and has compelled me to embark on a journey of profound introspection—a voyage that has brought me to the precipice of vulnerability and resilience. Even now I feel my hand resist writing these words, knowing the pain it might bring. In the aftermath of the heart-wrenching loss of my son, I find solace in the act of writing, weaving together personal narrative with scholarly inquiry to illuminate the transformative power of trauma-sensitive education within the realm of teaching and learning. I have experienced loneliness in my grief, and I do not assume that I am the only person who has ever felt this way; however, feeling connected to others brings a level of comfort.

Originating from the seminal works of ethnographer Ellis (1993, 1995, 2004) and Matthews (2019), autoethnography is a methodological approach that melds the personal with the cultural, foregrounding the researcher's subjective experiences as a means of understanding broader sociocultural phenomena. Ellis (2004) posits autoethnography as a reflexive praxis, wherein the researcher's introspection serves as both data and analysis, shedding light on the intricate interplay between self and society. Autoethnography allows for a window into the soul, with a level of vulnerability and open-endedness (Matthews, 2019), which differs from traditional ethnography. Building on this foundation, scholars such as Bochner and Ellis (2016) advocate for autoethnography as a tool for transformative storytelling, capable of fostering empathy, insight, and social change.

Simultaneously, the burgeoning field of trauma-sensitive education has garnered attention for its compassionate and holistic approach to teaching and learning. Rooted in the seminal work of van der Kolk (2014) and Herman (1992), trauma-sensitive education posits that adverse experiences, such as grief and loss, can profoundly impact an individual's cognitive, emotional, and behavioral functioning. Drawing upon principles of trauma theory and interpersonal neurobiology, trauma-sensitive educators

aim to create safe and nurturing learning environments that promote healing, resilience, and academic success for all students (Stokes, 2022). Central to this narrative is the concept of reflexive praxis in teaching—a pedagogical approach that encourages educators to critically examine their own beliefs, biases, and practices in relation to their teaching context (Lyle, 2023).

Inspired by the works of Lyle (2023) and Lyle and Caissie (2021), reflexive praxis invites educators to engage in a continuous process of self-reflection, dialogue, and action, fostering a deeper understanding of themselves and their students. Lyle (2023) and Lyle and Caissie (2021) suggest that teaching and learning are extremely personal experiences.

In this paper, I employ autoethnography as a methodological framework to explore the intersections of grief, trauma-sensitive education, and reflexive praxis in my journey as an educator. Drawing upon the rich tapestry of personal experience, I illuminate how the loss of my son has shaped my pedagogical philosophy, instilling within me a commitment to compassion, empathy, and authenticity in the classroom. Through the lens of storytelling, I chronicle my evolution as an educator, grappling with the complexities of trauma, loss, and resilience, and the profound impact they have had on my teaching practice.

By situating my narrative within the broader theoretical frameworks of autoethnography, trauma-sensitive education, and reflexive praxis, I aim to contribute to ongoing conversations within the field of education, advocating for a more compassionate and inclusive approach to teaching and learning. Through the sharing of my lived experiences and insights, I hope to inspire fellow educators to embark on their own journey of self-discovery and transformation, fostering healing, connection, and growth within their classrooms and communities.

Story I: Self Shattered Into Fragments

> *Time stood still in the early morning. There was a chill in the December air and a blue-gray haze of the morning light was beginning to fill my room. My soul felt it first. Something was wrong and as I crossed the room to the crib where my son was sleeping the feeling intensified. My legs started to collapse as life slowly started to drain from my body. A mother knows, a mother senses long before anyone else and when I placed my hand on his cold back, I knew he had left his body forever.*

Life after the death was extremely disorienting and I found myself living in the space between dreaming and awakeness. My body and limbs were numb and somehow my aching heart kept beating in my chest. I had to break days into moments to survive and my life became a feat of survival. I felt like I barely had the strength to live let alone continue to be a mother and a partner. How would I ever return to teaching especially since I had lost all sense of self. I found myself daily crumpled in a ball, paralyzed by grief, and completely consumed by despair.

> *Heading to the office today because they need me to confirm and sign that my son is dead. Can they see me? I'm not even part of this universe. Can they feel me? I am walking with my soul bare. I can't pretend to be the "teacher" like I ought to. I am scared they can feel the pain as it radiates from my soul. I am not the professional anymore like they had trained me to be. I walk forward through the tunnels to the office, I have to complete the papers so they know my son is dead. Isn't my word enough? I hear their words as they explain all the details, but I don't know*

what they are saying. I can't understand these words, my mind won't work. Someone puts a pen in my hand, and I move the ink across the page. Are you satisfied yet? I cannot move. I try to walk but I fall to the floor. I do not want to die, but I can't live here either. My husband helps me walk out of the office. I am floating above my body. I am unarmored and I know now that everyone sees the real me.

Reflection on "Self-Shattered Into Fragments"

Teaching is a vocation that has caused me tremendous joy and pain. Each day I put my heart and soul into my students, leaving me vulnerable to the interpretations of my students and society. I draw on the research of Palmer (2017), who suggests that teaching holds a mirror to a soul, and at times this has been a painful process. For as much as joy, I have faced extreme disappointment in the lack of humanness that exists in a school. I have always believed in a system that combined academics with spirit, soul, and intuition (Lyle 2023; Matthews, 2019). My experience has been cold and institutional, filled with rules and policies that go against creating a classroom community that allows for the growth of compassionate and critical thinking. As the research of Palmer (2017) suggests, teaching emerges from one's inwardness, so how can I teach when my identity has been shattered into fragments of myself?

I am drawn to the work of Lyle (2018, 2023), Bochner and Ellis (2016), and Matthews (2019), who use reflexive inquiry and critical thinking partnered with narrative as a methodological framework to understand the complexities of teaching and learning. It takes vulnerability to deep dive using reflexive inquiry to share narratives that truly examine assumptions and beliefs from lived experiences. From taking this internal position and critically examining oneself, we can use this research as a form of transformational change in the field of education. I use this approach to analyze the stories that I share.

Losing a child is often considered the worst thing that can happen to a parent. Society defines successful motherhood by keeping your children alive. For years after the loss of my son, I felt like a failure and questioned everything that I did. I could no longer trust my judgment because I had been so tremendously wrong and paid the ultimate price. Although grief responses vary from person to person, I was stuck in my emotions and suffered from increased depression and anxiety (Matthews, 2019). I had lost the meaning of my life, and I was not able to concentrate or be productive in any capacity. I often found myself in a state of disassociation, living between reality and dreams. I left my teaching position and focused on my living son, trying to get through each painful moment of the day.

When I think of my students, I realize that I saw my own struggles reflected. My students remind me that we are all on our own pathway and that trauma can shake our sense of *self* and how we connect to the world, to the point where we feel lost. My experiences helped me to become more attentive to my students' needs, and that vulnerability allows for deeper connection.

Reflecting on this story helped me to realize that teachers are multifaceted beings (Corkett, 2018), and it is important for me to recognize the deeper meaning beyond the classroom to be able to support my students. It is me who must be supportive and not expect that the one-size-fits-all approach to education will meet the needs of my students.

This experience made me realize the importance of knowing who I am on a deeper level and the importance of reflexive Inquiry. Palmer (2017) suggests that, "I do not know myself, I cannot know who my students are. I will see them through a glass darkly, in the shadows of my unexamined life—and when I cannot see them clearly, I cannot teach them well" (p. 2). This has led me on a journey to better know myself to inform my trauma-sensitive approach to education.

Deepening My Reflexive Inquiry Through Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing (EMDR) Therapy

Trauma left me stuck in the space of complicated feelings, unable to process without further promotion. I would experience a sense of disassociation of flashbacks, and anxiety-induced isolation would make it challenging to leave my home. It was this sensation of feeling stuck that prompted me to seek out other methods of reflexive inquiry. EMDR therapy was developed by Dr. Francine Shapiro in 1987 to treat posttraumatic stress disorder (Juby, 2021). Juby (2021) describes this therapy that uses eye movements to change the way a memory is stored in the brain, allowing you to process it. It is based on the theory that traumatic events are not properly processed in the brain when they happen. When something reminds you of the trauma, your brain and body react as though it's happening again (Juby, 2021). The brain cannot tell the difference between the past and the present. This is where EMDR becomes an important tool in restoring the self. The idea, known as the adaptive information processing model, is that you can "reprocess" a disturbing memory to help you move past it. This therapy aims to change the way that traumatic memories are stored in your brain, and once your brain properly processes the memory, you should be able to remember the traumatic events *without* experiencing the intense, emotional reactions that characterize posttraumatic stress (Juby, 2021). Using EMDR has enabled me to take a deeper look at who I am and separate from the suffering after the loss of my son. It has given me new insights as an educator and into understanding how developing a trauma-sensitive classroom is essential in today's classroom.

Connecting to My Praxis

My disconnectedness after the loss of my son made it impossible to teach. I could not care for others being in a state of survival myself. I recognize now through the research of Palmer (2017), that teaching holds a mirror to a soul, and at times this has been a painful process, and indeed this was too painful. However, I also recognize, through the research of Jennings (2019), that individuals who experience trauma can be dynamic and exceptional professionals as they have had to concentrate on specific skills to adapt to extreme situations. Through my lived experiences, I have developed an understanding of the importance of a trauma-sensitive approach to education and weave this practice into my teaching. Understanding my trauma through reflexive practice has allowed me to identify how trauma can impact the development of the social, emotional, and cognitive skills of my students (Jennings, 2019 & van de Kolk 2014). Combining my experiences with the research of Jennings (2019), Stokes (2022), and van de Kolk (2014), I implement a trauma-sensitive approach in my course development and instruction. I focus on building supportive relationships and creating a safe, compassionate, and resilient community of learners. It is through this praxis that I can impact and shift the direction of students' lives, as I did on my own, to create a more empathetic, respectful, just, and inclusive society now and for generations to come.

What Is Trauma?

Trauma, as defined by leading psychological theories such as those proposed by Herman (1992) and van der Kolk (2014), refers to an individual's response to an event or series of events that overwhelms their ability to cope, resulting in feelings of fear, helplessness, or horror. Drawing from Stokes (2022) and Tujague and Ryan (2021), recent research underscores the significance of trauma-informed education practices in addressing the needs of students affected by trauma or chronic stress. Contrary to traditional approaches that may resort to punitive measures or expulsion for students exhibiting behavioral challenges stemming from trauma exposure, current literature emphasizes the necessity of fostering connections, understanding, a sense of belonging, and community support for traumatized students (School District 27 Residential Schools and Reconciliation, 2015). Responding with harsh discipline can exacerbate trauma, leading to further behavioral and academic issues (Jennings, 2019; Stokes 2022; Tujague & Ryan, 2021). Trauma can manifest in various forms, including dissociation, extreme emotions, difficulties in social engagement, disproportionate reactions, forgetfulness, and lack of focus, often mimicking symptoms of other learning disabilities (Jennings, 2019). Jennings (2019) further highlights that individuals from marginalized communities, particularly people of color, are disproportionately affected by trauma due to systemic racism embedded within educational systems and social injustices. Therefore, cultivating mindfulness as educators involves a deep understanding of our students' backgrounds and the behaviors they exhibit in the classroom. By recognizing and addressing trauma-related symptoms in students, educators can create a more inclusive and supportive learning environment.

Mindful Classroom: A Framework for the Trauma-Sensitive Classroom

According to the research of Jennings (2019), Stokes (2022), and Tujague and Ryan (2021), a trauma-sensitive classroom is one that understands the student's needs and attempts to cultivate a safe learning environment and mitigate the impact of trauma symptoms on a student. I have found that being an educator requires an intense amount of emotional labor, and it is important to recognize that the role of a teacher is not to be a therapist or social worker, but rather to be supportive. Through my practice I have found that one of the most important actions I can take to help students exposed to trauma is to build positive relationships. Jennings (2019) describes the role of a supportive educator as a key component to a student's healing process, resulting in improved self-concept, academic performance, and social behavior. Building strong connections at school is an integral part of the trauma-informed approach as an educator.

Implementing a school-wide trauma-sensitive approach helps develop positive relationships between staff and students and cultivate commitment to the student's wellbeing (Jennings, 2019; Stokes, 2022).

In writing my stories and researching trauma-sensitive approaches to teaching, I started thinking about the pedagogical possibilities in these moments of reflection with my students.

Story II: I'm Not Good Enough

I have a lineup of students waiting to talk with me during our class break time. In my peripheral vision I see a student holding their computer to their chest, anxiously waiting to speak with me. When it is their turn, they open the laptop, and I can see the tears glistening on the rims of their eyes. They tell me quickly that they do not think they can present the lesson demonstration to the class because I told them last week it was not good enough. I am surprised because I remember our conversation and I did not say that the lesson was not good enough. I tell them that I apologize if they felt I was suggesting that the lesson was not done well. I ask them what I said that made them feel that way. They say nothing, and this prompts me to investigate further.

We sit down, open the lesson, and review the content. Before long the tears come, and the student reveals that in the class before mine, they received feedback from peers suggesting that the lessons and ideas were not good. The student was feeling extremely inadequate and that they were not good enough to be a teacher. At this moment, the student was vulnerable with me, and I recognized their need for deeper connection. They were feeling disconnected from who they were and the teacher they wanted to be. I asked the student if they had received any failing marks in our program to suggest that they were not good enough. The student confirmed that they had never failed anything, and we reflected together that there was no evidence to support the thinking that their work was not good. I reminded the student that the most important thing was how they were feeling about the lesson because as teachers we are not graded on if our lessons are excellent. That comes from the reflective process of evaluating our own teaching through a critical lens. The student apologized for crying in class and I reminded them of the importance of listening to their body and taking an emotional break from work. It is a good thing to cry and let emotions out; there would never be a reason to be embarrassed in front of me. At the end of our conversation, I reminded my student again that they and their mental wellness were the most important thing to me.

Reflection on "I'm Not Good Enough"

The research of Lyle (2023) resonates with me as she suggests that the learning process is deeply personal and as such, I believe that the student's self-reflexive process is complex, developing who they are and how this influences their identity. From my students, I learned the need for preservice teachers to develop reflection skills to help them form their teacher identity. The work of Grudnoff et al. (2017) and Syeed et al. (2020) identified the importance of having ongoing open-ended reflection for teacher candidates. It is the constant spiral of reflexive inquiry from self-practice-feedback that brings me self-awareness as an educator and to be critical about my practice to help create a more peaceful and just society (Tibbitts, 2016). It is this process that preservice teachers need to be cognizant of to seek alignment between practice and *self*.

To fortify resilience and foster mental wellbeing within my classroom, I advocate for the implementation of a journaling practice aimed at documenting both positive and negative emotions among students. Drawing from the insights of Brooks and Winfrey (2023), this approach is grounded in the principles of metacognition, affording students an opportunity to engage in critical reflection on their emotional experiences. Moreover, research by Lazarus and Folkman (1984) underscores the significance of understanding emotions as adaptive responses to environmental stimuli, highlighting the necessity of acknowledging both positive and negative affective states. By guiding students through the process of metacognitive awareness of their emotions, I seek to facilitate the development of emotional regulation

skills, as posited by Gross (2002, 2008, 2013), thereby equipping them with the tools to navigate and manage their emotional responses effectively. Through the cultivation of emotional intelligence and self-regulation, informed by the work of Salovey and Mayer (1990), my overarching goal is to cultivate resilience and promote mental wellbeing within the educational setting, aligning with the principles of positive psychology elucidated by Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi (2000).

Reflexive inquiry has allowed me to deeply understand who I am after the loss of my son. I have examined my biases, assumptions, and the values that shape the lens in which I view the world. Through this spiral of interrogation, I understand that for the 10 years after my son's death, I was in a survival mode where I could only focus on myself and get through the day. I could not take on the emotional weight of others in my personal or professional life. Living through these experiences and constructing meaning, I gained insights in empathy, compassion, mental wellness, and trauma's impact. This practice has enabled me to mitigate the biases that I held previously in my profession as an educator to understand the impact of emotions on learning. Reflexive inquiry has enabled me to look deeper into areas of trauma that I would not have been exposed to and thus increased the depth of my research around trauma and trauma-informed practices of teaching. Reflecting on the story helped me realize the importance of teaching my students resilience skills and the ability to reflect on their practice.

Story III: Imposter Syndrome

> *I am not in the right mindset to teach today. I could not find a parking spot at the university and that always makes me feel unsettled. I take deep breaths like my therapist has modeled to me, to reset my nervous system, and head to my class. This class has been tricky, I am not sure I am on the right pathway with the content that I am providing. Sometimes, I tell myself that I am not good enough to teach in the school of education, but I quickly shake that feeling of imposter syndrome from my head and remind myself that I am here for a deeper purpose.*

> *As I am walking through the classroom during break, just building rapport with my students, one of the preservice students turns to me and says, "This is the best class I have had in the entire Bachelor of Education program. What you are teaching us is incredible and I thought the last two years were a complete waste of time until I met you. All the students in the program talk about how meaningful you make our learning." Pardon? Did I just hear correctly? I turn and thank them for giving me such meaningful feedback, express how much it means to me. I walk away with tears welling in my eyes and heart on fire.*

Reflection on "Imposter Syndrome"

Reflecting on this story helped me to realize the importance and desire for vulnerability between people. My student wanted to connect through her engagement with me. Through her kind words, we were developing a deeper relationship and establishing trust. Since she expressed these thoughts to me in class, I have noticed an increase in her confidence and participation during classroom discussions. Through telling this story, I also recognize the importance of having a strong sense of self and teaching in alignment with who I am. When influences disrupt my alignment, I start to question myself and suffer a loss of connection in my teachings.

Risks and Vulnerabilities

I have found that a trauma-sensitive framework does not always fit into the one-size-fits-all institutional approach to education. The discordance between approach and institution highlights the rigidity of existing policies and procedures, which fail to embody the mindful practices that faculty strive to impart to their students (Lyle & Caissie, 2021). The institutional framework, by its very nature, overlooks the inherent humanness of the individuals within its structure. Such misalignment fosters a sense of distrust between faculty and the institution, sometimes escalating to feelings of resentment (Jennings, 2019; Stokes, 2022; Tujague & Ryan, 2021). Moreover, issues such as lack of follow-through, power imbalances, and the systemic oppression ingrained within institutional policies further erode trust. This discordance emphasizes the necessity of systemic change to accommodate trauma-sensitive practices throughout the institution. Reflexivity as an introspective process is essential for initiating a shift in teaching approaches towards creating more inclusive and just classrooms and institutions (Lyle, 2023). Reflecting on these dynamics, I recognize the profound openness of my students and their fundamental need for human connection. Envisioning the possibilities of a "whole school" approach, I anticipate the transformative impact it could have on both faculty and students, fostering a culture of trust, understanding, and support within educational communities.

Being vulnerable and putting my painful experiences on paper opens me to ridicule and judgment as I expose some of the dark places of my grief journey. I have found grief to be so lonely and it is a risk that I take to form human connections. Matthews (2019) argues, and I agree, that the understandings and "insights gained through autoethnography may not be uncovered through a less personal method" (p. 2). Thus, using writing as a form of therapy and point of connections, I know it is worth the risk of vulnerability.

Value, Importance, and Need for Stories of Vulnerability in Education

Writing about my experiences of trauma, particularly the loss of my own son, and its impact on my identity as an educator, has been a profound journey of self-discovery. Using an autoethnographical narrative offered me insights and deeper understandings beyond what traditional research methods offer. Grief is complicated and some experiences can only be understood when feelings are part of the research process (Ellis, 1993). It had been so difficult for me to come to terms with my loss that giving myself permission to write about my experiences provided me with a level of healing that I may not have uncovered otherwise. Autoethnography allowed me to process pain through writing and transform my grief into compassion and empathy in my teaching.

Through this process, I've cultivated mindfulness, compassion, and a vision of what a truly safe and inclusive classroom should embody for all learners. It has created a trusting space for my students to share openly, fostering a sense of belonging and support within our classroom community. This reflective practice has allowed me to live more intentionally, and to think critically about how to create a more resilient environment.

Engaging in the ongoing pedagogical process of writing stories about vulnerability and its intersection with teaching and learning has been enlightening. It's a journey of discovery that teaches me not only about my students but also about myself as a trauma-informed teacher. It compels me to examine the space between my intentions and the outcomes of my teaching, illuminating any biases or assumptions that may inadvertently influence my practice. This introspection cultivates mindfulness, resilience, and a commitment to continuous growth as an educator.

Sharing stories of vulnerability among educators serves as a catalyst for deeper inquiry and insight into compassionate and mindful pedagogical practices. It challenges us to reconsider conventional approaches to teaching and learning, urging us to adopt a more humanistic lens that prioritizes the wellbeing of our students. By acknowledging and addressing the ways in which trauma impacts both us and our students, we can create classroom environments that are not only inclusive and respectful but also safe havens for healing and growth.

As we embrace this journey of self-reflection and collective learning, we contribute to a broader conversation about the essence of education. By infusing our teaching practices with empathy, understanding, and a commitment to social justice, we pave the way for a more equitable and compassionate society. Through nurturing spaces of vulnerability and authenticity in our classrooms, we empower our students to share their own stories and experiences, fostering deeper connections and laying the groundwork for a future marked by empathy, inclusivity, and resilience.

References

Bochner, A. P., & Ellis, C. (2016). *Evocative autoethnography: Writing lives and telling stories.* Routledge.

Brooks, A., C., & Winfrey, O. (2023). *Build the life you want: The art and science of getting happier.* Portfolio.

Corkett, J. (2018). Butterflies in the knapsack: An exploration of a teacher's identity. In A. L. Cunliffe (2020), Reflexivity in teaching and researching organizational studies. *RAE: Revista de Administração de Empresas, 60(*1), 64–69. https://doi.org/10.1590/S0034-759020200108

Ellis, C. (1993). There are survivors: Telling a story of sudden death. *The Sociological Quarterly, 34*(4), 711–730.

Ellis, C. (1995). *Final negotiations: A story of love, loss, and chronic illness.* Temple University Press.

Ellis, C. (2004). *The ethnographic I: A methodological novel about autoethnography.* AltaMira Press.

Gross, J. J. (2002). Emotion regulation: affective, cognitive, and social consequences. *Psychophysiology, 39*(3), 281–291. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0048577201393198

Gross, J. J. (2008). Emotion regulation. In M. Lewis, J.M. Haviland-Jones & L.F. Barrett (Eds.), *Handbook of emotions* (3rd ed., pp. 497–512). The Guilford Press.

Gross J. J. (2013). Emotion regulation: taking stock and moving forward. *Emotion, 13*(3), 359–365. https://doi.org/10.1037/a0032135

Grudnoff, L., Haigh, M., Hill, M., Cochran-Smith, M., Ell, F., & Ludlow, L. (2017). Teaching for equity: insights from international evidence with implications for a teacher education curriculum. *Curriculum Journal, 28*(3), 305–326. http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=ip,sso&db=a9h&AN=123762793&site= eds-live&custid=s7439054

Herman, J. L. (1992). *Trauma and recovery: The aftermath of violence*. Basic Books.

Jennings, P. (2019). *The trauma-sensitive classroom: Building resilience with compassionate teaching*. W.W. Norton & Company.

Juby, B. (2021, August 4). What is EMDR therapy? PsychCentral. EMDR Therapy: How it works, benefits, uses, and side effects (psychcentral.com)

Lazarus, R. S., & Folkman S. (1984). *Stress, appraisal and coping*. Springer.

Lyle, E. (2018). Untangling sel(f)ves through a/r/tography. In E. Lyle (Ed.), *The negotiated self: Employing reflexive inquiry to explore teacher identity* (pp. 1–11). Sense Publishers. https://discovery.ebsco.com/linkprocessor/plink?id=6a3b85df-9f63-34a8-aaf7-a88293110e62

Lyle, E. (2023). *Of books, barns, and boardrooms: Exploring praxis through reflexive inquiry*. Brill. https://discovery.ebsco.com/linkprocessor/plink?id=e3b6ddf6-7d96-3c46-ad95-447d6097d200

Lyle, E., & Caissie, C. (2021) Rehumanizing education: Teaching and learning as co-constructed reflexive praxis. *LEARNing Landscapes 14*(1), 219–230. https://research.ebsco.com/linkprocessor/plink?id=a424a880-616c-3fc2-96b1-f5d1c47331aa

Matthews, A. (2019). Writing through grief: Using autoethnography to help process grief after the death of a loved one. *Methodological Innovations,*1–10. https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/2059799119889569

Palmer, P. (2017). *The heart of a teacher: Identity and integrity in teaching*. CourageRenewal.org. https://couragerenewal.org/library/the-heart-of-a-teacher/

Ryu, J. Y. (2018). I wish, I wonder, and everything I like: Living stories of piano teaching and learning with young children. *LEARNing Landscapes, 11*(2), 319–330. https://doi.org/10.36510/learnland.v11i2.965

Salovey, P., & Mayer, J. D. (1990). Emotional intelligence. *Imagination, Cognition and Personality, 9*(3), 185–211. https://doi.org/10.2190/DUGG-P24E-52WK-6CDG

School District 27 Residential Schools and Reconciliation. (2015, December 1). *First Nations Principles of Learning* [Video]. YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0PgrfCVCt_A

Seligman, M., & Csikszentmihalyi, M. (2000). Positive psychology: An introduction. *American Psychologist, 55*(1), 5–14. https://doi.org/10.1037/0003-066X.55.1.5.

Stokes, H. (2022). Leading trauma-informed education practice as an instructional model for teaching and learning. *Frontiers in Education*, *7*. https://doi.org/10.3389/feduc.2022.911328

Syeed, E., Kumar, M. M., Lowe, N., Moran, D., & Rucobo, K. (2020). Getting uncomfortable with difficult knowledge: A reflexive account of a community-based research project. *Collaborations: A Journal of Community-based Research and Practice, 3*(1), 3. http://doi.org/10.33596/coll.44

Tibbitts, F. (2016). Political autobiography: Reflexive inquiry in the preparation of social justice educators. *International Journal of Educational Sciences, 13*(1), 108–117. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/321205820_Political_Autobiography_Reflexive_Inquiry_in_the_Preparation_of_Social_Justice_Educators

Tujague, N. A., & Ryan, K. L. (2021). Ticking the box of "cultural safety" is not enough: Why trauma-informed practice is critical to Indigenous healing. *Rural and Remote Health 2021,* 6411. https://doi.org/10.22605/RRH6411

van der Kolk, B. (2014). *The body keeps the score: Brain, mind, and body in the healing of trauma.* Penguin Books.

Melissa Morris is a course instructor and practicum advisor at Trent University, School of Education, concurrently serving as an Experiential Learning K–12 Consultant within the school board. With a scholarly dedication to the field of education, she has over 16 years of professional experience, during which she has ardently pursued the establishment of inclusive and culturally responsive classroom environments. Morris's engagement extends beyond the classroom as she actively contributes to the Daughters Project, an anti-human trafficking organization, collaborating with peers and community stakeholders to develop educational resources tailored to the needs of educators and preservice teachers, particularly aimed at supporting the most vulnerable student populations.

Melissa Morris

School Sport for All: An Inclusive Developmental Framework to Improve Participation

Lauren Sulz and Douglas Gleddie

Abstract

Recognizing the contributions that school sport can make to the wellbeing of students, this paper proposes a "re-imagined" school sport framework. School Sport for All (SS4A) places students at the center of building a program where development and wellbeing are prioritized. The SS4A framework fully integrates and promotes key aspects from comprehensive school health, whole-child education, and long-term athlete development throughout all its features. As a whole, SS4A aims to ensure the benefits of sport can be experienced by all, within a school system where teaching and learning are prioritized in the classroom and in the school community.

Introduction

According to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO, 2011), schools serve as crucial catalysts for change by equipping individuals with the knowledge, skills, and values necessary for personal growth and societal advancement. Through providing a comprehensive education that develops 21st-century competencies, schools prepare students for success in both their personal and professional lives (Joynes et al., 2019). Learners have to deal with unforeseen and ever-changing situations in their future, so it is essential for them to be equipped with a variety of competencies, such as cognitive and metacognitive abilities (e.g., analytical thinking, imaginative thinking, and self-control), social and emotional competencies (e.g., sympathy, self-confidence, and teamwork), and practical and physical experiences (e.g., establishing healthy habits, persistence, applying new information) (UNESCO, 2011). These skills should be deeply rooted in school activities and educational experiences (OECD, 2018). Furthermore, all individuals, regardless of their gender, socioeconomic status, or location, should have access to quality education (UNESCO, 2008, 2021). Education has a significant impact on promoting social cohesion and addressing issues of inequality and injustice, making education a critical tool for advancing a more just and equitable world (UNESCO, 2021).

Within the broader education picture, school sport (SS) can play an important role in a student's experience and holistic development (Holt et al., 2008; Neely & Holt, 2014; Sulz et al., 2022; Thompson et al., 2022; Yanik, 2018). We recognize that SS can look quite different across the globe. For the purposes of this paper, we will be using the Canadian context as a reference point and believe that others can extrapolate the content and conclusions to their own unique context. In Canada, the term "SS" refers to school-sponsored sport, practiced outside regular class hours, in which students participate in organized interscholastic games and competitions (Camiré & Kendellen, 2016). School Sport Canada's

mission statement is to "promote and advocate positive sportsmanship, citizenship, and the total development of student athletes through interscholastic sport" (2018). SS has been perceived as possessing a distinctive capacity to augment educational opportunities beyond the traditional classroom setting and to foster development that cannot be achieved in more conventional environments (Eccles et al., 2003; Hellison, 2003). Participation in SS is associated with educational benefits, such as higher educational attainment, higher likelihood of attending post-secondary institutions, better academic engagement, and lower participation in risky behaviors (Sulz et al., 2022; Wretman, 2017). Further, research has shown that participation in SS can provide young people with various advantages that promote their overall wellbeing. These benefits may include greater engagement with school, a sense of belonging to a group, improved emotional regulation, increased physical activity, and the development of important life skills like communication, goal-setting, and teamwork (Sulz et al., 2022; Holt et al., 2008; Neely & Holt, 2014; Yanik, 2018). Overall, SS has the potential to provide a platform for students to develop important competencies for their success—now and in the future.

Obstacles to Quality School Sport

Amidst the opportunities and benefits available, schools face a number of obstacles to offering quality and inclusive sport opportunities for students. Canadian SS researchers (Gleddie et al., 2019; Neely & Holt, 2014; Sulz et al., 2020) have identified issues with traditional SS programs: (a) a lack of essential purpose/philosophy (e.g., focus on winning over development), (b) inequities for participation (e.g., only "elite" teams), (c) sustaining quality and investment (e.g., lack of support for teacher-coaches), and (d) conflict/overlap with club sport teams (e.g., the same students getting all the opportunities to play). Thompson et al. (2022) reported that participation in sport at school has not led to marked differences in the number of student-athletes performing at an elite level. As such, the authors state that SS are not suitable for facilitating the combination of elite sport and education. Rather, these programs should consider the bigger picture and focus on the holistic benefits instead of solely on performance (Thompson et al., 2022). Work by Camiré et al. (2009) and Sulz et al. (2022) aligns with this rethought purpose. These researchers argue that SS should be advocated for and advanced through an educational perspective. Specifically, Camiré et al. (2009) documented parents' perception that SS should promote an atmosphere which is based on pleasure, participation, and positive development for all participants, not just those with the most athletic talent. Sulz et al. (2022) recommended considering SS as an integral part of a healthy school community, for all students.

In response to the previously discussed issues, there has been growing interest in how to create inclusive SS programs focused on quality, development, and wellbeing—all within the important context of educational growth and development. In Canada, scholars have called for quality SS programs focused on student development but also with a view to support teacher-coaches, who are often overworked and stressed, but care deeply about sport and athlete development (Gleddie et al., 2019; Neely & Holt, 2014; Sulz et al., 2020). Sulz et al. (2020) challenged school athletic directors and teacher-coaches to create spaces for all students interested in playing SS and to do so by "thinking outside the traditional SS box" (p.1569). They suggested a "re-imagined" SS model that places students at the center of building a

program where development and wellbeing are priority. Both Sulz et al. (2020) and Camiré (2014) advocated for properly supporting and therefore sustaining teacher-coaches to achieve these goals. These adult mentors and leaders are critical to the development of students and the overall quality of programs. Specifically, the authors suggest teacher-coaches should be valued, compensated, recognized, and offered professional development opportunities to improve their competencies and ensure they have philosophies and values that are congruous with SS's education mandate (Sulz et al., 2020; Camiré 2014).

These current challenges emphasize a need to revise the culture and structure of SS to focus on student-athlete holistic wellbeing and development, enhance participation rates—of both skilled and developing athletes—and build capacity to attract teachers to coach SS teams and maintain their involvement. School leaders also need to recognize the contributions that SS can make to the education community and the holistic success of students, and then become advocates for valuing, prioritizing, and supporting SS to achieve those goals.

Development of a School Sport Framework

Recognizing the role SS can play in student-athlete wellbeing and overall development, we decided to explore the development of a framework for quality SS that was evidence based, open enough to apply to diverse contexts, and designed to address the challenges and opportunities stated above. Following the design of similar processes to develop a framework for embedding physical literacy in physical education (Gleddie & Morgan, 2021) and the implementation of comprehensive school health in the school community (Storey et al., 2016), our proposed SS framework is based on three foundational approaches.

Comprehensive School Health (CSH)

CSH is an internationally recognized framework for supporting improvements in students' educational and health outcomes (JCSH, 2019). A CSH approach to education and health emerged in response to the recognition and understanding of the importance of multifaceted approaches to health and the association between health and learning (Kolbe, 2019). Researchers suggest moving from practices that rely mainly on a singular approach (e.g., health class, school policy) to a multi-pronged whole-school approach in order to improve the current health of youth, as multifaceted approaches not only affect individual behaviors but also the environment in which students live and learn (Samdal & Rowling, 2011; Storey et al., 2016). The CSH approach integrates multiple school components (i.e., teaching and learning, partnerships and services, healthy school policy, social and physical environment) that can improve both health and education outcomes. Research has demonstrated the effectiveness of comprehensive approaches to health-enhancing behaviors and positive educational outcomes among students (Langford et al., 2017; Michael et al., 2015). Examining the experiences of youth in SS through a CSH lens enables an understanding of the place of sport within a healthy school community and underscores the importance of addressing the multifaceted needs of students to support their holistic wellbeing and development.

Whole-Child Education

Whole-child education recognizes that a narrow focus on academic achievement alone is not sufficient to support students' holistic development and success. Instead, a comprehensive approach that addresses the multiple dimensions of students' lives is necessary to create a supportive and nurturing environment in which all students can thrive academically and personally (Morse & Allensworth, 2015). This approach takes into consideration the emotional, physical, social, and cognitive development of each student. Specifically, whole-child education is based on five tenets: (a) each student enters school healthy and learns about and practices a healthy lifestyle; (b) each student learns in an environment that is physically and emotionally safe for students and adults; (c) each student is actively engaged in learning and is connected to the school and border community; (d) each student has access to personalized learning and is supported by qualified, caring adults; and (e) each student is challenged academically and prepared for success in their future and participation in a global environment (ASCD, 2007). A whole-child approach to education encourages school administrators, decision-makers, teachers, and other members of the school community to think more holistically and comprehensively about offering students both academic and non-academic support and learning opportunities (Slade & Griffith, 2013). SS can play an important role in supporting whole-child education by promoting physical activity, healthy development, and a positive school culture. Whole-child education reflects and aligns with the CSH approach by addressing the health needs of the student to support their physical, cognitive, social, and emotional development and further integrate health and education (Lewallen et al., 2015). When integrated into a comprehensive and well-rounded educational program, SS can have a positive impact on student learning and wellbeing.

Long-Term Athlete Development (LTAD)

LTAD shares fundamental principles of whole-child education, including comprehensive development, creating supportive environments, personalized learning, and promoting inclusivity and engagement, which contribute to individuals' well-rounded growth and success. Specifically, LTAD offers a comprehensive approach to athlete development that focuses on optimizing the performance and wellbeing of athletes over the course of their athletic careers (Higgs et al., 2019). The main objectives of LTAD are to (a) ensure that athletes have the opportunity to participate in sports in a safe and healthy environment; (b) provide a clear path for athletes to progress through the different stages of development, from beginner to elite; (c) ensure that athletes receive the necessary training and support to reach their full potential; (d) provide athletes with the skills and knowledge they need to make informed decisions about their athletic careers, including decisions about when to retire; and (e) foster a positive and inclusive culture in sport that supports athletes at all levels of development (Higgs et al., 2019). LTAD is based on the principles of physiological, psychological, and motor development, and takes into account the different needs and challenges faced by athletes at different stages. Developing a SS program with LTAD as a foundation, schools can help students develop their athletic abilities in a safe, structured, and age-appropriate way.

Outline of and Evidence for School Sport for All (SS4A)

The goal of SS4A (Figure 1) is to increase opportunities and improve experiences within SS for all community members–students first, but also for parents, teachers, coaches, and administrators. In the following sections, we will provide an overview, explain the structure, and share the evidence behind the SS4A framework.
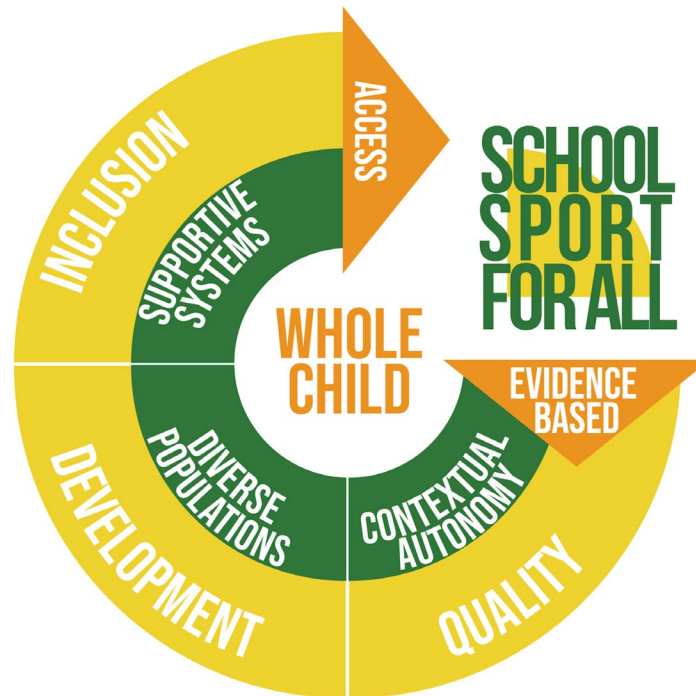

Fig. 1: The School Sport for All (SS4A) Framework

Where It All Begins

The entry to SS4A is evidence-based (Figure 2). Evidence can certainly include findings from formal research, such as we have shared above. However, evidence can also come from formal and informal discussions with students, parents, and teachers. It can come from a lifetime of teaching and coaching experience, coupled with a working, professional knowledge of children and sport. As such, our goal of improving access for all is built on a foundation of evidence-based practice and practice-based evidence—all relevant to distinct school communities able to meet the needs of diverse students.
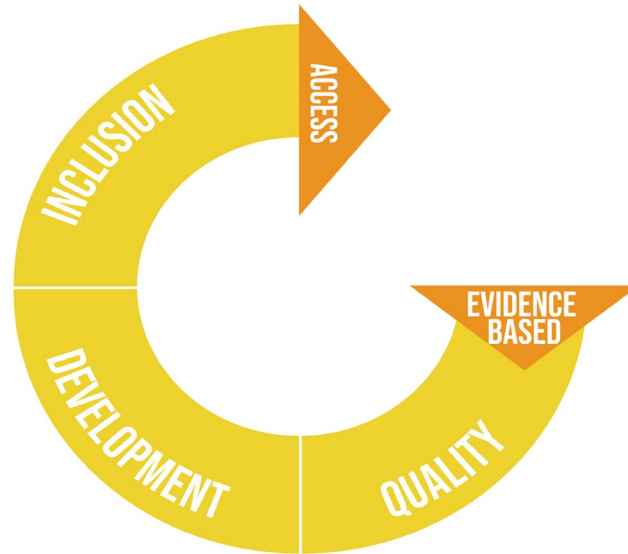
Fig. 2: Essential Elements

Essential Elements

The Essential Elements (Figure 2) are at the heart of every change we wish to make to SS systems; they refer to the fundamental components that are required for the system to operate effectively and to fulfil its intended purpose. These elements are considered essential because without them, the system would not be able to operate at its best. Essential Elements are the core components that are foundational for achieving SS4A, and, as such, they cannot be compromised or omitted without significantly impacting the overall effectiveness of the framework. These elements interact and work together, running through the entire framework, including the Essential Conditions (green circle—Figure 3) and the center of the framework (Figure 4). In other words, SS cannot be for all unless it is based on evidence, grounded in quality practice, developmentally appropriate, inclusive, and meets the needs of the whole child.

Quality

Maintaining quality SS programs is imperative to reaching the goals of the framework—increase opportunities and improve experiences within SS. For example, increasing the number of players on a team can inhibit development by reducing the attention, amount of practice, and playing time of student-athletes. It is best to offer multiple teams, each with their own coach, as opposed to one large team. Sport for Life developed a guide to provide quality sport delivery based on long-term development, with the intention to identify how community sport organizations can improve and sustain quality sport (Jurbala, 2019). Sport for Life's Quality Sport model emphasizes three main components: Good Places, Good People, and Good Programs. Good Places refers to creating safe and inclusive environments for individuals to participate in sports, regardless of their age, gender, ability, or socio-economic background. Good People focuses on promoting positive values such as respect, teamwork, and fair play among coaches, athletes, and parents, and developing strong relationships within the sporting community. Good Programs involve creating

developmentally appropriate and engaging training programs that focus on the holistic development of individuals, including their physical, social, emotional, and cognitive skills (Jurbala, 2019). By prioritizing these three components within SS programs, we can foster a quality sporting experience that supports lifelong participation and personal growth.

Related to the point above, re-imagining SS does not mean we remove competition—competition can be healthy. The point is to allow more students to participate in healthy competition at their particular skill and developmental level. According to Shields and Bredemeier (2009), competition can affect people and society in both favorable and unfavorable ways. On the one side, competition can encourage people to push themselves past their comfort zones and pursue success, which can foster personal development, drive, and greatness. On the other hand, competition can also result in adverse consequences that hurt both individuals and society as a whole, such as anxiety, violence, and a win-at-all-costs mentality. Shields and Bredemeier (2009) suggest that competition should be set up in a way that prioritizes good sportsmanship, justice, and respect for opposition while still encouraging individual development and motivation. By taking a balanced approach, competition's advantages can be maximized while its drawbacks are reduced (Shields & Bredemeier, 2009). That means appropriate competition for highly skilled athletes and those just learning a new sport. Quality sport experiences focus on good people (trained leaders and coaches), leading good programs (to develop athletes) in good places (safe and welcoming).

Development

Shifting school focus to a holistic development approach will foster personal growth to allow youth to learn about themselves, develop sport and life skills, and acquire attributes that will benefit them beyond sport (Camiré et al., 2013; Holt et al., 2008). If the goal of SS is to holistically develop students, it should emphasize personal growth, skill development, fun, peer support, and educational success (Sulz et al., 2020). Holt & Neely (2011) evaluated the concept of positive youth development in relation to youth sport. Positive youth development is a strength-based conception of development that occurs when youth's values, beliefs, and life skills are actively strengthened to enable maturation into well-balanced, optimal-functioning individuals (Gould & Carson, 2008; Lerner et al., 2005). Positive youth development through sport aims to develop psychological, social, emotional, physical, and intellectual skills in athletes that can be used in sport and in life (Bateman et al., 2020; Gould & Carson, 2008). Holt and Neely (2011) reported that youth sport has been associated with positive and negative developmental outcomes, with positive developmental benefits of sport participation being contingent on social contextual factors (e.g., how coaches, parents, and peers contribute to the sport experience). Richard Lerner, a developmental psychologist, introduced the 5Cs of positive youth development (e.g., Lerner et al., 2005): Competence, Confidence, Character, Caring/Compassion, and Connection. The 5Cs are measurable constructs that represent desired youth development outcomes. Zarrett et al. (2008) found that youth who participated in sports for two or more years had significantly higher positive youth development scores than non-participants and youth who participated for only one year. This underscores the importance of providing opportunities for all students to participate on SS teams and of incorporating SS into students' holistic development.

Inclusion

Like school, SS should be a place where any student who wants to play a sport has an opportunity. There are certainly challenges associated with this (e.g., gym space, coaches); however, in our experience, many programs have successfully implemented alternative structures to increase participation. SS opportunities can range from intramurals to interscholastic teams, "sport camp" options to drop-in sessions, intraschool teams to jamboree style tournaments. These would allow more opportunities for more students to receive the benefits of SS. However, a low percentage of the student population actually participates in SS, limiting those receiving the benefits (Dwyer et al., 2006; Kann et al., 2014). Dwyer et al. (2006) found that while 97.2% of schools provided SS programs, only 15% of students participated. The low percentage of student participation is often attributed to funding, teacher involvement, and the availability of facilities/gym space (Dwyer et al. 2006; Sulz et al., 2020). Intramural programs, for example, can be an effective way to provide students who are not on SS teams with opportunities for physical activity and sport participation (Edwards et al., 2014). However, due to decreasing resources for school-based physical activity opportunities (e.g., volunteer teachers, teacher compensation, and funding to schools), the availability of intramural programs in schools is limited (Dwyer et al., 2006; Edwards et al., 2014; Sulz et al., 2020). This issue is exacerbated by the fact that students who are not advanced athletes have fewer options at school. Often the students who do participate on SS teams are already quite active outside of school and/or fill roster spots on multiple SS teams (Sulz et al., 2020). Traditional SS sometimes includes pressure to "win," resulting in team selection procedures where only highest skilled athletes fill roster spots, while the developing athletes are cut (Gleddie et al., 2019). If lower skilled players make the team, they often see little playing time, limiting their development. Furthermore, students who are cut from SS teams often discontinue their involvement from the sport they were cut from; therefore, team selection practices may also be a way of enhancing continued participation (Gleddie et al., 2019). Advocating for these students does not mean forgetting about the higher skilled athletes (and all those in between). The extra effort and time taken to provide feedback and direction to youth who were not selected might make a difference in their future sports participation (Gleddie et al., 2019). By implementing de-selection practices that are seen by student-athletes as respectful, fair, and supportive, we can create an experience for youth that encourages future sport engagement, rather than sport discontinuation (Gleddie et al., 2019). Variety and opportunity ensure sport for all, so it's important to consider what activities are preferable for the school population, including adaptive or modified activities for different abilities and skills, and ensuring that the "rules" don't create barriers to participation.

Essential Conditions

The Essential Conditions (Figure 3) are the environmental and population-focused aspects that surround the Essential Elements and ensure success and access. These are what need to be understood so as to develop programs based on who is in the school, what is happening at school, and what tools and supports are needed to make change.

Fig. 3: Essential Conditions

Contextual Autonomy

One size does not fit all. The re-imagined framework needs to be carefully and intentionally applied to fit within each unique school and community context. Rural? Urban? Large high school? The neighborhood elementary school? Each has its own unique characteristics, families, cultures, physical plant, community amenities, and district policies. As a result, the SS4A framework is designed to provide each school community the autonomy to customize the framework to meet their own specific needs. Storey et al. (2016), in their work on essential conditions of CSH implementation, have recognized contextual conditions, such as time, funding, readiness, and prior community connectivity as important considerations to successful CSH implementation. Autonomy is viewed as imperative to implement SS4A into existing school communities. Aligning with Storey et al. (2016), the SS4A framework is flexible to allow for each school to build upon its strengths, assets, and needs.

Diverse Populations

School is a setting that purports to offer convenient and equitable access to sport; however, sometimes specific populations tend to be excluded. Inequities in SS are currently present and refer to disparities and imbalances in access, resources, and opportunities that limit the ability of some students to participate and benefit (Buchanan et al., 2016; Tandon et al., 2021). These inequities can be caused by a variety of factors, including experience/skill level, socioeconomic status, race and ethnicity, gender,

and disability. Students who are excluded from SS often include lower skilled athletes, youth from low-income families, girls and young women, persons with disabilities, and new Canadians (Holt et al., 2011; Somerset & Hoare, 2018; Sulz et al., 2022; Tandon et al., 2021). According to the Institute for Canadian Citizenship (2014), children of recent immigrants are less likely to participate in sports (32%) than children of Canadian-born parents (55%). Reasons for lower participation may include: parents' lack of understanding of the benefits of sport, students' lack of the basic skill level that Canadian kids have already developed to play certain sports, teachers' lack of cultural understanding, and/or SS being too structured and offered after school when students have other responsibilities (e.g., looking after siblings, academic commitments) (Spaaij, 2012; Tirone et al., 2010). Girls and young women are also disproportionately missing out on the academic, educational, and health benefits of SS participation (Canadian Women & Sport, 2020). This gap has been attributed to cultural messages (e.g., "sports are for boys"), variety/interest (e.g., non-traditional sports; individual sports), lack of representation (e.g., female coaches), and physical self-concept (e.g., low physical competence) (Sabiston et al., 2019). Furthermore, pay-to-play SS models inhibit participation among students from low-income households (Holt et al., 2011; Somerset & Hoare, 2018) due to a lack of financial resources available within a family to support participation in extracurricular activities (Snellman et al., 2015). There is a cost associated with SS in Canada, for example, to cover out-of-town travel, competition team fees, team meals, and apparel (Clark, 2008; Holt et al., 2011). Sulz et al. (2022) studied the effects of SS participation among youth from low-income backgrounds. The authors concluded that involvement in SS can result in the formation of meaningful connections with coach-teachers and teammates, increased emotional backing, an improved feeling of belonging and purpose, and a sense of "family." Concerning students with disabilities, access to sports and school sports is notably restricted (Nixon, 2011; Lakowski, 2011; Robinson et al., 2023). Various barriers impede their participation, including a lack of awareness among others on how to inclusively involve those with disabilities, limited training and competition programs, and challenges in accessing suitable resources (Jaarsma et al., 2014; Shields & Synnot, 2016). Robinson et al. (2023) conducted participatory action research to improve sports opportunities for students with disabilities in school environments. Their findings suggest that while it is feasible to provide such opportunities within schools, concerted efforts involving students, teachers, and possibly university researchers, are needed to identify and address the specific needs for sport participation in these settings.

Schools are diverse institutions that enroll students from varied backgrounds, circumstances, interests, and skills. To develop SS programs that meet the diverse needs of students, it is necessary to create a space and place where understanding and appreciation for diversity can develop and flourish. Within the SS4A framework, we recommend that schools strive to keep costs low and/or support students through organizations that provide financial assistance for sport fees; consider the accessibility of the spaces and programs, as well as what the participants can do to support involvement of students with a variety of abilities; reflect on, and plan for, the ethnic backgrounds of students that might influence student sport experience; consider religious practices such as apparel requirements and holidays; and offer modifications and progressions for different activities to support students to participate at their skill level.

Supportive Systems

Similar to the essential conditions identified by Storey et al. (2016) for the implementation of CSH, schools developing and sustaining a supportive system in the school community is essential to the implementation of the SS4A framework. Most SS coaches are teachers who volunteer their time. However, teachers are becoming more resistant to coaching due to workload, lack of support, and family obligations (Camiré, 2015; Sulz et al., 2020). As a result, the sustainability of SS programs is challenged (Sulz et al., 2020). One key concern revolves around how much time coaching occupies in one's life. There is a significant time requirement involved in coaching SS teams, and this creates stress on the role of the teacher's daily job requirements and personal life. However, even with "community coaches" taking the reins in some cases, without teacher volunteers, SS programs suffer. Students are often faced with the choice of whether to attend their club sports event or their SS event; oftentimes they are pressured to play for their more "competitive elite" or expensive club team, leaving their SS event unattended (Sulz et al., 2020). The school, administrators, and staff must foster an environment in which teacher-coaches feel valued and supported, and thus want to coach. Administrators of school systems must acknowledge the contributions that a SS4A framework can make to the education community and then find ways to support and sustain those professionals who are critical to holistic student success (Sulz et al., 2020).

Where We End Up

The end point of the SS4A framework (Figure 1) is access to SS—in all its glorious forms—for all students who desire to play. In this way, we can ensure that the benefits of sport can be experienced by all, within a school system where teaching and learning are prioritized in the classroom and on the court.

The Center and Point of It ALL

Fig. 4: Whole Child

The center of the model, and the point of where we end up (access), is the whole child, the student-athlete. What that means is that the intended outcomes of the framework delivered in any school system are ultimately intended to support healthy, holistic child development. A whole-child approach moves the conversation about education from an often-narrow focus on academic achievement to one that promotes the long-term development and success of children (Morse & Allensworth, 2015). By focusing our attention on the developmental and personal needs of students, in addition to their academic

achievements, we can better prepare students for the challenges and opportunities they will encounter in school and as members of society (citizenship).

Through the SS4A framework, our aim is to ensure all students are healthy, safe, engaged, supported, and challenged while at school. If we intentionally focus on holistic development of student-athletes, we should create spaces for all interested students to play, allowing for more students to reap the benefits of quality sports programs. SS offers the potential to complement curriculum and contribute positively to student development by offering opportunities for students to learn about and engage in healthy lifestyles, connect to the school (peers and teacher-coaches) and the broader school community, and be challenged physically, cognitively, socially, and emotionally.

Conclusion

As educators, coaches, athletes, and researchers, we believe strongly in the efficacy and value of SS. In our view, the UNESCO assertion for access to quality education (2008, 2021) should include access to quality SS opportunities—for all. As stated earlier in this paper, the benefits for students are important and diverse. Academically, benefits include increased educational attainment and post-secondary attendance as well as lower incidence of risky behaviors (Sulz et al., 2022; Wretman, 2017). From a wellbeing perspective, SS can provide support for the development of life skills, emotional regulation, physical activity, a sense of belonging, and more (Holt et al., 2008; Neely & Holt, 2014; Yanik, 2018). We are also very aware of the obstacles that stand in the way of quality SS—especially the inequities related to participation (Camiré, 2015; Sulz et al., 2020). We foresee challenges to the implementation of our SS4A framework, including the necessity of building sustainable capacity for the framework, including teachers willing to volunteer as coaches, and the limited funding allocation to SS (Sulz et al., 2020). Supportive systems within the SS4A framework are crucial in this regard. We urge school system leaders to acknowledge the positive impact a reimagined SS framework can have on the education community. They should then explore avenues to support and maintain the professionals crucial for holistic student success.

Perhaps the most significant obstacle to the implementation of the SS4A framework is the need for the culture of school sport to prioritize student-athlete development and participation over winning (Sulz et al., 2020). However, effecting such a culture shift will pose challenges, as it necessitates changes in the mindset, norms, and attitudes of all school stakeholders involved (e.g., students, teacher-coaches, athletic directors, school administration, parents). Nevertheless, amidst these challenges lies an opportunity to reimage SS as a unique and sustainable platform for students' personal growth and development, placing emphasis on their holistic wellbeing ahead of athletic achievement. High-quality SS programs that prioritize student-centered approaches, developmental appropriateness, and evidence-informed practices do not materialize without effort. Rather, they require intentional planning, contextual relevance, and commitment to evidence-based strategies. SS4A was designed to center students in quality sport experiences using an evidence-based framework to ensure contextual quality and access for as many students as possible. Based on the well-established foundations of comprehensive school health (Storey, et al., 2016), whole-child education (Slade & Griffith, 2013), and long-term athlete development

(Higgs, et al., 2019), the purpose of SS4A is to provide structure and guidance for those seeking to enhance and improve SS programs in their unique contexts. We hope that teacher coaches and athletic directors work with the framework in their schools. Likewise, we'd invite researchers to add to the body of evidence by applying the framework in a variety of contexts.

Currently, we are in the midst of studying the implementation of SS4A in a local school community. As our findings and those of others take shape, revisions to the framework may be necessary to improve uptake and efficacy. We will share SS4A and the forthcoming research developments through academic papers such as this one, but also through workshops, podcasts, and professional blogs to provide access to the education community. Increasing opportunities and improving experiences for SS provides a myriad of benefits for students, staff, coaches, parents and administrators. School is intended to be available and accessible for everyone. If that is truly the case, then why not have SS for all?

Acknowledgments

References

Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (ASCD). (2007). Commission on the whole child. *The learning compact redefined: A call to action: A report*. Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.
http://www.ascd.org/ASCD/pdf/Whole%20Child/WCC%20Learning%20Compact.pdf

Bateman, J. E., Lovell, G. P., Burke, K. J., & Lastella, M. (2020). Coach education and positive youth development as a means of improving Australian sport. *Frontiers in Sports and Active Living, 2*, 591633. https://doi.org/10.3389/fspor.2020.591633

Buchanan, R., Odenheimer, E., & Prewitt-White, T. (2016). An examination of equal access in athletic programs throughout public high schools in the United States. *Journal of Amateur Sport, 2*(1). https://doi.org/10.17161/jas.v2i1.5014

Camiré, M. (2014). Youth development in North American high school sport: Review and recommendations. *Quest, 66*(4), 495–511. https://doi.org/10.1080/00336297.2014.952448

Camiré, M. (2015). Being a teacher-coach in Ontario high schools: Challenges and recommendations. *Revue phéEPS/PHEnex Journal, 7*(1), 1–15.

Camiré, M., & Kendellen, K. (2016). Coaching for positive youth development in high school sport. In N. Holt (2nd Ed.), *Positive youth development through sport* (pp.126-136). Routledge.

Camiré, M., Trudel, P., & Bernard, D. (2013). A case study of a high school sport program designed to teach athletes life skills and values. *The Sport Psychologist, 27*(2), 188–200. https://doi.org/10.1123/tsp.27.2.188

Camiré, M., Trudel, P. & Forneris, T. (2009). High school athletes' perspectives on support, communication, negotiation and life skill development. *Qualitative Research in Sport and Exercise, 1*(1), 72–88. https://doi.org/10.1080/19398440802673275

Canadian Women & Sport. (2020). The rally report. https://womenandsport.ca/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/Canadian-Women-Sport_The-Rally-Report.pdf

Clark, W. (2008). Kids' sports. *Canadian social trends*. Component of Statistics Canada catalogue no. 11-008-X.

Dwyer, J. J., Allison, K. R., LeMoine, K. N., Adlaf, E. M., Goodman, J., Faulkner, G. E., & Lysy, D. C. (2006). A provincial study of opportunities for school-based physical activity in secondary schools. *Journal of Adolescent Health*, *39*(1), 80-86. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jadohealth.2005.10.004

Eccles, J. S., Barber, B. L., Stone, M., & Hunt, J. (2003). Extracurricular activities and adolescent development. *Journal of Social Issues*, *59*(4), 865–889. https://doi.org/10.1046/j.0022-4537.2003.00095.x

Edwards, M. B., Kanters, M. A., & Bocarro, J. N. (2014). Policy changes to implement intramural sports in North Carolina middle schools: simulated effects on sports participation rates and physical activity intensity, 2008-2009. *Preventing Chronic Disease 11*, 130195, 130–195. http://dx.doi.org/10.5888/pcd11.130195

Gleddie, D. L., & Morgan, A. (2021). Physical literacy praxis: A theoretical framework for transformative physical education. *Prospects*, *50*(1-2), 31–53. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11125-020-09481-2

Gleddie, D. L., Sulz, L., Humbert, M. L. & Zajdel, A. (2019). If you must cut athletes from school sport teams: Consider best practices. *Journal of Physical Education, Recreation and Dance*, *90*(2), 24–30. https://doi.org/10.1080/07303084.2018.1546630

Gould, D., & Carson, S. (2008). Life skills development through sport: Current status and future directions. *International Review of Sport and Exercise Psychology, 1*(1), 58–78. https://doi.org/10.1080/17509840701834573

Hellison, D. (2003). *Teaching responsibility through physical activity*. Human Kinetics.

Higgs, C., Way, R., Harber, V., Jurbala, P., & Istvan, B. (2019). *Long-term development in sport and physical activity 3.0*. https://sportforlife.ca/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/Long-Term-Development-in-Sport-and-Physical-Activity-3.0.pdf

Holt, N. L., Kingsley, B. C., Tink, L. N., & Scherer, J. (2011). Benefits and challenges associated with sport participation by children and parents from low-income families. *Psychology of Sport and Exercise*, *12*(5), 490–499. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.psychsport.2011.05.007

Holt, N. L., & Neely, K.C. (2011). Positive youth development through sport: A review. *Ibero-American Journal of Exercise and Sport Psychology, 6*(2), 299–316.

Holt, N. L., Tink, L. N., Mandigo, J. L., & Fox, K. R. (2008). Do youth learn life skills through their involvement in high school sport? A case study. *Canadian Journal of Education/Revue canadienne de l'éducation*, *31*(2), 281-304. https://www.jstor.org/stable/20466702

Institute of Canadian Citizenship (2014). *Including the New Canadian voice*. https://www.inclusion.ca/AnnualReport/icc_2014/files/assets/basic-html/page-1.html#

Jaarsma, E. A., Dijkstra, P.U., Geertzem, J. H. B., & Dekker, R. (2014). Barriers to and facilitators of sports participation for people with physical disabilities: A systematic review. *Scandinavian Journal of Medicine & Science in Sports*, *24*(6), 871–881. https://doi.org/10.1111/sms.12218

Joint Consortium for School Health (JCSH). Comprehensive school health framework. (2019) Available from: https://www.jcsh-cces.ca/index.php/about/comprehensive-school-health.

Joynes, C., Rossignoli, S., & Fenyiwa Amonoo-Kuofi, E. (2019). *21st century skills: Evidence of issues in definition, demand and delivery for development contexts*. Institute of Development Studies.

Jurbala, P. (2019). Quality sport for communities and clubs. https://sportforlife.ca/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/qscc_resource_20200124-WEB.pdf

Kann, L., Kinchen, S., Shanklin, S. L., Flint, K. H., Kawkins, J., Harris, W. A., … & Zaza, S. (2014). Youth risk behavior surveillance—United States, 2013. *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report*, *63*, 1–168.

Kolbe, L. J. (2019). School health as a strategy to improve both public health and education. *Annual Review of Public Health, 40*(1), 443–463. https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-publhealth-040218-043727

Lakowski, T. (2011). Advancing equity for students with disabilities in school sports. *Journal of Intercollegiate Sport*, *4*(1), 95–100. https://doi.org/10.1123/jis.4.1.95

Langford, R., Bonell, C., Komro, K., Murphy, S., Magnus, D., Waters, E., Gibbs, L, & Campbell, R. (2017). The health promoting schools framework: Known unknowns and an agenda for future research. *Health Education & Behavior, 44*(3), 463–475. https://doi.org/10.1177/1090198116673800

Lerner, R. M., Almerigi, J. B., Theokas, C., & Lerner, J. V. (2005). Positive youth development: A view of the issues. *The Journal of Early Adolescence*, *25*(1), 10–16. https://doi.org/10.1177/0272431604273211

Lewallen, T. C., Hunt, H., Potts-Datema, W., Zaza, S., & Giles, W. (2015). The whole school, whole community, whole child model: A new approach for improving educational attainment and healthy development for students. *Journal of School Health, 85*(11), 729–739. https://doi.org/10.1111/josh.12310

Michael, S. L., Merlo, C. L., Basch, C. E., Wentzel, K. R., & Wechsler, H. (2015). Critical connections: health and academics. *Journal of School Health, 85*(11),740–758.

Morse, L. L., & Allensworth, D. D. (2015). Placing students at the center: The whole school, whole community, whole child model. *The Journal of School Health*, *85*(11), 785–794. https://doi.org/10.1111/josh.12313

Nixon, H.L. (2011). Engagement of people with disabilities in sport across the life span. In N. Holt & M. Talbot (Eds.), *Lifelong engagement in sport and physical activity: Participation and performance across the lifespan* (pp. 111–122). Routledge.

Neely, K. C., & Holt, N. L. (2014). Parents' perspectives on the benefits of sport participation for young children. *The Sport Psychologist*, *28*(3), 255–268.

Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). (2018). *The Future of Education and Skills: Education 2030*; Secretary-General, Paris, France. https://www.oecd.org/education/2030/E2030%20Position%20Paper%20(05.04.2018).pdf

Robinson, D. B., Harenberg, S., Walters, W., Barrett, J., Cudmore, A., Fahie, K., & Zakaria, T. (2023). *Game Changers*: A participatory action research project for/with students with disabilities in school sport settings. *Frontiers in Sports and Active Living*, *5*(1150130). https://doi.org/10.3389/fspor.2023.1150130

Sabiston, C. M., Pila, E., Vani, M., & Thogersen-Ntoumani, C. (2019). Body image, physical activity, and sport: A scoping review. *Psychology of Sport and Exercise*, *42*, 48–57. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.psychsport.2018.12.010

Samdal, O., & Rowling, L. (2011). Theoretical and empirical base for implementation components of health-promoting schools. *Health Education*, *111*(5), 367–390. https://doi.org/10.1108/09654281111161211

School Sport Canada. (2018). *About SSC*. https://www.schoolsport.ca/ssc-partners-updates/

Shields, D. L., & Bredemeier, B. L. (2009). *True competition: A guide to pursuing excellence in sport and society*. Human Kinetics.

Shields, N., & Synnot, A. (2016). Perceived barriers and facilitators to participation in physical activity for children with disability: a qualitative study. *BMC Pediatrics*, *16*(9), 1–10. https://doi.org/10.1186/s12887-016-0544-7

Slade, S., & Griffith, D. (2013). A whole child approach to student success. *KEDI Journal of Educational Policy*.

Snellman, K., Silva, J. M., Frederick, C. B., & Putnam, R. D. (2015) The engagement gap: Social mobility and extracurricular participation among American youth. *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, *657*(1), 194–207.

Spaaij, R. (2012). Beyond the playing field: Experiences of sport, social capital, and integration among Somalis in Australia. *Ethnic and Racial Studies 35*, 1519–1538.

Sport for Life. (2023). Long-term development stages. https://sportforlife.ca/long-term-development/

Somerset, S. & Hoare, D. J. (2018). Barriers to voluntary participation in sport for children: A systematic review. *BMC Pediatrics, 18*(1), 1–19.

Storey, K. E., Montemurro, G., Flynn, J., Schwartz, M., Wright, E., Osler, J., Veugelers, P. J., & Roberts, E. (2016). Essential conditions for the implementation of comprehensive school health to achieve changes in school culture and improvements in health behaviours of students. *BMC Public Health, 16*(1), 1133. https://doi.org/10.1186/s12889-016-3787-1

Sulz, L., Gleddie, D. L., Kinsella, C., & Humbert, M. L. (2022). The health and educational impact of removing financial constraints for school sport. *European Physical Education Review, 29*(1). https://doi.org/10.1177/1356336X221104909

Sulz, L. D., Gleddie, D.L., Urbanski, W., & Humbert, M. L. (2020). Improving school sport: Teacher-coach and athletic director perspectives. *Sport in Society, 24*(9), 1554–1573. https://doi.org/10.1080/17430437.2020.1755263

Tandon, P. S., Kroshus, E., Olsen, K., Garrett, K., Qu, P., & McCleery, J. (2021). Socioeconomic inequities in youth participation in physical activity and sports. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, *18*(13), 6946. https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph18136946

Thompson, F., Rongen, F., Cowburn, I., & Till, K. (2022). The impacts of sports schools on holistic athlete development: A mixed method systematic review. *Sports Medicine*, *52*(8), 1879-1917. https://doi.org/10.1007/s40279-022-01664-5

Tirone, S., Livingston, L. A., Jordan Miller, A., & Smith, E. L. (2010). Including immigrants in elite and recreational sports: The experiences of athletes, sport providers and immigrants. *Leisure/Loisir*, *34*(4), 403–420. https://doi.org/10.1080/14927713.2010.542887

UNESCO (2008). *Inclusive education: the way of the future, general presentation of the 48th session of the ICE.* https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000161565_eng

UNESCO (2011). *UNESCO and Education: Everyone has a right to an education.* https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000212715

UNESCO (2021). *Reimagining our futures together: A new social contract for education.* https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000379707.locale=en

Wretman, C. J. (2017). School sports participation and academic achievement in middle and high school. *Journal of the Society for Social Work and Research*, *8*(3), 399–420.

Yanik, M. (2018). Effect of participation in school sports teams on middle school students' engagement in school. *Education Sciences, 8*(0), 1–8. https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci8030123

Zarrett, N., Lerner, R. M., Carrano, J., Fay, K., Peltz, J. S., & Li, Y. (2008). Variations in adolescent engagement in sports and its influence on positive youth development. In N. L. Holt (Ed.), *Positive youth development through sport* (pp. 9–23). Routledge.

Lauren Sulz is an Associate Professor in the Faculty of Education at the University of Alberta. Her primary research commitments focus on school- and community-based strategies to promote healthy lifestyles among children and youth.

Douglas Gleddie is a Professor in the Faculty of Education at the University of Alberta. His research foci include narratives of physical education, school sport, physical literacy praxis, meaningful physical education, and teacher education.

Maintaining Playground Relationships Through Music During a Pandemic: An Action Research Inquiry

Matthew Yanko

Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic's restrictions for schools and playgrounds threatened children's social and emotional wellbeing. In response, Grade 4/5 students created music-based activities through action research to sustain playground interactions. This study explored the crucial yet fragile playground relationships and the children's determination to maintain them. Findings indicate that the student-initiated projects were not only a medium for self-expression and maintaining friendships, but also served as an important tool for reinforcing the inherent social fabric of the playground setting. Notably, this study underscores the significance of collaborative learning, interpersonal skill development, and intrinsic motivation in fostering social skills and enhancing self-confidence.

Introduction

As students progress through elementary school, they engage in diverse and meaningful interactions. Each year brings new learning experiences with specific teachers and classmates, weaving a blend of new and old connections. Relationships in the classroom profoundly impact learning, yet those formed during unstructured times, like recess, are equally important (Pellegrini, 2006; Pellegrini & Blatchford, 2000).[1] A culture exists on school playgrounds, just as it does in the classroom. Here, children develop social skills and foster relationships that contribute significantly to collaborative socialization, learning conflict management, and nurturing intimacy and commitment (Blatchford et al., 2003). However, during the COVID-19 pandemic, interactions beyond the classroom were restricted, which marginalized informal learning opportunities. With unstructured time limited to peers from the same class, issues arose regarding how students would maintain their playground relationships.

The words of Miguel de Cervantes Saavedra, "he who sings in grief, procures relief," (1907, p. 169), resonate with the essence of elementary school music education in these challenging times. The pandemic significantly altered the landscape of music-making for both students and educators. Singing was only permitted with adequate ventilation, spacing, and masks, while musical instruments necessitated rigorous sanitization. Such restrictions prompted many music educators, myself included, to explore alternative learning approaches, allocating more time to creative exploration with music-making materials. The effects of these changes rippled beyond the music classroom, evident in the discernible decline of my students' socioemotional wellbeing, which could be indirectly linked to limitations on classroom interactions and adjusted playground regulations.

In response to these challenges, a class of Grade 4/5 students found their voice. They were driven to design music-based activities that reflected the dynamics of the playground, with the objective of sustaining and reviving peer connections. Through a mixed methodological framework of autoethnography and action research, this study aims to uncover how music nurtured playground relationships despite the challenges imposed by the pandemic. The study explores how music education can support peer relations under restrictive measures by encouraging students to explore creative possibilities with various materials, instruments, and cultural constructs in a redesigned music classroom. It also aims to illuminate how these constraints affect aspects of children's peer relations—positivity, openness, and shared experiences—as well as their socioemotional health and self-identity. Moreover, it seeks to examine the capacity of children to maintain these relations during distressing times.

Relevant Literature

People have a profound need to belong, and forming meaningful connections with others facilitates a sense of relatedness, connectedness, and belonging (Baumeister & Robson, 2021). In middle childhood (6 to 12 years old), interpersonal relationships with peers become increasingly important for development, providing opportunities for children to engage in ways that differ from interactions with adults (Ellerbrock et al., 2014; Hartup, 1983). During this period, time spent socially with peers expands, tightly knit cliques develop, and aspects of peer relations become more stable (Gifford-Smith & Brownell, 2003). These peer relations also play a role in developing essential interaction skills, such as communication, empathy, and conflict resolution (Hartup, 1983).

Close relationships within the school environment, particularly friendships, serve as crucial developmental contexts for students (Ladd, 1990). These connections offer substantial social support, opportunities for social interactions, and are linked to mental wellbeing (Baumeister & Robson, 2021), reduced social loneliness (Binder et al., 2012), and enhanced academic performance (Ladd, 1990; Rubin et al., 2011; Tepordei et al., 2023). In the current inquiry, students' close relationships extend beyond formal education to include the freedom of choice and shared experiences on the playground. Here, they actively choose which peers to engage with and what activities to pursue, underscoring the significance of autonomy and interpersonal connections in shaping their social dynamics and wellbeing.

Furthermore, the relationships of children in the classroom and on the playground exhibit distinct rules and dynamics that influence both learning and social development (Pellegrini & Blatchford, 2000; Stanton-Chapman & Schmidt, 2021). During recess, students play and collaboratively establish rules for their interactions. These rules form the basis for broader patterns of peer interaction, which can extend into adulthood (Pellegrini, 2006). This aligns with Maxwell's (1990) assertion that "The peer group provides arguably the most efficient and highly motivating context for the learning and development of social skills which will ultimately enable children to live effectively as a member of adult society" (p. 171). Unfortunately, challenges in meeting outside of schools have made the school playground a vital space for children to initiate and foster friendships (Blatchford & Baines, 2006). Notably, a significant portion of 8- to 10-year-olds have never played with friends without adult supervision (Blatchford & Baines, 2010), and nearly a third of 8- to 15-year-olds seldom meet friends beyond school settings (Blatchford et al., 2003).

Given the playground's critical role in friendship and social skill development, understanding how children maintain these relationships during unsettling times holds considerable value.

Positive peer relations, characterized by mutual respect, support, and cooperation (Buhs & Ladd, 2001), play a pivotal role in fostering social and emotional development, nurturing a sense of belonging, acceptance, and emotional wellbeing (Wentzel et al., 2012). These relationships offer invaluable opportunities for children to develop essential social skills such as communication, empathy, and conflict resolution, which are vital for navigating social interactions throughout their lives (Ladd, 1990; Tepordei et al., 2023). Recognizing the importance of positive peer relations in the current study is crucial. Not only do these relationships enhance students' social development, but they also positively impact their school experience, leading to increased academic engagement, motivation, and achievement (Wentzel, 2009). Furthermore, positive peer relations act as a protective shield against various psychosocial challenges such as loneliness, social exclusion, and bullying (Buhs & Ladd, 2001). Thus, fostering positive peer relations in both classroom and playground environments can be necessary for promoting students' overall wellbeing and academic success.

While relationships are important for wellbeing and academic success, challenges can arise that require maintenance behaviors. Maintenance behaviors are proactive actions aimed at resolving challenges and nurturing loyalty within relationships (Oswald & Clark, 2006). These behaviors are integral for children to effectively problem-solve, and play a fundamental role in sustaining and strengthening interpersonal connections. They significantly enhance psychological wellbeing and are associated with overall happiness (Demir et al., 2011). Given the disruptive effects of the pandemic on students' social connections, prioritizing maintenance behaviors becomes essential for preserving and nurturing these connections within the current inquiry. Without adequate support for maintenance behaviors, relationships may be at risk of breaking down, potentially leading to negative impacts on students' social and emotional wellbeing. Therefore, it is crucial to investigate how students develop and use maintenance behaviors, particularly within the creative context of music, to strengthen their social connections and enhance their resilience in the face of adversity.

Storying Action Research

Action research, a collaborative and democratic approach, is utilized to support inquiries that question unjust systems and conventions. In the current inquiry, where restrictions limit students' ability to play with friends on the playground, the children themselves are integral participants and active researchers, seeking ways to connect with their peers. In this cyclical process of planning, development, and reflection, students actively contribute to the research partnership instead of merely being subjects, while I, their music teacher, provide supportive assistance. Action research guides research in music education, addressing topics such as student-centered learning (Mackworth-Young, 1990), positive learning spaces (Black, 1989), self-expression (Miller, 2004), and creative music pedagogies (Auh, 2005; Laidlaw, 2022).

Autoethnography, as a methodological approach, entails a nuanced exploration of personal experiences to unveil deeper understandings of cultural dynamics. Autoethnographers embark on a reflective journey,

weaving individual narratives with broader socio-cultural contexts, thus facilitating profound insights at the intersection of personal and societal realms. Through this approach, I delve into various facets of my experiences, understanding, and interpretations of my students' interactions, particularly their efforts to sustain connections during a pandemic. Concurrently, in action research inquiries, participants gather empirical evidence to capture unfolding situations, aiming to provide detailed descriptions and interpret events as they occur (Mcniff, 2013). In this regard, I employ a contemporary autoethnographic storytelling approach to enable the emergence of creative non-fictional vignettes that depict the unfolding action research inquiry (Ellis, 2004).

While the autoethnographic vignettes reflect my experiences as the teacher, it is important to recognize that my students' experiences are also valuable and important. Thus, as I write and (re)write my experiences, the vignettes are composed in active interplay and dialogue with the students. To maintain anonymity, all identifying characteristics of children have been removed, and pseudonyms have been used in place of actual student names, adhering to the common practice in autoethnography.[2] While autoethnographic research has been widely used to investigate and portray school experiences (i.e., Yanko, 2019; Yanko & Gouzouasis, 2020; Yanko & Yap, 2020), a void exists in the context of music education. However, a mixed-method approach of autoethnography and action research has been successfully employed in general education research (i.e., Filipovic, 2019; Vang et al., 2022), highlighting its applicability to the current study.

This action research inquiry centers on a Grade 4/5 class of 28 students within a suburban public school. Spanning four months, the study begins with three objectives: to weave creativity into the curriculum, navigate the new realities posed by the pandemic, and cultivate new social dynamics based on playground interactions. This inquiry unfolds in an elementary school's music atelier, a learning space inspired by the Reggio Emilia approach and enriched by maker-movement principles, where students autonomously shape their learning paths through exploratory music making (Yanko & Gouzouasis, 2020). Here, the teacher's role as a facilitator empowers students to take ownership of their learning, fostering agency and character development through the negotiation and harmonization of ideas.

Within the elementary school music atelier, various instruments, everyday objects, and natural materials blend effortlessly, enriching students' understanding and creativity. As the action research inquiry progresses, a collection of projects, notes, and dialogues emerge, forming the foundation for three contemporary autoethnographic vignettes. These vignettes provide empirical insights into students' musical engagements and interactions, narrating the inquiry's dynamic progression and capturing the development of their projects, peer feedback, and reflective discussions. This vivid depiction celebrates the students' spirited exploration and innovative approaches to maintaining and fostering new relationships.

Vignette One:
Inventing Playground-Inspired Activities Through Music

Over the past month, the Grade 4/5 students have drafted action plans, tested their projects, and compiled instructions for others to discover and enjoy. The clink and clatter of cardboard being cut fills the room, accompanied by the scent of hot glue wafting in the air. I tidy up scattered cardboard remnants and muse over the transformation of my music classroom into a vibrant, student-centered space, echoing the principles of the action research inquiry. While setting aside a stack of cardboard, my ears pick up an animated discussion, prompting me to inquire about their progress.

"How is your musical marble run coming along?" I ask.

The sound of tinkering stops and Stan replies, "We're strengthening it because parts keep breaking off."

"Did you receive any feedback on the post-it notes from your playground friends?" I question, glancing at the colorful array of notes like a mosaic of input.

"Yeah, Brandon's drawing shows an arrow pointing at a broken part," Stan indicates a yellow post-it note, "and Jake wrote about a place where marbles get stuck. Fixing both of these is next on our to-do list."

Mark interjects, "Oh! A kid named Simon also suggested placing a basket at the end so we don't have to chase marbles across the room. That was clever."

I nod in acknowledgment, leaving them to their improvements and meander to the rhythmic thump-thump-thump of a game in full swing.

"How is your game coming along?"

Max beams, "Take a pump of sanitizer, then grab a Boomwhacker tube to join in."

I comply. The cool, lemony gel evaporates from my hands and I grasp the large, smooth, orange Boomwhacker.

He commands, "Simon says du-de du," and I strike the wooden stump, the impact resonating with the chosen notes back at me.

"Simon says du-da-di, du-da-di, du, du," his voice keeping tempo, as I follow suit.

I whack the correct answer again.

"Du, du, du, du," he tests.

Caught, I tap out the rhythm, the wood sounding a staccato reminder of my eagerness.

"Simon didn't say that," Max grins. "You've got to listen for his name—how do you like our game?"

"I like the idea of playing the game Simon Says. It ties in nicely with recess. Did any of your playground friends leave feedback?"

"We were hoping for some notes, but no one left us anything."

"How does that make you feel?"

"A bit sad because we don't know if anyone likes it, or what to do to make it better."

"You should come up with instructions and leave a stack of post-it notes and pencils for comments," I suggest.

I leave the boys and approach Suzie, engrossed in her game of toss, the air filled with the swish of objects in flight.

"How is the game shaping up?"

"Not bad. I am changing it to make it harder for my friends. They said it was too easy. You know how we play different notes at the same time when we play xylophone music—like how I play music on the glockenspiel and the bass xylophones play different notes? Well, this game is like that."

"That's exciting. How does the xylophone music fit in?"

"There are no xylophones. It's just the idea behind that type of teamwork."

"Aren't there games that you play at recess that are like that as well, games that involve teamwork?"

"So many games, and this brings a bit of that to life. You see, the game is to be played at the same time by two people, playing beats with the egg shaker and jingle bells," she explains and points to the bottom row of cards. "I chose the egg shaker because it has a nice, soft sound that keeps on going. Like in a pandemic when times get hard, you just keep on going. I also picked the jingle bells because COVID started in December. That part has fewer notes in it because if it's too busy, you won't hear the egg shake at the same time. Do you want to try it together?"

We test out the game. Then, I head to some boys huddled around an iPad.

"How is your soundscape composition progressing?"

Marco presses play, and the familiar sounds of the pandemic echo—sanitizer squirts, muffled voices through masks, the schhhh of handwashing. Abruptly, the school bell rings, cutting off Marco mid-sentence. The class hustles to clean up and head outside to their self-contained recess area.
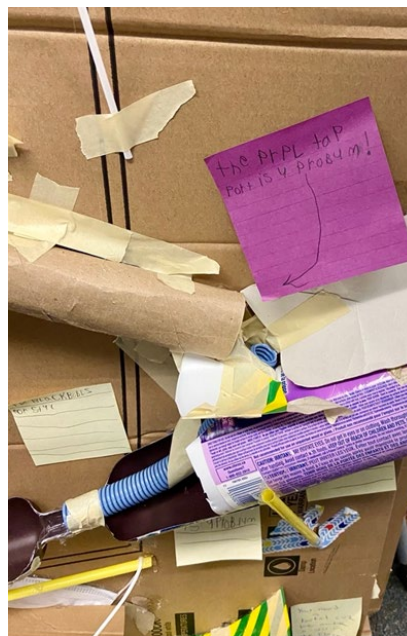
Fig. 1 Musical marble run.

Fig. 2: Feedback from playground friends illustrating issues with a joint in the marble run.

Vignette Two: Let's Play

As students persist in creating songs, games, and activities, the ongoing action research inquiry reveals itself through iterative cycles of planning, formulating, reflecting, and evaluating. This process not only enhances their creations but also nurtures evolving playground relationships, underscoring the participatory nature of action research.

Today, a class of Grade 6 students eagerly test out the students' projects. I meander around the room, observing interactions and reading feedback. As I sift through post-it notes, a detailed one at the musical marble run catches my eye, bursting with suggestions to expand the project.

Jason joins me, his expression clouding as he discards one of the notes. "This one says it sucks. Kids shouldn't write mean things like that," he frowns, the paper crinkling in his grip. "Stan and his friends have put a lot of work into their project and would feel sad if they read that."

Prompted by this, I lead a class discussion about the music atelier as a safe space for exploration and creativity. After, the students resume playing and I join a group listening to the soundscape compositions. I'm greeted by the vibrant energy of the music as I join them huddled around the speakers.

Maya shares, "The first song has a great beat with fun energy. That has to be Emily's touch 'cuz the notes leap through the air and makes me think of her dancing."

"How can you tell?" I inquire.

"It's so Emily. The way the rhythm hops and skips—it's her for sure. I'll leave a note to ask if she crafted that part."

Sophie adds, "The other song has a good beat as well, but it's too loud. I can barely hear the mixture of sounds."

Jasmine chimes in, "Yeah, but the loud siren part sounds cool. It makes me think of an ambulance coming to save them."

I leave the group and head over to Michael sitting at a piano.

"How is the piano song?" I prod.

He answers, "I've mastered the right-hand notes for Demon Slayer."

"And how does it sound?" I encourage.

He beams with a mix of pride and challenge. "It's got that epic video game vibe. Leo's instructions say to master the left hand next, then put the two together."

I leave him to practice and make my way over to students playing the whacking and tossing games. I inquire about their experiences.

Candace explains, "They are both a bit confusing. We sort of get what they are saying, but it's hard to figure out their instructions. At recess, we just figure out the rules of the games. We go along and change them as needed."

Jeffrey adds, "Yeah, we just do it and learn from one another. It's hard with these games because the kids aren't here to show us how to play."

The students explore the various projects for the rest of their music class. When class is over, the Grade 4/5 students eagerly head in to see their feedback and read about their experiences, illustrating the ongoing action research inquiry led by the students.

Fig. 3 Music version of Simon Says game.

A Boomwhacker game.

Fig. 4: Rhythm tossing game using egg shakers and jingle bells.

Vignette Three: Musings on Maintaining Playground Relationships

As the action research inquiry nears completion, we engage in discourse regarding the process and outcomes of their playground-inspired activities and games.

"Did you notice consistent feedback from the same kids week to week?" I prompt, receiving a variety of responses.

Suzie recalls, "Yeah, my friends always left their thoughts on the notes."

Marco attentively shares, "It was a mix. Sometimes friends wrote comments and other times kids I didn't know left them."

The dialogue deepens, exploring the nuances of feedback and its challenges.

Max joins in, "Feedback only started coming when we made the rules for our game. It's not like recess where we all just kinda know what to do without talking." The room echoes with nods of agreement, everyone understanding exactly what he means.

Stan adds, "More comments are better because they show you what to fix."

Janine points out, "Sometimes it was hard to understand the feedback on the notes. When we are on the playground, it's easier to figure things out."

As the class engages in lively conversation, they explore various challenges. These range from figuring out digital compositions to solving the puzzle of marbles trapped in cardboard mazes, and mastering the skill of creating clear instructions.

In a moment of vulnerability, Suzie shares, "Janet suggested that I add singing to my tossing game. I couldn't see that idea working. I didn't want to judge my friends' singing. Besides, how would I know if someone sounds good enough to win the game and toss the egg—"

Kevin interrupts, "We're not supposed to be singing right now because of the pandemic, so it's a good thing you didn't add that."

Despite these challenges, the students express pride in their collaborative efforts to develop their songs and games. Curious about peer feedback, I direct the conversation towards the significance of comments from playground peers.

Stan comments, "I like reading all the nice feedback."

Janine shares, "Jasmine's suggestion of a siren sound led us to create a cool ending for our song."

Marco mentions, "A kid asked us to add more sneezing into our song. We tried, but it made our song too long."

After discussing the feedback, it's clear that the students value friendships and tried out their friends' suggestions, highlighting the importance of their ideas.

Moving on, I ask, "The goal of your action research inquiry was to create activities for playground friends. Did any games remind you of recess?"

Max says, "Suzie's tossing game and our whacking game are similar to ones kids could play at recess."

The discussion progresses, and many students mention the variety of recess activities beyond sports, with Michael saying, "I am not sure my piano song is the ideal recess activity."

Stan adds, "Sometimes kids do quiet activities at recess. Recess isn't just about sports. Some kids like to draw and be creative, so your piano game is good for them."

"What about friendship? Did you feel you maintained playground connections, even though you couldn't play together in the same way?"

Many nod, and Mark reflects, "Jack's post-it notes show me he likes my game. Getting his advice as it developed helped us stay connected. It was like we were playing, but not together. It's hard to explain."

Suzie remarks, "My friends and I don't always agree, but we still play and figure things out. The way the game developed reminded me of that."

Max adds, "I made new friends. I can't wait to play with them and my old friends at recess again."

With these musings, the students engage with each other's activities, laughter and chatter filling the space—embodying the essence of their collective experience and drawing a harmonious close to their action research journey.

Insights and Implications

Understanding the intricate dynamics of peer relations is paramount within the complexities of contemporary education, particularly under the unique challenges of a pandemic. The following discussion delves into insights from the action research inquiry, specifically focusing on sustaining positive peer relations, nurturing close relationships, and understanding the dynamics of playground interactions during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Positive Peer Relations and Close Relationships

The inquiry highlighted the profound impact of peer relations on students' educational development, especially in fostering social competence and personal growth. Through projects like the musical marble run, soundscape compositions, and the Boomwhacker game, students experienced significant social connections. These projects served as important openings for personal development, particularly during challenging times. The engagement of students in these collaborative efforts mirrors findings in existing research, highlighting the significant role that peer interactions play in shaping self-concept and emotional resilience. Studies by Bukowski and Hoza (1989), Markus and Nurius (1984), and Rubin et al. (2011) have shown positive correlations between peer relationships and self-esteem. Building on this, aligning students' personal interests with educational activities enriches peer interactions and extends the learning landscape. For instance, Suzie's tossing game, which integrated elements from her playground experiences, exemplifies how personalization of educational tasks can elevate engagement and motivation. This approach aligns with Krapp's (2002) insights on the transformative power of interest-driven engagement in education. Such personalized educational strategies bridge the gap

between formal and informal learning, enabling students to apply their diverse skills in meaningful contexts and thus significantly enhancing their educational outcomes.

Throughout the pandemic, students have exemplified resilience and adaptability, transforming everyday classroom projects into essential tools for maintaining social connections and emotional wellbeing. Projects like the musical marble run and the tossing game, initially simple pastimes, transformed into vital components of social engagement within the constraints of the pandemic environment. The students demonstrated remarkable resilience and adaptability, along with strong emotional intelligence, which are crucial for maintaining healthy peer relationships. For instance, when Suzie evaluated and subsequently disregarded feedback that conflicted with her vision, it showcased her ability to navigate differing perspectives effectively, a skill crucial for sustaining relationships. Moreover, the vignettes illustrate how initiatives like Stan and Max's marble run address the challenges of social distancing while promoting ongoing engagement and sparking shared creativity. These projects exemplify how empathy and teamwork can not only persist but thrive even in periods of isolation, thereby reinforcing the theme of resilience.

Furthermore, the significance of positive peer relations became increasingly apparent as the skills cultivated through student-centered projects started to impact the learning that was unfolding. Projects such as the musical marble run and the tossing game encouraged spontaneous cooperation, constructive feedback, and the resolution of disagreements. As the students immersed themselves in such activities, they were able to practice important social skills like empathetic understanding, effective communication, and collaborative teamwork towards common objectives. This pattern of interaction, reinforced by positive peer relationships, aligns with the educational research by Malcolm (2021) along with Smith and Lim (2020), who both emphasize the significance of such dynamics in education.

This inquiry also revealed significant autonomy in students' choice of learning activities, reflecting dynamics akin to those in playground interactions. For instance, the way Max, Stan, and Janine integrated diverse viewpoints into their educational projects illustrates how autonomy within the educational setting can emulate the freedom and spontaneity of playground social exchanges. This self-directed learning, and the empowerment it provided, were not only pivotal for fostering individual creativity, but also essential for cultivating and sustaining close relationships among students. Such autonomy allows students to make friends based on their strengths and interests, thereby enhancing their social competencies and emotional wellbeing. Moreover, these instances of autonomy align with the findings of Erdley et al. (2001), Kingery et al. (2011), and Berndt (2002), which underscore the vital role of self-directed, positive interactions in the psychological and social development of children. By encouraging autonomy, the educational environment fosters deeper interpersonal connections, resembling the vibrant, multifaceted dynamics of playground relationships. This not only encourages social resilience but also instills a profound sense of community and mutual respect, which are crucial for development and long-term interpersonal success.

Rules and Dynamics of the Playground

The rules and dynamics of the playground significantly influenced the learning experiences in the elementary school music atelier during the action research inquiry. Students like Max, Stan, and Jake engaged in forms of playground self-monitoring by practicing self-regulation and peer critique, similar to policing each other's contributions. Through this process, they learned essential skills such as compromise, negotiation, and developing their communication skills, crucial for mediating differences and fostering social and emotional growth (Pellegrini, 2006; Yanko & Yap, 2020). Specifically, when Jake added a basket to the end of the marble run to address the issue of chasing marbles, he demonstrated his capacity to incorporate practical feedback into the project's development.

Students encounter the complex challenge of translating the fluid dynamics of play from the playground into concrete classroom instructions. As reflected in their project adjustments, like the addition of nonverbal cues suggested by their peers, the students endeavored to integrate playground rules into the classroom setting. Jeffrey's reflection captured this challenge: "We just do it and learn from one another. It's hard with these games because the kids aren't here to show us how to play." This statement emphasizes the essence of meta-communication—communication that goes beyond words and is rooted in shared experiences and spontaneous interactions (Bateson, 1979). It showcases the challenges in capturing the subtle, often nonverbal cues that govern playground activities, highlighting the significance of meta-communication in facilitating meaning-making in music and social learning (Yanko & Yap, 2020).

Furthermore, the continuity from the playground extended into the classroom, where children like Suzie demonstrated a comparable dedication to their selected activities. This dedication is illuminated in how the students collaborated to create meaningful musical pieces and games, akin to how they routinely reunited to play soccer and other activities during recess. Their joint endeavors reflect the playground's culture of repetitive engagement with favored games and peers, which are essential for nurturing a sense of stability and belonging among children. This process, illustrative of collective meaning-making within a supportive learning network, empowers the development of individual voices among peers (Yanko, 2019).

Maintenance Behaviors

In navigating relationship challenges, children often employ maintenance behaviors to sustain and guide their relationships through difficult times (Rubin et al., 2011). Oswald et al. (2004) identify four primary behaviors crucial for sustaining relationships: positivity, supportiveness, openness, and shared interactions. Positivity was exemplified by Suzie, who, despite encountering challenges with her tossing game, shared it with enthusiasm and maintained an uplifting demeanor throughout the project. Supportiveness was seen when peers, like Max and Jake, provided constructive feedback on each other's projects, such as suggesting practical improvements to the marble run, thereby reinforcing their connection through collaboration. Openness was evident among students, like Stan, who openly shared their thoughts and accepted feedback on their ideas, fostering a transparent environment that enhanced their collective problem-solving efforts. Interaction was highlighted by Suzie and Max, who, despite the physical constraints imposed by the classroom setting, found innovative ways to communicate and coordinate on their projects.

Proactive maintenance behaviors were instrumental in building resilience within the students' evolving friendships, fostering loyalty and confronting challenges. However, questions arise regarding the longevity and evolution of these bonds beyond the structured classroom, within less constrained playground settings. This concern is especially significant in the context of Larivière-Bastien et al. (2022), whose research reveals that virtual interactions during the pandemic failed to replicate the intrinsic qualities inherent in face-to-face interactions essential for forming and maintaining friendships among children.

Resilient Connections in Action

At the outset of the action research inquiry, students set goals that guided their progress. They aimed to infuse creativity into everyday tasks, adapt to the challenges posed by the pandemic, and enhance the quality of their interactions during recess. This research journey vividly demonstrates the power of music to build resilience and deepen friendships, particularly in times of adversity. Yehudi Menuhin insightfully notes, "Rhythm imposes unanimity upon the divergent, melody imposes continuity upon the disjointed, and harmony imposes compatibility upon the incongruous" (1972, p. 14). Similarly, In the dynamic and exploratory environment of the elementary school music atelier, students autonomously shape their learning experiences, fostering agency, creativity, and collaboration.

Building upon these insights, music educators can refine their teaching practices and pedagogies. Firstly, educators should foster collaborative learning environments, akin to the group projects undertaken by students, by providing ample opportunities for collective work and creativity. Encouraging students to collaborate towards shared goals can cultivate teamwork skills and foster a sense of community in the classroom. Secondly, incorporating activities that promote empathy, communication, and conflict resolution skills, similar to the interpersonal interactions observed during the inquiry, can create a supportive and inclusive classroom environment conducive to learning. Lastly, leveraging students' interests in music-making, as demonstrated through the creation of songs and games, serves as a powerful motivator for engagement and participation. By tapping into students' intrinsic motivation and providing opportunities for creative expression, educators can enhance student learning experiences and promote a deeper appreciation for music.

The COVID-19 pandemic has underscored the crucial need for maintaining peer relationships between children on the playground and in the classroom, especially during times of crisis. As McNiff (2013) aptly states, "Doing action research means you consciously hope that something is going to change" (p. 96). Through the lens of action research, I have witnessed firsthand how students' engagement in collaborative music projects not only nurtures their academic growth but also provides a vital outlet for connection during uncertain times. This underscores the need for educators to prioritize student interaction and engagement, recognizing its significant impact on their overall wellbeing and learning outcomes. By acknowledging the value of playground friendships and the resilience of children in maintaining them, there is hope that these connections will endure beyond challenging times, fostering the emergence of new relationships rooted in shared experiences and mutual support.

Notes

1. In some countries, the term *breaktime* is used to represent informal playtime outside of structured instructional time. However, the term *recess* is preferred in Canada and the United States.

2. Consent has been provided for use of audio clips, written observations, and photos. This research was conducted in accordance with research guidelines set by the University of British Columbia's Behavioural Research Ethics Board (and autoethnographic works approved in provisos H13-01168, H13-03210, H16-01244, and H18-02451).

References

Auh, M. S. (2005). Make a difference in a public high school? A personal experience in music classes. *A Celebration of Voices: XV National Conference Proceedings. Australian Society for Music Education* (pp. 13–18). https://search.informit.org/doi/10.3316/informit.801906590786657

Bateson, G. (1979). *Mind and Nature*. EP Dutton.

Baumeister, R. F., & Robson, D. A. (2021). Belongingness and the modern schoolchild: On loneliness, socioemotional health, self-esteem, evolutionary mismatch, online sociality, and the numbness of rejection. *Australian Journal of Psychology, 73*(1), 103–111. https://doi.org/10.1080/00049530.2021.1877573

Berndt, T. J. (2002). Friendship quality and social development. *Current Directions in Psychological Science, 11*(1), 7–10. https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-8721.00157

Binder, J. F., Roberts, S. G. B., & Sutcliffe, A. G. (2012). Closeness, loneliness, support: Close ties and significant ties in personal communities. *Social Networks, 34*, 206–214. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socnet.2011.12.001

Black, C. (1998). Improving group dynamics and student motivation in a grade 9 music class. *The Ontario Action Researcher, 1*(1). https://oar.nipissingu.ca/archive-Vol1-V111E.htm

Blatchford, P., & Baines, E. (2006). *A follow up national survey of breaktimes in primary and secondary schools*. Nuffield Foundation.

Blatchford. P., & Baines, E. (2010). Peer relations in school. In K. Littleton, C. Wood, & J. Kleine Staarman (Eds), *International handbook of psychology in education* (pp. 227–276). Emerald.

Blatchford, P., Baines, E., & Pellegrini, A. (2003). The social context of school playground games: sex and ethnic differences, and changes over time after entry to junior school. *British Journal of Developmental Psychology, 21*(4), 481–505. https://doi.org/10.1348/026151003322535183

Buhs, E. S., & Ladd, G. W. (2001). Peer rejection as an antecedent of young children's school adjustment: An examination of mediating processes. *Developmental Psychology, 37*(4), 550–560. https://doi.org/10.1037/0012-1649.37.4.550

Bukowski, W. M., Hoza, B. (1989). Popularity and friendship: Issues in theory, measurement, and outcome. In T. J. Berndt & G. W. Ladd (Eds.), *Peer relationships in child development* (pp. 15–45). Wiley.

Cervantes Saavedra, M. D. (1907). *Don Quixote* (C. Jervas, Trans.) H. Frowde.

Demir, M., Özdemir, M., & Marum, K. P. (2011). Perceived autonomy support, friendship maintenance, and happiness. *Journal of Psychology, 145*, 537–571. https://doi.org/10.1080/00223980.2011.607866

Ellerbrock, C., Kiefer, S. M., & Alley, K. M. (2014). School-based interpersonal relationships: Setting the foundation for young adolescents' belonging in middle school. *Middle Grades Research Journal, 9*(2), 1–17.

Ellis, C. (2004). *Autoethnographic I: A methodological novel about autoethnography*. AltaMira Press.

Erdley, C. A., Nangle, D. W., Newman, J. E., & Carpenter, E. M. (2001). Children's friendship experiences and psychological adjustment: Theory and research. *New Directions for Child and Adolescent Development, 91,* 5–24. https://doi.org/10.1002/cd.3

Filipović, J. (2019). Transdisciplinary qualitative paradigm in applied linguistics: autoethnography, participatory action research and minority language teaching and learning. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education, 32*(5), 493–509. https://doi.org/10.1080/09518398.2019.1597209

Gifford-Smith, M. E., & Brownell, C. A. (2003). Childhood peer relationships: Social acceptance, friendships and peer networks. *Journal of School Psychology, 41,* 235–284. https://doi.org/10.1016/S0022-4405(03)00048-7

Hartup, W. (1983). Peer relations. In E. M. Hetherington (Ed.), *Handbook of child psychology, Vol IV: Socialization, personality, and social development* (pp. 103–196). Wiley.

Kingery, J. N., Erdley, C. A., & Marshall, K. C. (2011). Peer acceptance and friendship as predictors of early adolescents' adjustment across the middle school transition. *Merrill-Palmer Quarterly, 57*(3), 215–243. https://doi.org/10.1353/mpq.2011.0012

Krapp, A. (2002). Structural and dynamic aspects of interest development: Theoretical considerations from an ontogenetic perspective. *Learning and Instruction, 12*(4), 383–409. https://doi.org/10.1016/S0959-4752(01)00011-1

Ladd, G. W. (1990). Having friends, keeping friends, making friends, and being liked by peers in the classroom: Predictors of children's early school adjustment? *Child Development, 61,* 1081–1100. https://doi.org/10.2307/1130877

Laidlaw, J. (2022). An action research study to enhance a music teacher's creative pedagogies with children. *Canadian Journal of Action Research, 22*(2), 72–90.

Larivière-Bastien, D., Aubuchon, O., Blondin, A., Dupont, D., Libenstein, J., Séguin, F., Tremblay, A., Zarglayoun, H., Herba, C. M., & Beauchamp, M. H. (2022). Children's perspectives on friendships and socialization during the COVID-19 pandemic: A qualitative approach. *Child: Care, Health & Development, 48*(6), 1017–1030. https://doi.org/10.1111/cch.12998

Mackworth-Young, L. (1990). Pupil-centred learning in piano lessons: An evaluated action-research programme focusing on the psychology of the individual. *Psychology of Music, 18*(1), 73–86. https://doi.org/10.1177/0305735690181006

Malcom, D. R. (2021). Loneliness as a downstream concern in a pandemic (and post-pandemic) world. *American Journal of Pharmaceutical Education, 85*(4), 251–254. https://doi.org/10.5688/ajpe8456

Markus, H. J., & Nurius, P. S. (1984). Self-understanding and self-regulations in middle childhood. In W. A. Collins (Ed.), *Development during middle childhood* (pp. 147–183). National Academy Press.

Maxwell, W. (1990). The nature of friendship in the primary school. In C. Rogers & P. Kutnick (Eds.), *The social psychology of the primary school* (pp. 169–189). Routledge.

McNiff, J. (2013). *Action research: Principles and practice* (3rd Ed.). Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203112755

Menuhin, Y. (1972). *Theme and variations*. Stein & Day.

Miller, B. A. (2004). Designing compositional tasks for elementary music classrooms. *Research Studies in Music Education, 22*(1), 59–71. https://doi.org/10.1177/1321103X040220010901

Oswald, D. L., & Clark, E. M. (2006). How do friendship maintenance behaviors and problem-solving styles function at the individual and dyadic levels? *Personal Relationships, 13,* 333–348. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1475-6811.2006.00121.x

Oswald, D. L., Clark, E. M., & Kelly, C. M. (2004). Friendship maintenance: An analysis of individual and dyad behaviors. *Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology, 23*, 413–441. https://doi.org/10.1521/jscp.23.3.413.35460

Pellegrini, A. D. (2006). *Recess: Its role in education and development.* Taylor & Francis. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781410613325

Pellegrini, A., & Blatchford, P. (2000). *The child at school: Interactions with peers and teachers*. Arnold.

Rubin, K. H., Coplan, R., Chen, X., Bowker, J., & McDonald, K. L. (2011). Peer relationships in childhood. In M. E. Lamb, & M. H. Bornstein (Eds.), *Social and personality development* (pp. 309–360). Psychology Press. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203813386

Smith, B. J., & Lim, M. H. (2020). How the COVID-19 pandemic is focusing attention on loneliness and social isolation. *Public Health Research & Practice, 30*(2). https://doi.org/10.17061/phrp3022008

Stanton-Chapman, T. L., & Schmidt, E. L. (2021). How do the children play? The influence of playground type on children's play styles. *Frontiers in Psychology, 12*. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2021.703940

Țepordei, A., Zancu, A. S., Diaconu-Gherasim, L. R., Crumpei-Tanasă, I., Măirean, C., Sălăvăstru, D., & Labăr, A. V. (2023). Children's peer relationships, well-being, and academic achievement: The mediating role of academic competence. *Frontiers in Psychology, 14*. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2023.1174127

Vang, M., Wolfgram, M., Smolarek, B., Lee, L., Moua, P., Thao, A., Xiong, O., Xiong, P. K., Xiong, Y., & Yang, L. (2022). Autoethnographic engagement in participatory action research: Bearing witness to developmental transformations for college student activists. *Action Research, 21*(1), 104–123. https://doi.org/10.1177/14767503221145347

Wentzel, K. R. (2009). Peers and academic functioning at school. In K. H. Rubin, W. M. Bukowski, & B. Laursen (Eds.), *Handbook of peer interactions, relationships, and groups* (pp. 531–547). The Guilford Press.

Wentzel, K. R., Baker, S. A., & Russell, S. L. (2012). Young adolescents' perceptions of teachers' and peers' goals as predictors of social and academic goal pursuit. *Applied Psychology, 61*(4), 605–633. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1464-0597.2012.00508.x

Yanko, M. (2019). Learners' identity through soundscape composition: Extending the pedagogies of Loris Malaguzzi with music pedagogy. *LEARNingLandscapes*, *12*(1), 271–284. https://doi.org/10.36510/learnland.v12i1.994

Yanko, M., & Gouzouasis, P. (2020). Deconstructing the pedagogies of Freinet, Malaguzzi, and the maker movement in an elementary school music atelier. *Journal of Artistic & Creative Education, 14*(2), 1–13.

Yanko, M., & Yap, P. (2020). A symbiotic link between music, movement, and social emotional learning: Mindful learning in early learners. *LEARNingLandscapes, 13*(1), 249–264. https://doi.org/10.36510/learnland.v13i1.1018

Matthew Yanko is an instructor in the Department of Curriculum and Pedagogy at the University of British Columbia. His research highlights music education, with a focus on social justice, arts-based research, early childhood and contemporary music pedagogies, and social-emotional learning. His doctoral dissertation, *Living assessment: The artful assessment of learning in the arts*, (2021), brings light to the art of assessment, and earned the Elliot Eisner Educational Imagination Award. Matthew has 15 years of elementary and secondary teaching experience, with a strong background in diversity and inclusion, inquiry, and assessment.