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Editorial

Kathleen Nolan and Valerie Triggs, *University of Regina*

Hello, and welcome to the 2025 Spring/Summer issue of *in education*! Valerie and Kathleen are so pleased to be reunited again as co-Editors-in-Chief after Kathleen's six-month research sabbatical. Thanks to Gale Russell, who served as interim co-Editor-in-Chief during this time. We have a packed issue for readers, with seven highly educational and stimulating research articles and one book review. We trust you will enjoy each and every contribution.

To ease ourselves out of the summer season, we begin this issue with an article featuring meditative inquiry. In this first article, entitled *Cultivating Awareness, Reverence, and Autonomy in Students: Meditative Inquiry as a Catalyst to Holistic Learning and Living*, **Ashwani Kumar and Shane Theunissen** draw on Dialogical Meditative Inquiry (DMI) to highlight the importance of self for teaching, learning, and living. Through a conversational style of writing, the authors take the reader into the topics of critical reflection, environmental education, meditative inquiry, and reverence for nature, life, and learning. They aim to reveal how the processes of DMI can be used to facilitate learning relationships.

Following from this focus on meditation and learning relationships, we present an article that highlights the concepts of belonging and connection in schools. In *Investigating School Belonging Using Socio-Ecological Systems Theory*, **Tara Poole** offers a literature review on school belonging, illustrating that it is a complex and multifaceted phenomenon. In this article, the author draws on Bronfenbrenner's levels of development and ecological systems theory of human development to work toward a comprehensive model of school belonging, which includes strategies for promoting in students a sense of belonging and connection to/in school.

With a slight shift in attention from the belonging and connection of students to that of educators, the next article in this issue explores how educators can nurture their own sense of belonging through collaborative learning communities. In *Collaborating with Critical Friends: Exploring Picture Books Through Self-study in Secondary and Post-Secondary Classrooms*, four researchers and educators, **Carolyn Clarke**, **Evan Throop-Robinson**, **Ellen Carter**, and **Jo Anne Broders**, draw on collaborative critical self-study to explore picture books as a pedagogical tool in secondary and post-secondary institutions. They report several critical findings in relation to how and why specific literature is selected (or not), as well as implications for educators who aim to learn and grow their professional practice through collaborative learning communities.

What better way to learn and grow toward learning communities than to involve students as mathematics mentors in schools? In their article entitled *Strength-Based Pedagogies in Mathematics Education: "I Like Being Your Little Teacher,"* **Kaja Burt-Davies** and **Annica Andersson** provide a unique perspective on what can be learned when sixth-grade students serve as mathematics mentors for the younger students in their school. With their research data based on observations and interviews, the authors draw on positioning theory and storylines to study how the strength-based, cross-age mentoring process positions these sixth-grade students as mathematics learners. Burt-Davies and Andersson identify several storylines that point to the social and academic value of creating these kinds of learning-focused relationships and contexts, ones that provide meaningful experiences for both mentor and mentee alike.

Maintaining a focus on relationships in schools but shifting focus attention to teachers' experience of reconciliation goals, the article, *7 of 8: Decreased Planning Time as a Barrier to Reconciliation Education* by **Susan Legge** and **Adrian M. Downey,** describes a phenomenological research study designed to explore how ongoing reductions in teacher planning time is impeding progress toward the goals of, and commitment toward, truth and reconciliation in schools. The authors draw on Giroux's idea of educators as transformatory intellectuals to make the point that reconciliatory work in education demands that teachers have time and space to work through "the complex histories and contemporary contexts involved in reconciliation" (Legge & Downey, *this issue*).

The next article in this issue also features the topic of how truth and reconciliation is (or is not) being lived out with the article entitled, *Morality and the Academic Journey: Perspectives of Indigenous Scholars,* contributed by **Frank Deer** and **Rebeca Heringer**. In their study, Deer and Heringer investigate how Indigenous Faculty members understand and acquire moral understandings, including the sources of knowledge from which faculty gather this understanding. The authors argue that genuine reconciliatory efforts must strive to broaden moral conceptualizations. They share perspectives of morality guided by principles stemming from Stonechild's Seven Sacred Teachings, which are not codified perceptions of behaviour but rather cyclical, dynamic, and intercultural understandings. Deer and Heringer's findings stress the importance of incorporating Indigenous perspectives into academic programming and the need for consideration of how Indigenous conceptions of morality are currently present in the academic institution.

Our final research article in this issue ends on a joyful note with *Exploring and Progressing the Concept of Joyful Teaching in Higher Education*, by **Muhammad Asadullah** and **James Gacek**. These authors address the question of 'what makes teaching joyful?' through qualitative research interviews with university faculty. Asadullah and Gacek connect decolonizing teaching praxis with ideas around joyful teaching to suggest that, by placing greater emphasis on joyful teaching in higher education, students can experience transformational learning as evident in their ability to critically reflect and build new perspectives.

To round out this Spring/Summer issue, we offer **Twyla Salm**'s book review of *Teaching Classroom Controversies: Navigating Complex Teaching Issues in the Age of Fake News and Alternative Facts* (2024)*,* written by Glenn Y. Bezalel. Salm presents a careful and thorough account of how author Bezalel seeks to help educators navigate the teaching of controversial issues in the classroom. In addition to providing her 'wish list' for the next edition, Salm commends Bezalel for the creative and intentional ways in which he draws the reader into professional and critical reflection on a range of controversial topics.

We hope you will enjoy reading the richly diverse contributions in this issue. As always, we extend a special note of appreciation to our managing editor, Marzieh Mosavarzadeh, for her excellent manuscript editing and journal production skills. Until the Autumn 2025 issue, we wish you well.

Cultivating Awareness, Reverence, and Autonomy in Students: Meditative Inquiry as a Catalyst to Holistic Learning and Living

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I, Ashwani Kumar, would like to thank my RA, Jamie Caron, for his editorial assistance in finalizing this paper.

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Abstract

This conversational paper between Ashwani Kumar and Shane Theunissen explores how meditative inquiry in teaching and learning can foster reverence for nature, life, and learning. Through an organic and reflective conversation rooted in Dialogical Meditative Inquiry (DMI), the authors offer a holistic exploration of the intersections between personal transformation, environmental awareness, and holistic education. The authors emphasize that meditative inquiry challenges predetermined educational outcomes and encourages a profound, personal transformation that can lead to social change. Authors discuss how meditative inquiry can facilitate learning relationships that promote student autonomy and awareness, and how it can instill reverence for life. The paper considers how awe, wonder, and reverence can shift educational paradigms from mechanistic models toward contemplative, relational approaches informed by Indigenous and meditative perspectives. The conversation also highlights the strong connection between meditative inquiry and Indigenous ways of knowing, both of which are rooted in a deep reverence for nature and a harmonious relationship with the natural world. The paper promotes a contemplative and holistic approach to education and living, suggesting that personal transformation through meditative inquiry can contribute to a more respectful and interconnected relationship with oneself, others, and the environment. By challenging dominant narratives in education and promoting meditative and emergent dialogue, the authors advocate for education as a regenerative and transformative practice grounded in deep listening, interconnectedness, and awareness.

Keywords: meditative inquiry, reverence, dialogical meditative inquiry, holistic education, nature, Indigenous philosophy

Cultivating Awareness, Reverence, and Autonomy in Students: Meditative Inquiry as a Catalyst to Holistic Learning and Living

In this conversational paper, we, Ashwani Kumar and Shane Theunissen, explore how meditative inquiry as an approach to teaching and learning can act as a catalyst for reverence toward nature, life, and learning. Through the processes of Dialogical Meditative Inquiry (DMI) (Kumar, 2022; Kumar & Downey, 2018, 2019; Kumar & Fisher, 2021)[1], we offer a holistic understanding of the importance of self within broader social, political, and economic structures. We discuss how meditative inquiry may facilitate learning relationships that promote student autonomy and awareness while engaging in moments that instill reverence and reflection. For the benefit of the readers new to meditative inquiry, we try to clearly describe its fundamental principles in a way that is accessible to everyone. The conversation provides an exemplary synthesis of critical reflection, environmental education, and meditative inquiry. It is this synthesis that is the catalyst to deepen our understanding of power, education, and relationships.

The key questions that we explored in this paper include: 1) What is the meaning of authenticity and meaningfulness in the context of meditative inquiry? 2) How can an individual struggling to meet survival needs become engaged in the reflective and meditative process? 3) What are the political implications of meditative inquiry? 4) What is the role of reverence in teaching and learning? 5) What are the intersections between meditative inquiry and Indigenous philosophy? and 6) How may we inculcate reverence for life in ourselves and our students and children?

It is important to note that while the conversation captured in this article was structured around guiding questions, all follow-up questions and insights emerged organically as a result of the stimulus of the conversation. It is our sincere hope that educators and students may find inspiration in the ideas presented in this paper and embark on their journeys of critical dialogue, reflection, reverence, and discovery.[2]

In the next section, Shane introduces himself and outlines the experiences that have brought him and Ashwani to a moment of conversational intersection that is captured in this article. The next section is followed by the conversation.

Laying the Ground for Conversation by Shane Theunissen

Sitting down to write this preamble presented an opportunity to contemplate the complexity of this seemingly innocuous action. Hidden within any brief synopsis we articulate to introduce ourselves is the intersection of countless socio-political undercurrents that constitute the narrative that we choose to define our positionality. And this, of course, might even be the intent or the expectation of holistic education and meditative inquiry. As for me, and I feel I can only speak to my own experience, I have struggled with this through every personal introduction for the past 36 years. I was born a white South African male in what some might describe as one of the most absurdly racist societies in recent memory (Drury, 1967). Many of my childhood and early adolescent memories of landscapes, the heat, the smells from the confines of small spaces and woodsmoke, and the immeasurable expanses of the Karoo and its environs evoke a sense of happiness and contentment. I understand in a way that squeezes my heart what is meant when that place, far from

[1] For similar approaches that use dialogue in the process of inquiry and writing, see Margolin & Jones (2024); McLaren & Rikowski (2016); Mclaughlin & Kelly (2009); Shor & Freire (1987).
[2] You can watch the virtual conversation here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t0caetcVJmw

my new home and life in Nova Scotia (Canada), is described as "beautiful beyond any singing of it" (Paton, p. 1987). It is only in hindsight that I know my happiness and contentment were contingent and achieved only through the appropriation of land, resources and privilege that was exacted, in most instances through brutish savagery, by my race and class. There is no way for me to reconcile these feelings that are the catalyst to my acute understanding of moral injury. But what I do know is that the South African apartheid regime perpetuated its hate through a narrative that foreclosed any possibility of alternative storylines (Willis, 2009). To this end, I have an impassioned interest in dialectic processes as mechanisms that undermine attempts at censorship while concurrently challenging the hegemonic normative discourse.

It was through a conversation with a respected colleague, whose work has a significant focus on moral injury within the context of potential conflict zones, including Rwanda (Baillie-Abidi & Cleave, 2024), that I was introduced to the idea of Dialogic Meditative Inquiry (DMI). While I did not, after this initial conversation, fully understand the concept of DMI, the name resonated with me because, for me, teaching is centred on the dialogic processes of the Socratic method. Further to this, with my academic journey's focus on depoliticizing education with a particular focus on experiential learning, I began to wonder if part of the experiential education process might include a dialogue between individuals and the natural context that they engage with. It was at this time that I, fortuitously, reconnected with Ashwani. As we walked the picket line as part of our collective job action in February and March of 2024 at Mount Saint Vincent University in Halifax (Nova Scotia, Canada), we spoke of the potential that our ongoing conversations might have for a broader readership, and we committed to publishing this article.

Ashwani suggested that I, in preparation for our collaboration, develop a line of questioning that might address issues that I wished to explore. To this end, I recognized this as an opportunity to extend my thinking around human and environmental interrelations. One of the moments that was a catalyst to my thinking occurred on a recent trans-Atlantic sailing trip with my daughter. We had the absolute pleasure of watching a 14-foot swordfish that followed our sailboat for about 20-30 minutes. My daughter was so excited from seeing this spectacular fish changing its colours from deep blues to radiant purples as it swam leisurely, keeping pace with our boat, that her body was shaking. When reflecting on this moment, I thought to myself, something is happening here that is special. I wanted to try and understand how we can look at a reverent moment like this and use it as a way to help engage students in learning generally and engaging in learning with nature specifically. I started thinking about awe and wonder, which challenge current conceptions of ocean literacy, which I feel lacks humility (Guest et al., 2015; McPherson et al., 2020). Through my engagement with awe and wonder, as mechanisms for promoting engagement, I came across the concept of *reverence*. Some of the authors were talking about awe and wonder as a passive reception of the incalculable, the mysterious, and the unknown, while reverence was articulated as a more reflexively active engagement with this space.

Shawn Wilson (2008) in his book *Research as Ceremony* (2008) talks about the space between humans and the environment as being sacred (p. 87). In my mind, awe and wonder did not encapsulate the sacredness of the space between human beings and the environment. However, reverence does. So, I see the idea of ceremony as being the enactment of reverence. When people engage in ceremony, they enact reverence for the space or the moment, or whatever it is that they are engaging with. From my rudimentary understanding of meditative inquiry, I see that meditative inquiry might be inextricably linked to reverence, and I humbly engage in this dialogue to explore these intersections with Ashwani.

Conversation

Shane: In preparing for this conversation, I read a few of your articles, Ashwani (Kumar & Downey, 2018, 2019; Kumar & Fisher, 2021), and found myself, as a neophyte to this process and space, challenged by the subjectivity which appears to be central to meditative inquiry. Based on my study of your ideas, I have two streams of questions. The first set is burdened by my background, and my questions reflect a skepticism that I approach most topics with, and may seem antagonistic, but please know this is not my intention. The second set represents excerpts or ideas that I found intriguing in your writings, especially the opportunity to explore how mediative inquiry could work in engagement with nature. In reading your work, it does not seem as though we can separate those two streams of questions because I think they probably are linked, but I have arbitrarily separated them so we can leave it at that, and then maybe as we move along, we can unpack them. Does that feel good for you?

Ashwani: I think that is wonderful. It is important for me to know where you are coming from, what the purpose of the conversation is, and what your thoughts and intentions are behind coming to this space of mutual exploration.

I am very intrigued by the questions or the thoughts that you have, and I am very willing to engage with them, especially because nature, which seems to occupy your thinking, is very central to meditative inquiry. As you might recall, I sent you a description of one of the assignments from one of my course outlines where I have asked students to do a nature reflection journal[3], which encourages them to spend time in nature, observe nature, listen to nature, and then be aware of what happens to them and what they learn about nature and themselves through that engagement (see Kumar et al., 2023). So, I think that is a very important aspect of my whole pedagogy.

One of the key principles of meditative inquiry is questioning everything without fear and creating dialogue between and among people rather than, as Paulo Freire (2000) discusses, imposing one's notions of truth, what is right and what is not right, and what individuals can do and what they cannot do. So, I welcome your critical questioning.

While it is important to have some prepared questions, the nature of dialogical meditative inquiry is spontaneous and emergent (see Somerville & Powell, 2022; Stacey, 2011); one can come to the dialogic space with questions and intentions, but then it opens the space for exploration (see

[3] Description of the Nature Reflection Journal Assignment: Developing ecological consciousness is central to education, particularly social studies education. The purpose of this assignment is to create opportunities for you to develop a deeper awareness of and connection with nature. Ancient cultures have known it throughout human history, and there is a lot of evidence now that suggests, that spending time in nature is beneficial to our health and well-being. Each student will be working on a nature reflection journal throughout this course based on their experiences of spending time in nature in a contemplative, reflective, and meditative way. How often should you spend time in nature? As often as you can! Try to make it part of your life this term and at least do it once or twice a week. There is no specific format, word limit, or structure for this assignment. I want you to use your own intuition in preparing this reflection journal. Feel free to use pictures, videos, artwork, poetry, and music to share your reflections. Please write a brief introduction (to describe the approach you took to report your experiences with this activity) and conclusion (to explain the impact it had on you and how may an activity like this inform your own teaching). You will be requested to briefly share your reflections on your experiences in nature in the class a few times during the course. We will discuss more about this and other assignments in class.

Kumar & Caron, 2024). So, listening to something new that can emerge through conversation is so central to the process of meditative inquiry.

Shane: Yes, absolutely. I was talking to my wife the other day, and I mentioned that we are doing a lot of curriculum mapping in our department (Department of Child and Youth Study). I was saying that it is kind of tricky for me because a lot of the time in my classes, I am engaging in this emerging curricular process, which means that we do not necessarily want to have those prescribed curriculum restrictions. So, I appreciate your emphasis on the emergent process.

Let us start with the sort of politically oriented questions first, and we will see how the conversation goes from there. And then hopefully we can get to those nature-related questions as well in a bit. A lot of these questions are coming from my lack of experience with meditative inquiry or a holistic learning approach, but one of the things that you mentioned in relation to meditative inquiry that stands out to me is the significance of authenticity and meaningfulness. You wrote:

> Unless there is a real passion to understand and explore, and unless students and I ask authentic and meaningful questions, for me, true and transformative education is not occurring (Downey & Kumar, 2018).

When I read those words, I struggle with how we might define what "authentic" and "meaningful" are. I recognize that those are subjective terms. When you are engaging a group of people or students and you are talking about authenticity and meaningfulness, I am curious as to how you present that to the class or even to me, a student in this space. How am I to understand those concepts as they apply to meditative inquiry?

Ashwani: Wonderful question, Shane. The kind of educational spaces that we have constructed in schools and universities are mediated by a given curriculum, a curriculum that is a contested space, a space that is negotiated between different power influences (Kumar, 2019). What gets reflected in the curriculum is dominated by people in power, those who have control, and that is why the curriculum reflects power. It is a reflection of whose truth or whose ideologies are more relevant, whose knowledge is more important to learn. That is what gets reflected in the curriculum, and because of that, we create inauthentic spaces in schools and universities.

What gets reflected in the curriculum and what is studied in the classrooms in schools and universities lacks authenticity. In schools, there is very little academic freedom – what the teacher needs to teach is already decided and is often linked to the standardized testing that happens at the end of the course. It is the pre-decided nature of what knowledge has the most worth, including how that knowledge should be engaged with, that takes away the authenticity and meaningfulness from learning and educational experience, because it is not the teacher's or student's inner pursuit of learning and exploration that is informing the educational space. Rather, it is the pressures of society, the pressures of the government, the pressures of the educational system, and the demands of the economic systems that are dominating the educational space. By the time a student comes to the educational space, they are not sure whether they are authentically interested in that subject matter, whether that subject matter means something to them, and because of that, the possibility of learning that transforms you deeply, changes your mind deeply, invigorates you, doesn't exist. That is one response to that question.

There is another response as well. Often, students are doing the work to achieve a grade or to respond to the demands of the person in authority, who is the professor or the schoolteacher.

Because the orientation is not necessary to explore oneself and what one wants to do, but it is driven by the authority of the teacher or the authority of the system, all of this also undermines authenticity and meaningfulness. What I do to avoid this in my courses is encourage students to choose the work and readings that they want to engage with. Of course, if I had unlimited time with them, I would construct the whole curriculum with them. But even in the design that I develop before the course starts, there are options for them to choose their reading material, and to write very open reflective journals on topics that draw their attention. From the very beginning, in every step of the curriculum design, I promote their engagement and curiosity.

What they want to explore is made central in the course and is made clear to them from the very beginning. If you look at my course evaluations, students leave positive remarks about the engagement that I have with them. They emphasize the value of an open dialogical atmosphere in which we explore the thoughts and ideas together, where everybody shares what they find meaningful in what we, as a class, are studying. To make it authentic, it is also made very clear to them that they should not complete the assignments for me. I say to them "Do this work for yourself because once you have the taste of this freedom and this creative exploration, you are going to encourage that in your own pedagogical spaces, you will also encourage authenticity among your students and encourage them to find meaning in what they are doing, rather than just conforming to what is already decided for them."

Shane: You suggested that once student-teachers experienced freedom from some of those structures, such as imposed curriculum, they would want to promote those same processes in their own learning spaces. It is interesting that you say that freedom is not a technique; it is a way of being. It is something that you have to embody, and it has to become part of who you are, so that it is authentic; if it is not a part of who you are, then it lacks this authenticity.

I quite liked the idea of personal transformation, but one of the things that I am perhaps struggling with is how this relates to Maslow's (1958) hierarchy of needs. In Maslow's model, personal transformation is the actualization of self. It is pretty near the top of Maslow's pyramid. But you may have students who are still working, maybe on survival needs, and they do not necessarily have the luxury (or maybe the privilege) of being able to release themselves in the space created by meditative inquiry. If they have time to be able to reflect, maybe that is the time that they would rather put into meeting their survival needs. So, the question is: How does this individual who is stuck trying to meet survival needs become engaged in this reflective process that is meant to bring them freedom?

Ashwani: I think that is a very important question. I want to address two points from your narration. One is the idea of how, as a society, our way of being is often conditioned. The social forces are not just economic forces. They are political forces. They are cultural forces. They are market forces. There are influences that emanate from the media. There are also impacts that come from the music, the arts, and the literature. Whatever discourse is floating around us shapes our way of being. In fact, it shapes us biologically: how we move, how our eyes move, how we speak, how we listen, etc. So much of our thinking and behaviour is constructed by the discourses that are going on around us. The fact is that human beings live in the space of knowledge, the constructed knowledge space – I am referring to knowledge as all kinds of thought patterns that are around us, whether it is from the economic system or the cultural practices or the religious practices or the political ideologies and whatnot. This whole knowledge web and discourse are around us from the very moment we take birth, and it begins to shape the way we are and the way we act in the world. One of the significant aspects of meditative inquiry is to realize this network

of thought, this web of discourse around us, so that we begin to see how it has shaped us and constructed us in our specific contexts. When we observe and question how we, as individuals, have been shaped by our environment, we begin to have space in our mind, in our brain, which allows for the possibility of freedom. But if we do not even realize this, recognize this, and begin to see how the environment impacts us and our relationship on a day-to-day basis, I think there is very little space for freedom, for real freedom. That is one aspect.

The other aspect is about the survival needs. First, I want to begin by acknowledging that life can become very difficult for many of us. For example, what has been happening in the Gaza Strip, and even though that is an extreme case, there are so many other examples from all around the world where people are dealing with extreme difficulties. People in these situations do not have food to eat or shelter. There is a wave of migration that is happening. People are trying to find a place where they can be safe and where they can live their lives without extreme distress. Before the national boundaries became so impermeable, there was a possibility for people to migrate and move as they pleased, as their circumstances allowed, and find different places to live and raise their families. But now we have made it so bureaucratized, so racist, so nationalistic, that it is very difficult for people to find places to be where they can feel safe and secure and pursue work that they want to do. People rave about Canada giving space to people to come here, but most of it is economically driven and highly selective, which we can perhaps explore another time.

I am giving these examples to point out how difficult we have made life for people in many parts of the world to just have a proper living. There are so many reasons – economic, political, but also deeply psychological and spiritual reasons – for the way we have collectively created these unjust structures, where only some people can live properly and sufficiently, and a majority of us are struggling very hard. When that is the kind of situation for a majority of the population of the world, that situation in itself is creating a context where meditativeness is not possible. Because if we are struggling for the survival and safety of ourselves and our family and community, then that state is not conducive to meditation, because we are in a state of constant struggle.

There is one more very important thing that should be recognized as well: many of us may not be interested in meditative exploration. Because of the social structures that we live in, we grow in a context that emphasizes desire. We emphasize competition and desire in the sense of getting more and more in the capitalist society. The comparison that is enforced on us to be somebody else or be better than somebody else forces us to keep struggling in a social structure for our survival and betterment.

All kinds of people are coming to my classroom, including international students who are struggling because of the lack of employment and high rents, as well as teachers who feel oppressed in the public education system. Whatever inner and outer pressures they are bringing with them, I try to create an educational space where there is at least a moment of relief, where they can explore how they are being bombarded in their specific contexts, and what struggles they are currently experiencing.

I just taught a course called “Music of India” through the Cultural Studies program at MSVU, and in the first hour of each lesson, we, as a class, sat on the floor close to each other. We did some vocal warmups, some physical warmups, and then learned songs rooted in Indian classical music. We mastered 3 songs that we performed at a public event at the end of the course. I did not know what their response would be to all this. They unanimously expressed that for them

this was a very meditative experience, although the music and the language of the songs–Hindi–was completely new to most of them.

What I am trying to convey is that if we can create educational and social spaces where being together and working on your well-being is important, then through that, we can sow the seeds for creating a different society. If students can be educated to understand themselves, reflect on their thoughts and emotions, and sit together in a community, they will grow and learn in very different ways. But society, especially Western societies, creates so many barriers between individuals due to a strong emphasis on ego, self, and identity. It seems there are barriers between people - invisible walls - which do not allow them to connect at a deeper level. I do not know about South Africa, but in India, you will not see that, and these students, in my Music of India course, for the first time experienced boundaries disappearing between them: a small group sitting together close to each other and exploring something together.

I don't deny that oppression exists, struggles exist, and life can be very difficult. The climate crisis continues, and the majority of the World's population is not living the way human beings should live. Governments' expenditures on defence are more than the amount of money needed to end world hunger, but still, we haven't been able to take care of it. I recognize that structural problems, psychological problems, the problem of colonization, etc., are all examples of systemic issues. However, I still feel there is a possibility, despite all the difficulties and problems, to create those spaces where people can catch a breath, where they can nourish themselves and energize themselves to have more strength and energy to be in and to transform the difficult spaces they are in. But, often, we try to have a different argument that unless everything becomes better, meditation is not possible or looking inward is not possible. I do not agree with Maslow's hierarchy at one level, but I do agree with it at another level.

Shane: Yeah, as you are talking, it leads me to reflect on South Africa, especially your remarks about people having spaces where they can create hope. I do not think the political resistance to Apartheid could have occurred without the spaces that you described. As a teenager growing up in South Africa, I would not have had access to those spaces. But as you are talking, I am thinking to myself that those spaces must have existed amongst the black African population who were actively working against the apartheid system. I feel that communities need those spaces of hope to mobilize the people against the system. I do see that correlation. However, as you were talking, and as you were making that correlation, another point that you emphasized was how fear underpins the system, and some people are afraid of not being successful (or they are afraid of being poor). That is what pushes them into this education system. That is inauthentic, as we have discussed, and they may not be realizing their potential as human beings. It is funny because in my classes, we have had conversations where I will put out the question: "Do you, as students, want to actualize as a human being, or do you want to actualize as a human resource?" Sometimes, that is what is happening in the education system: you are being made into a human resource, right?

You say in your paper with Downey (2018, p. 967) that meditative inquiry is a gentle but intense approach. And you say that it is our conviction and engagement that is going to touch people, and that meditative inquiry is not political propaganda, which you need to convince people of. But I think that meditative inquiry is political. If everybody in Canada, for instance, began to engage in this way of being, this philosophical way of being and embodied it, then that certainly presents challenges to the economic and social systems. So, I do see the work that you do as being political, do you?

Ashwani: Absolutely. See, I think the one aspect of the question that I did not respond to before is that dialogue or meditative inquiry is not just a technique. The goal of this approach is for me to invite students or colleagues interested in engaging with me, and through that engagement, they create their own approaches. They create their own way of being, and that way of being, wherever they go, has an interaction, a dialogue, with people, so it is much more organic and more subtle than: "Here is the five-step approach, go and implement it", right? That is one part that I wanted to connect.

Also, meditative inquiry is a way of being, which means through engagement, our authentic, meaningful and exploratory engagement, we begin to change our thinking. That is a way of transformation that is different from a transformation where you convince people, create propaganda, and say, "This is the best thing everybody has to do. This is the new bandwagon, and everybody has to get on it". Meditative inquiry is different from that. It is an authentic, personal, and relational engagement and exploration. And, of course, when that happens, the changes begin to happen in participants, which are very organic and subtle, as it is not a superficial approach. Cognitive behavioural therapy, and similar approaches, just change the negative thoughts and behaviours into what is more acceptable, but they don't change our whole being.

When a person's being begins to change from the very core of their existence, then that poses a huge challenge to whatever context they are in because they will be asking difficult questions. They will be questioning inequitable practices. They will be questioning racism. My dear supervisor and colleague, Bill Pinar, with whom I had a dialogue (Kumar & Pinar, 2023), a similar dialogue to what we are having here, talked about the political possibility of meditative inquiry in his foreword (Pinar, 2022) to the meditative inquiry collection that I edited (Kumar, 2022). He works from an autobiographical perspective (Pinar, 1994), which underscores the significance of understanding oneself in relation to social structures. A lot of people also thought autobiography was not political, that it was not radical. But it is! When people are learning about their lives, which are not disconnected from the structures around them, they are engaging in a political act. It is a radical, critical act.

Shane: What you were saying jogged my memory to recent conversations I have been having with some other folks in the department, and we are looking at making a co-edited book around the decolonization of self. Your thoughts are interesting in that regard. When I went to my supervisor and used that word, decolonization, he said, "Well, is there a more positive word you could use?" It was through a conversation with someone else who brought up the term "regenerative," and I was almost thinking of this regenerative self, where we are regenerating who we are as individuals, as a consequence of this process of transformation. Further to this, I compare the banking model (Freire, 2000) with the regenerative transformational model of education. The banking model of education is a mechanistic process where learners take in something and then put out the same thing. The difference between this machine and the living being that is being transformed is metabolism. When people metabolize something, they take it in, and it becomes part of who they are. As teachers promoting transformation, we put out something that may be different, and our students metabolize these things, which then become a part of them, and they are transformed, and they regenerate. This idea might align with your discussion about introducing student-teachers to freedom so that they regenerate and are transformed, and then manifest opportunities for freedom in their own classes.

Ashwani: It is regeneration! It is regeneration, not according to a pre-decided method or concoction, but something that is organic and mysterious rather than something predetermined and

preestablished. That is why I do not agree with outcomes-based approaches because outcomes make everything predetermined. However, education is a generative, regenerative, and emergent process, rather than something fixed.

Shane: In my second line of questioning, and I realize we may be going in a very different direction, I'd like to have more of an understanding of what you call listening with your whole being, but maybe it is connected in ways that I do not see.

Ashwani: Yes, it is. Listening is central to a meditative way of living; it is central to the process of meditative inquiry. I think what happens is that through the web of thoughts, the web of discourses, and the web of social structures, our brain becomes narrow, and begins to think, feel and listen in ways that are prescribed or that are acceptable in particular contexts. And listening is a process through which we receive the world, and we learn from the world. It's one of the ways through which we connect with the world, right? The whole world of music is rooted in listening (Kumar & Downey, 2019). When we listen to our environment attentively, it creates the possibilities in us to create something beautiful (Kumar et al., 2023).

Listening with your whole being implies not listening just with your mind, which is conditioned because it translates everything into its vocabulary or its conception, which in many instances is socially or politically constructed. Listening with your whole being is the capacity to be meditatively aware in the presence of people and nature so that we are not listening to what we want to listen to, or what we can quickly translate into our mental structures, but listening to something with a fresh mind, with a sense of openness. And when that happens, then listening has a very different effect than the listening that happens from a mind that is limited to its own conditioning. There are a lot of people who will disagree with this idea because they believe that nobody can listen without all the prejudices and conditioned thought patterns one has. I think these people have not experimented with what meditative listening is.

We, as human beings, can be deeply aware of the moment and be free of these conditioned patterns. It is possible; otherwise, we would never think of anything new. There would not be any explorations or "Eureka moments" if our brains were completely limited by what they have known from the pressures of society. We can be attentive to be free and invite something new. Listening with your whole being is not just listening through conditioned thought patterns; meditative listening creates the capacity for an open being which can perceive more, which can understand more deeply.

Shane: Connecting this discussion to my write-up at the beginning of this paper, learning about oceans can be viewed from two angles: the perspective of ocean literacy and from a sense of awe and wonder. The ocean literacy approach is a conditioned approach that involves conditioned ideals of any one way of looking at things. On the other hand, awe and wonder open up one's whole being to see and respond to the ocean in a way that is not so conditioned. So, when you are talking about listening with your whole being, I can see that application in that context for me. Even when I was talking about sort of just having an intuitive response to words, you may be receiving them in a way that is not uniformly cognitive.

Ashwani: Absolutely. And I think I am really glad that you mentioned that point because I did want to explore it a bit. See, when we are talking about the climate crisis, sustainability, etc., we are talking about it from a very cognitive and scientific perspective, and a lot of people think that the solution to the climate crisis is going to happen through science. I do not think it can only be through science, because science is rooted in capitalist structures. Science is not independent of

capitalism or racism. It is not free from them because who are scientists? Scientists are people who are impacted and influenced by the structures in which they are living in. Science can play an important role, but the most important role has to be played by each one of us, where we each have a relationship with nature. A relationship of awe, wonder, and reverence, as you said – a meditative relationship where we do not see nature as something different from us. We have been created from the elements of nature, we live in it, and we die in it. In other words, there is no "we" and "nature;" we are nature!

We do not respect our bodies; we do not respect our creative capacities. We do not respect the life in us and around us. Of course, we do not respect nature; we pollute the oceans, you go on the oceans, right? We all have heard of the Pacific Gyre, such a big island of plastic, right? How ruthlessly we cut the trees. We just do not care about nature, which means that we see ourselves as being so much bigger and better than nature. We have stopped caring about ourselves and our relationship to nature. We are inflicting violence on everything. Unless this tendency to be violent to oneself, and to one's relationships, including nature, ends, we are not going to respect and have reverence for nature. We are not going to protect nature, really, in a deep way, in an interconnected way. When one feels that cutting a tree is cutting open one's baby or cutting oneself, one will be very careful. Do you need to cut it? Do I need it? I have heard that in Brazil and other South American countries, they are just destroying the Amazon rainforests to produce more cattle for the meat industry. It is clear that eating too much meat or eating meat every day is not healthy. It is not supporting healthy lifestyles. It is not helping the animals, and it is not helping nature, but, as a society, we are still on that path. The solution to that is not changing the government. That could be one partial solution, but the real solution is rooted in how we, each one of us, are going to discover ourselves in a way so that we are not violent to ourselves and to people and nature around us. If we are stressed, if we are conflicted within, if we have outward conflicts, if we have no sense of peace, we will not care about the peace on Earth or peace in nature.

Shane: Yes, I think sometimes when I am teaching my classes, I feel like I talk a lot about hegemonic systems and processes, and I think, "OK, well, I have got to leave my students with a little bit of hope". So, I talk about axiology – the choices that reflect our individual and communal values. These choices help to manifest the world, so it is nice that I have been sort of talking about it, but I have not understood what I am talking about in my class as being linked to meditative inquiry. Therefore, it is really good for me to see that what I am talking about is linked in a way to this process of meditative inquiry, and I am able to enact the values that are important.

I have heard people talk about Indigenous knowledge, being, and connection to the place. In many Indigenous cultures in North America, people have this idea that you cannot separate the individual from the land.[4] And that is one of the points you mentioned above. So there seems to be a sort of coalescing, I guess, of Indigenous knowledge ways and the meditative approach. Do you want to speak to that intersection?

Ashwani: Absolutely. I recently edited a book called *Engaging with Meditative Inquiry in Teaching, Learning, and Research,* which I also referenced above. One of the chapters in this book is written by one of my doctoral students, Diane Obed (2022), who is an Inuit. She explored the connections between meditative inquiry and Indigenous philosophy in her chapter.

[4] For further exploration of Indigenous perspectives see Kimmerer (2015, 2024), Kimmerer & Smith (2022), Machon (2023), Smith (1999), Wilson (2008), and Wilson et al. (2017).

I think that the ancient cultures were quite connected to nature. They did not see nature as an enemy that they needed to control or tame to do what they wanted to do. They always worked along with nature. So, in the older societies, the relationship with nature was not one of antagonism. It was always from the perspective of working together. When I was growing up in New Delhi, India, about 30 years ago, every house in my locality used to have at least a tree inside the house, but if you go now, you will not find any tree in any of the houses. Even New Delhi 30-40 years ago was very different from what it is now. If you see the neighbourhoods that are being built in Halifax now, they do not seem to care about trees much. They do not care about nature. They are ensuring to get as much built-up area as possible. The ancient cultures, the older cultures, did not have an antagonistic relationship with nature. They lived in harmony with nature, right? That is why they established themselves along the rivers. They knew that their sustenance was dependent on the river, so they would pray to the river or have reverence in the sense we have discussed in this conversation. They would look at nature and natural elements as their equal partners and even as deities in many cultures; they never thought of themselves as superior to nature. When they are praying to the sun, or praying to the river or praying to the mountains, they are seeing themselves as someone who depends on these elements, right? So, reverence emerges on its own. But with the advent of science and being able to control nature in certain ways, we begin to think that we do not need to have reverence for nature. We may have a lot of trees in some areas and have manicured grass because that looks pretty. And we can go for a walk in nature, but the idea of reverence is lost, which is core to Indigenous people and meditative inquiry. The Indigenous philosophy and Eastern wisdom put a lot of emphasis on learning about yourself and understanding your connection with nature and the universe.

The perspective of acquiring knowledge about nature and controlling it, whether to destroy it or to protect it, is deeply anthropocentric and fundamentally different from the perception where we have reverence for nature, where we see ourselves as something which emerged from nature and is entirely dependent on nature.

Shane: Yes, I agree. So, how do we help those students, or how do I help my daughter manifest this idea of listening with the whole being? Maybe she was listening with her whole being when she interacted with the swordfish. I do not want her to lose that, because I think the education system teaches that out of us. It teaches us not to have reverence anymore, so I do not want that to happen to my child. So, how do I protect my daughter?

Ashwani: And protect everybody, right? I think when the relationship is broken, one way to bring it back is by initiating the conversation. In this context, that conversation can happen by being in nature, like you do while on the ocean. We have become so detached from nature. As soon as I am outside in the elements, I have noticed that nature begins to cleanse my stresses and my fears. It starts to heal me. The healing process begins as soon as you are in nature. The beauty of nature is everywhere, from the smallest dust particle to the galaxies and the sun and the moon. It is everywhere, so when we look at it, the awe and wonder are very natural, which is there in all kids. The curiosity, the desire to touch everything, the desire to explore everything. I have a baby girl right now who is 14 months old. For her, putting everything in her mouth is intrinsic. Curiosity, awe, and wonder are already there in her eyes and being. When we let that happen, let that happen continually, for which the parents have to make an effort, we help the child to grow meditatively. I often take her to a tree or a plant and just stand still. Now, science says, hey, this is the leaf, this is the flower and all that. But can you just sense the tree? Can you just sense the grass? They have their energies. They have their being, and through that contact, through that regular contact, that

frequent contact, the awe and wonder and curiosity will grow more and more. And when they see people around them who have reverence for nature, like your daughter sees you having a reverence for nature, they will have the reverence too. They will see that the trees, waters, and rocks are all wonderful. They will thank nature and be grateful because they depend on it. They will have so much respect and reverence for everything around them. If you talk to children about nature and our reverence for it, if we share it with them, not necessarily to make them reverent, but sharing reverence, sharing connection, will help others see and feel it. To feel reverence for nature will be natural, and they will imbibe that.

I mentioned the Nature Reflection Assignment previously. Students were so surprised to have participated in that assignment. They realized that they hardly looked at anything with awareness. They never looked at a tree with full attention. They never looked at the bird. What the woodpeckers do, or at least they did not do so since they were children. For them, it was so refreshing. It was just an open assignment. They were encouraged to go to nature as many times to nature as possible and just listen and observe what they see. That was it. Some of the students wondered, "What's your angle here?" "What am I, as a student, really supposed to do when I am in nature?" And I would just say that there is no angle! I just want you to take time for yourself and connect with nature. That is an important part of being a human being and being an educator. You need to know your environment in a very deep way. I would say the majority of them just loved the possibility that they could just do this assignment throughout the term as part of the coursework, so they did not have to take out any extra time to be in nature. It was part of their studies.

Shane: I wanted to share a final thought about an epiphany I had. It is funny that I wanted to control the destiny of my daughter. And then you were very quick to add "and everybody else" because it is my daughter's wellbeing which is interconnected to the wellbeing of everybody else, and also the environment. There is this interconnection because the way that she engages in the world, as we spoke about in this conversation, influences all the people that she engages with. So yes, it is maintaining that sense of awe and wonder, but that is beneficial to everybody that she encounters. And I think that is a really important point: the exploration of self is also looking after my relationships with the planet, other people, and myself.

I was trapped in a patriarchal mindset when I was wondering, "How do I protect that (awe and wonder) in my daughter?" Well, she has power of her own, and I think there is a big lesson for me as a teacher, as a parent, as a human being: I can control who I am and my reverence. People, including my daughter, will see how I choose to manifest in the world, and they can choose to take that on for themselves, or not. Either way, my reverence and processes of meditative inquiry will impact other people's ways of being, and their interactions will impact me.

So, to reiterate, it is not political propaganda; it is my way of being that can influence the interactions that I have with other people or other beings. For me, that is what I want people to take away from this conversation. That is what I found incredibly insightful, and maybe people can learn from the lessons that I have had from this conversation.

Ashwani: I think one of the tendencies that we as human beings have is to not only control our way of being, but also control other people's ways of being out of fear, because we do not know the deeper dynamics of life, right?

So, I think it is so important to transform ourselves, taking a deep interest in that and engaging through that with people and see if it has any impact on the people. So, rather than controlling people, we are sharing our way of living with them.

I want to thank you again because I enjoy the opportunity to speak with people, to listen to their ideas, and to be able to share my ideas when the conversation is authentic and when somebody wants to have that conversation. And in this case, it was clear that you wanted to explore some of the things that you thought were important to you, and you raised so many points that I found very interesting. Thank you for your engagement.

Shane: I appreciate that, and I am also really grateful for your time.

In Closing

In this conversational paper, we explored insights and experiences that influence our pedagogical practices in higher education and, by extension, our lives. We begin the dialogue with a critical approach by respectfully questioning and challenging some of the key ideas presented in Ashwani's previous writings on meditative inquiry (Kumar & Downey, 2018; Kumar & Fisher, 2021), with an additional goal of deepening our understanding of how we perceive and relate to nature. Guided by the process of Dialogical Meditative Inquiry, this interlocution is an emergent conversational process which explores themes like authenticity and meaningfulness, awe and wonder, reverence and reflection, and capitalism and colonialism, among others.

In curricula and pedagogical spaces, we see inauthenticity due to power structures that value certain types of knowledge over others. With these systemic pressures that cascade down from economies, governments, and society, students arrive in educational spaces unsure of what interests them in authentic ways. This explains why students are often hesitant in the beginning to transformative education approaches (Kumar et al., 2023; Kumar & Caron, 2024), since they are taught from their earliest educational experiences that achieving high grades or following assignment instructions (without deviating) are more important than exercising one's creative imagination and critical thinking. We express concerns with this current approach as it leaves little space for self-exploration, authenticity, and meaningfulness in one's learning. As an antidote to this approach, we propose that opening opportunities for students to engage in meditative inquiry will create spaces for more authentic and meaningful learning in the same way that Freire (2000) calls for freedom through critical consciousness.

This freedom of the mind, creativity, and critical thinking that we speak of here may seem utopic given the volume and complexity of global crises (Kumar & Acharya, 2021a). We attempt to reframe this thinking in this paper. We acknowledge that there are many challenges which students face as they arrive at educational spaces; however, meditative inquiry provides opportunities to create spaces of freedom to overcome capitalist structures that foster competition (Giroux, 2014; Kumar, 2019) and instrumentalism (Kumar & Acharya, 2021b). By engaging in contemplative and reflective processes, including spending time reconnecting with nature, with others in safe community spaces, and studying the self, we submit that meditative inquiry can promote spaces of hope (Freire, P., & Freire, A.M.A., 2021).

We also briefly discuss important connections between meditative inquiry and Indigenous approaches to teaching and learning (see Obed, 2022). Indigenous ways of being and knowing and meditative inquiry are informed by what we call in this paper a *reverence* for nature. The tensions between capitalism and living in harmony with nature are explored, and we maintain that

meditative inquiry, like Indigenous worldviews, can offer ways of being, knowing, teaching, and learning that are connected to our natural world in a harmonious way, and it can help individuals and society overcome this unhealthy thirst for "more" that permeates globally. We argue that our relationship with the natural world around us has largely been cast aside as a result of a system that is reliant on perpetual and proliferating growth. This system distracts most of us from what is most important, and we suggest that the solution to this problem exists in each individual spending more time with nature, studying it, understanding it, and decreasing the violent acts of aggression toward it.

For many educators, education administrators, and political groups, education is a mechanism for social, political, and economic control. The ideas of education as a means of actualization or empowerment have been superseded by those of the corporate state. Throughout this conversation, we challenge conceptions of education as a mechanism for domination and promote a more contemplative and holistic approach to teaching, learning, and living. The paper underscores the importance of personal transformation as the basis of social transformation. We maintain that true transformation cannot be imposed but ignited through dialogue and exploration.

The dialogue closes with Shane's epiphany about relinquishing control of his daughter's and everyone else's experiences of reverence. This can be seen as a marker of personal spiritual, ethical, and intellectual growth. We hope that readers of this paper are able to recognize the inherent power of meditative inquiry to facilitate personal transformation and consequently embark on their own journeys of personal discovery.

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Investigating School Belonging Using Socio-Ecological Systems Theory

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Abstract

A wide body of literature has found that a strong sense of belonging and connection to school is imperative for students' academic success, in addition to their social and emotional well-being. School belonging is a complex and multifaceted phenomenon, and researchers have identified a multitude of factors that influence the development of belonging at school. Given its complexities, a holistic representation of school belonging is often left out of the research, leading to a lack of clarity on this essential educational construct. To develop a comprehensive model of school belonging, this narrative review examines the construct using Bronfenbrenner's (1993) ecological systems theory of human development. Seven electronic databases were searched from 1999 to November 2024 using 'school belonging', 'school connectedness', and 'school engagement' amongst the key search terms. Relevant peer-reviewed articles were identified and included to investigate how school belonging evolves in response to influences across Bronfenbrenner's (1993) levels of development (i.e., the individual level, the microsystem, the mesosystem, the exosystem, the macrosystem, and the chronosystem). Findings from this investigation are also used to discuss strategies for promoting belonging in schools. This narrative review makes an original contribution to the field of educational research by developing a comprehensive model of school belonging through the lens of a socio-ecological framework.

Keywords: school belonging, ecological systems theory, peer relationships, teacher-student relationships, academic achievement, psychosocial well-being

Investigating School Belonging Using Socio-Ecological Systems Theory

Students' sense of school belonging is a key construct in educational psychology, as it reflects students' perceived connection, inclusion, acceptance, and respect within their school environment (Alink et al., 2023; Goodenow, 1993). Over the past two decades, a substantial body of research has established a strong positive link between school belonging and various academic and psychosocial outcomes (Ahmadi & Ahmadi, 2020; Allen et al., 2018; Allen & Kern, 2017; Arslan, 2019). For instance, school belonging is associated with stronger academic achievement (Anderman, 2003; Fong Lam et al., 2015), higher quality social relationships (Arslan & Allen, 2021; Cemalcilar, 2010), and greater perceived well-being (Allen & Boyle, 2018; Tian et al., 2016). Furthermore, strengthening school belonging has the potential to address persistent educational challenges, such as dropout rates, low academic performance, student alienation, and school disengagement (Ibrahim & El Zaatari, 2020; Korpershoek et al., 2020; Lo Cricchio et al., 2023).

School belonging is impacted by a wide variety of factors, including individual, social, and environmental determinants that interact with one another across time (Ahmadi & Ahmadi, 2020; Allen et al., 2018; Allen & Bowles, 2012). Individual characteristics implicated in school belonging include gender, ethnicity, externalizing and internalizing behaviours, and academic skills and attitudes (Allen et al., 2018; Allen & Boyle, 2018; Gillen-O'Neel & Fuligni, 2013; Hughes et al., 2015; Shochet et al., 2011; Tian et al., 2016; Wagle et al., 2021). Interpersonal relationships with family members, educational staff, and peers also play a significant role in students' perceptions of belonging at school (Allen et al., 2023; Ibrahim & El Zaatari, 2020; Uslu & Gizir, 2017). Environmental influences, such as local neighbourhoods and the broader geographical location in which a student lives, are also implicated in levels of school belonging (Allen et al., 2023; Cemalcilar, 2010). The multifaceted nature of school belonging makes it a challenging educational concept to study. As such, this narrative review examines the construct using Bronfenbrenner's (1993) ecological systems theory. This theory offers researchers a framework for investigating individual, social, and environmental influences on educational phenomena (Hayes et al., 2022), making it an ideal model to examine the complexities of school belonging (Allen et al., 2016, 2023; Allen & Kern, 2017).

The purpose of this article is to provide a comprehensive overview of school belonging research to add clarity to the construct and to support a holistic conceptualization. This article begins by reviewing Bronfenbrenner's (1993) ecological systems theory. Next, a discussion of the implications of belonging for healthy human development is reviewed, followed by a definition of school belonging. The next sections explore influences on school belonging situated within Bronfenbrenner's (1993) model, followed by strategies to foster belonging in schools. Evidence from this review emphasizes the relevance of school belonging in promoting positive student outcomes. The primary objective of this article is to facilitate a more comprehensive understanding of school belonging to assist future educational research and practice aimed at increasing belonging in schools. This has important implications for enhancing students' academic and psychosocial outcomes (Ahmadi & Ahmadi, 2020; Allen & Kern, 2017; Arslan, 2019).

Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory

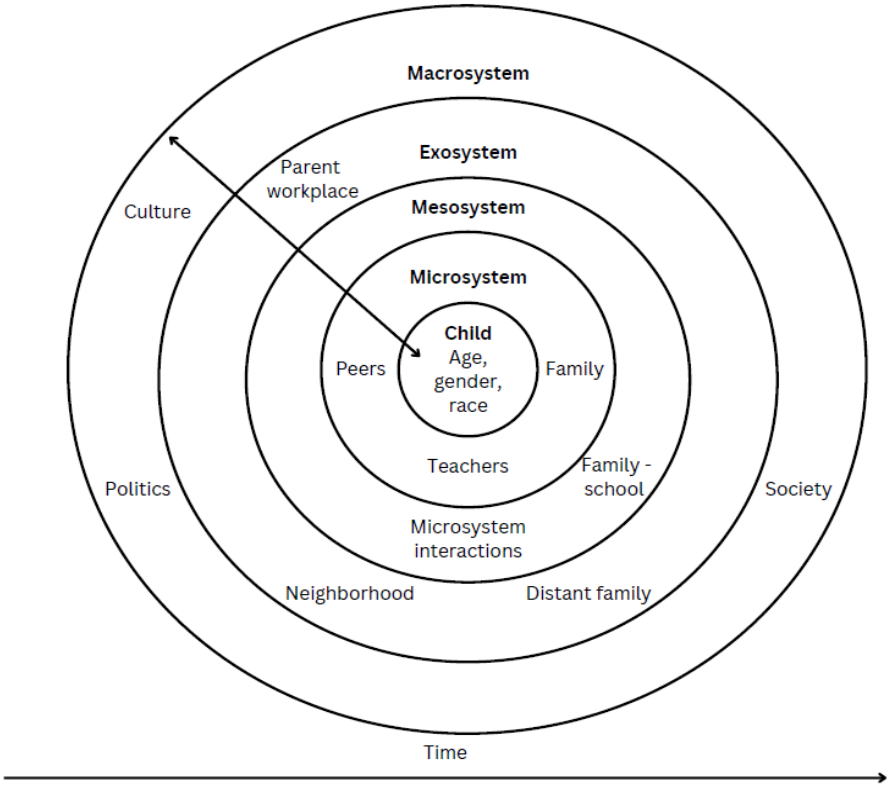
Bronfenbrenner's (1993) ecological systems theory of development recognizes the interplay between individual, social, and environmental influences on child development. This theory is adapted from his original model, the Ecological Model of Human Development (Bronfenbrenner,

1979), as the updated theory places greater emphasis on the role a child plays in their own development (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 1993; Rosa & Tudge, 2013). His framework also considers the effects of time, such as history, critical social and cultural events, and the historical period of one's childhood (Bronfenbrenner, 1993; Hayes et al., 2022; Rosa & Tudge, 2013). Five concentric circles are represented in the model, with the developing child in the centre and four systems of influence expanding outwards as they become increasingly distal in their effects on development (see Figure 1). The five levels of influence include the child, microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, and macrosystem in the context of time.

In the model, personal characteristics of the child, including age, gender, race, temperament, and health status, are presented in the centre of the circle (Allen & Kern, 2017; Bronfenbrenner, 1993; Hayes et al., 2022). The microsystem is represented in the subsequent layer, capturing environmental influences that impact the daily life of the child, such as relationships with immediate family, peers, and educators (Bronfenbrenner, 1993; Hayes et al., 2022). The mesosystem is represented in the following layer, which reflects the interactions between a child's microsystems, such as school and home communication (Bronfenbrenner, 1993; El Zaatari & Maalouf, 2022). The exosystem contains influences such as parental work environments, the local neighbourhood, and extended family (Allen et al., 2016; Bronfenbrenner, 1993; Hayes et al., 2022). The final layer is the macrosystem, which captures indirect cultural and societal influences, such as political contexts and ideologies (Bronfenbrenner, 1993; Hayes et al., 2022). Finally, these systems are considered in the context of time (Bronfenbrenner, 1993; Rosa & Tudge, 2013).

Figure 1

Adapted From Bronfenbrenner's (1993) Ecological Systems Theory of Development



Bronfenbrenner's ecological models are some of the most popular theories of human development (Vélez-Agosto et al., 2017); however, academics have been critical of some components of his frameworks. Although his multidimensional system presents a comprehensive understanding of human development across the lifespan, researchers argue that the theory is deeply anthropocentric, as little consideration is given to human-nature interconnections (Elliott & Davis, 2020). In addition, Bronfenbrenner's frameworks do not emphasize the role of power and social capital in shaping development and life outcomes (Houston, 2017). Finally, some have criticized the oversimplification of human development represented in his theories, particularly regarding culture (Vélez-Agosto et al., 2017). Despite these limitations, his frameworks have been useful in the study of school belonging (e.g., Allen et al., 2016, 2023; El Zaatari & Ibrahim, 2021; El Zaatari & Maalouf, 2022).

Defining School Belonging

Researchers have long recognized that belonging is a fundamental requirement for well-being that arises out of positive, stable interpersonal relationships (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Baumeister and Leary (1995) define belonging as frequent, positive interactions within stable, caring relationships. Mahar and colleagues (2013) further defined belonging as feeling valued and respected in reciprocal relationships shaped by shared experiences, personal characteristics, and beliefs. In contrast, a lack of belonging has been linked to poor health outcomes, maladjustment, and reduced well-being (Ainsworth et al., 1979; Ainsworth, 2014; Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Zhang et al., 2022).

The recognition that individuals are motivated to create and maintain interpersonal bonds through positive social engagement is recognized through various theoretical perspectives. Maslow (1943) proposed a motivational theory which identified five fundamental human needs represented in hierarchical levels within a pyramid. In his theory, the motivation to seek love and belonging was placed just after safety and physical needs (Kenrick et al., 2010; Maslow, 1943). In addition, Bowlby's (1969) attachment theory emphasizes the importance of early, secure relationships for healthy development, a model that continues to influence the field of psychology today (Fletcher et al., 2016; Yip et al., 2018). This research has significant implications for schools, as educational environments play a crucial role in offering social opportunities for children and youth to experience a sense of belonging.

There exists a wide range of school belonging terminology and conceptualizations within educational literature; however, most definitions reflect a student's sense of connection, inclusion, acceptance and respect within their school environment (Alink et al., 2023; Cai et al., 2023; Goodenow, 1993; Green et al., 2016). Based on her foundational work examining school belonging in adolescent populations, Goodenow (1993) defined the construct "as the extent to which students feel personally accepted, respected, included, and supported by others in the school social environment" (p. 80). This definition is popular in much of the school belonging literature (e.g., Allen et al., 2022a; Palikara et al., 2021; Wagle et al., 2021). In a study gathering the perspectives of 73 expert school belonging researchers, Alink and colleagues (2023) reported that connectedness was the most appropriate synonym for school belonging, and that key indicators of the phenomenon include inclusion, acceptance, respect, and connection. School belonging is complex and multidimensional, as it reflects the interplay between individual, social, and environmental influences that contribute to students' experiences of belonging at school (Allen et al., 2016, 2021, 2022a; Ibrahim & El Zaatari, 2020). These findings highlight the benefit of using a socio-ecological framework to examine the phenomenon.

Methods

A narrative review was conducted to synthesize research on school belonging for the purpose of developing a comprehensive model of the topic through the lens of a socio-ecological framework. Narrative reviews provide an extensive description and interpretation of published literature on a given topic, which is useful for examining the research focus in novel ways and for presenting new insights (Sukhera, 2022a, 2022b). Furthermore, the method is useful for investigating research inquiries that are broad or complex (Sukhera, 2022b), such as school belonging. Rather than a systematic synthesis, narrative reviews offer thoughtful and rigorous interpretations of bodies of knowledge, culminating in rich and meaningful summaries (Sukhera, 2022a, 2022b).

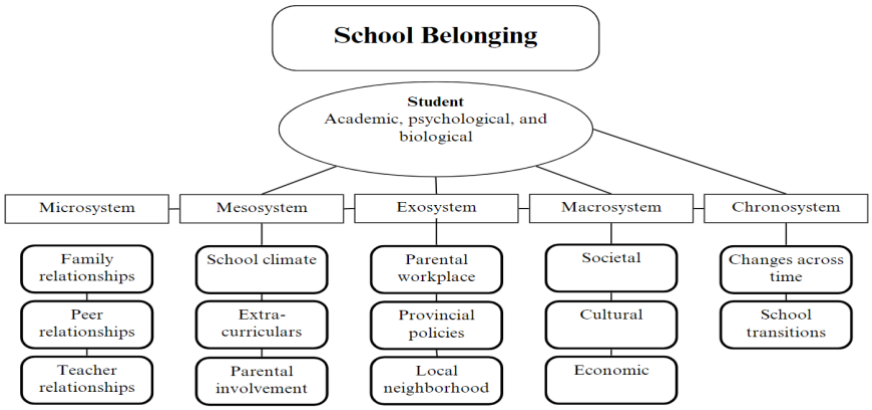
A literature search for peer-reviewed articles examining school belonging was undertaken using a combination of keywords, including *school belonging, school connectedness, school bonding, school engagement, school identification, school membership, student connection, student engagement, academic achievement, peer relationships, student-teacher relationships, parent involvement, and extra-curricular involvement.* Relevant databases were searched, including ERIC, JSTOR, EBSCOhost, Connected Papers, Semantic Scholar, Google Scholar™, and the University of Victoria Library database. The search was limited to articles published in English, and only those that were peer-reviewed and published after 1999 were included. Relevant peer-reviewed articles were identified and examined for this narrative review.

Socio-Ecological Influences on School Belonging

Situated within Bronfenbrenner's (1993) ecological systems theory, this review first examines student-specific influences as they relate to school belonging, including academic, biological, and psychological determinants. Family, peer, and teacher-student relationships within the microsystem are discussed next, followed by parent involvement at school, enrollment in extra-curricular activities, and school climate, which are reflected in a child's mesosystem. At the exosystem and macrosystem levels, broader social and political themes are explored. It is important to note that each of these factors is often measured and discussed in isolation; however, they can exert bidirectional influences on one another across multiple systems in complex and often poorly understood ways (Bronfenbrenner, 1993; Hayes et al., 2022).

Figure 2

Ecological Systems Model of School Belonging



Note. Adapted from El Zaatari and Maalouf's (2022) and Allen and colleagues' (2016) conceptual theories.

Student-Level Influences: Academic, Biological, and Psychological

Research has established a strong link between student-level factors and students' sense of school belonging (Allen et al., 2016, 2023). Academic motivation and achievement, gender, ethnicity, and psychological well-being have all been implicated in students' perceptions of school belonging (Allen et al., 2018; Faulkner et al., 2009; Gillen-O'Neel & Fuligni, 2013; Graham et al., 2022; Hughes et al., 2015). The individual factors discussed in the following section reflect bi-directional effects, as students' traits influence their environment, while their environment simultaneously exerts influence on their personal characteristics (Bronfenbrenner, 1993; Hayes et al., 2022; Rosa & Tudge, 2013).

Academic Influences

Students who highly value school (Allen et al., 2018; Anderman, 2003; Gillen-O'Neel & Fuligni, 2013), have future educational goals (Allen et al., 2018; Uwah et al., 2008), experience greater academic motivation, and demonstrate better academic achievement are more likely to have a strong sense of school belonging (Ahmadi et al., 2020; Allen et al., 2018; Anderman, 2003; Hughes et al., 2015). For example, in a meta-analytic review of 82 correlational studies, Korpershoek (2020) reported a positive correlation between school belonging and academic achievement. Other research suggests that positive future educational aspirations, better academic self-regulation, greater self-rating in academics, higher educational goals, increased motivation, and valuing academics all positively affect students' sense of school belonging (Ahmadi et al., 2020; Allen et al., 2018; Fong Lam et al., 2015; Korpershoek et al., 2020). This research highlights the key role that academic skills play in school belonging and the importance of supporting academic motivation and achievement in classrooms (Allen et al., 2022a; Šeboková et al., 2018). Educators can achieve this by providing meaningful, interesting, and scaffolded academic activities using a variety of educational approaches (Allen et al., 2018; Riley, 2019; Shochet & Orr, 2020).

Biological Influences

Evidence across elementary, middle, and high school students suggests that school belonging varies by gender, with females reporting higher levels of school belonging than males (Anderman, 2002; Hughes et al., 2015; Sali et al., 2023). A likely explanation for this finding is that females tend to experience greater academic achievement than males (Encinas-Martín & Cherian, 2023; Marcenaro–Gutierrez et al., 2018), which is positively associated with school belonging (Allen et al., 2018). Females also tend to report more positive relationships with their teachers (Aliyev & Tunc, 2015; Carvalho, 2016; Gillen-O'Neel & Fuligni, 2013), which also has positive implications for school belonging (Ahmadi et al., 2020). Given the importance of school belonging to student success (Allen & Boyle, 2018), educators need to prioritize building strong student-teacher relationships across all gender identities.

Variation across race and ethnicity has also been identified in some of the literature, although findings are inconsistent across studies, likely as a result of different measurement tools, geographical locations, and sample populations (e.g., Benner & Graham, 2009; Gillen-O'Neel & Fuligni, 2013; Hughes et al., 2015). In a longitudinal study of Latin American, Asian, and European high school students (n = 572), Gillen-O'Neel and Fuligni (2013) reported that ethnic group membership alone was not associated with school belonging, nor with fluctuations in levels of school belonging across high school. Other researchers have also found that race/ethnicity was not significantly related to school belonging (Allen et al., 2018). In contrast, some researchers have reported a difference in school belonging across ethnically diverse groups (Hughes et al., 2015;

Wang & Eccles, 2012). Researchers hypothesize that when variation in school belonging across ethnically diverse groups is identified, it may be in response to the ethnic composition of schools, rather than students' individual ethnicity (Benner & Graham, 2009; Gillen-O'Neel & Fuligni, 2013; Graham et al., 2022). In other words, students with few same-race/ethnic peers at school face additional challenges to developing a strong sense of school belonging because they may feel like they don't fit in (Graham et al., 2022; Singh et al., 2010).

Psychological Influences

A large body of research has reported that students with better mental health also experience a greater sense of school belonging (Allen & Boyle, 2018; Castro-Kemp et al., 2020; Klik et al., 2023; Vang & Nishina, 2022). For example, students who report higher rates of self-esteem (Gummadam et al., 2016; Hernández et al., 2017) and subjective well-being tend to experience a greater sense of belonging at school (Allen & Boyle, 2018; Tian et al., 2016). Furthermore, a greater propensity to experience positive emotions (positive emotional affect) and lower levels of psychological distress can also support the development of a strong sense of school belonging (Shochet et al., 2011; Wagle et al., 2021). Korpershoek and colleagues (2020) conducted a review of 82 correlational studies across six English-speaking countries and reported a small to moderate positive correlation between students' social-emotional outcomes (such as self-concept and self-efficacy) and school belonging. When students have effective social-emotional skills, such as self-efficacy and self-esteem, they are able to more easily feel connected to their school environment (Frydenberg et al., 2017).

Internalizing symptoms, such as depression and anxiety, can create significant barriers to students' ability to develop a sense of belonging at school (Arslan, 2019; Montecillo et al., 2024; Shochet et al., 2011). For example, symptoms of depression can have significant, adverse effects on student well-being, in addition to students' perceptions of school belonging (Arslan, 2019; Klik et al., 2023; Parr et al., 2020; Slaten et al., 2016). Furthermore, researchers have also found a negative association between symptoms of anxiety and school belonging (Arslan, 2019, 2022; Montecillo et al., 2024; Shochet et al., 2011). Effects of negative peer relationships, such as peer victimization, are often a major contributor to students' stress and anxiety levels, further exacerbating feelings of unbelonging (Arslan, 2022; Montecillo et al., 2024; Parker et al., 2015). This research highlights the need for educators to support school belonging by offering social-emotional learning programs that target social and emotional skills in students (Allen et al., 2022b; Frydenberg et al., 2017; Hassani et al., 2023), in addition to referring students for early mental health intervention services to improve their future mental health outcomes (McGorry & Mei, 2018).

Microsystem Influences: Relationships with Parents, Peers, and School Staff

Microsystems directly affect a child's daily life through interactions with parents, siblings, close extended family, school personnel, and peers (Bronfenbrenner, 1993; Hayes et al., 2022). Researchers examining microsystem factors typically investigate the effects of parents, peers, and school staff on school belonging with a primary focus on perceived levels of support within each of these influences (e.g., Allen et al., 2016; El Zaatari & Maalouf, 2022). This literature suggests that positive relationships with individuals inside and outside of school settings are required for a strong sense of school belonging to development (Ahmadi et al., 2020; Allen et al., 2023; Cai et al., 2023; Ibrahim & El Zaatari, 2020). There is growing awareness that learning is a social and

relational process, and that fostering positive relationships in schools is an important aspect of providing high-quality education.

Parental Influences

According to Bronfenbrenner's (1993) theory, the family is the first microsystem to which a child belongs, and familial contexts play a significant role in child development, in addition to students' sense of school belonging (Allen & Boyle, 2018; Law et al., 2013). Common family-related determinants of school belonging include parents' educational aspirations and level of academic support for their child, parental emotional support, and the quality of parent-child relationships (Ahmadi & Ahmadi, 2020; Ahmadi et al., 2020; Allen et al., 2018; Uslu & Gizir, 2017; Wang & Eccles, 2012).

Researchers have found that increased parental emotional support, in addition to greater involvement in a child's life, is a strong positive predictor of school belonging (Ahmadi et al., 2020; Allen et al., 2023; Garcia-Reid et al., 2005). This is because parents who can offer academic support, prioritize educational values, and believe in their child's competence as a learner are actively fostering a positive connection to the school (Allen et al., 2023). Furthermore, positive parent-child relationships derived from healthy emotional connections with primary caregivers have a positive effect on children's prosocial behaviours and mental health (Allen & Boyle, 2018; Zilberstein, 2014). This has important implications for school belonging, as researchers have reported a positive association between children's social-emotional and behavioural skills and their sense of school belonging (Korpershoek et al., 2020). Adding further support for this conclusion, in a study conducted by Nunes and colleagues (2013) of 289 children and 205 caregivers in Brazil, the authors reported that poor parental attachment and rejection predicted internalizing and externalizing behaviours in children. Similarly, Belskey and colleagues (2006) conducted a longitudinal study of over 1,000 U.S. children and found that healthier patterns of parental attachment were associated with lower teacher ratings of internalizing and externalizing behaviour problems in early elementary students. This also has implications for school belonging, as students with higher rates of externalizing and internalizing behaviours tend to experience lower levels of school belonging (Arslan, 2019). Parents can do much to foster positive academic and psychosocial outcomes at school by providing academic and emotional support to their children.

Peer Influences

Within a school setting, peers constitute an important determinant of a student's educational experience, influencing students' school and classroom engagement, academic motivation, and social and emotional adjustment (Cemalcilar, 2010; Kiefer et al., 2015; Uslu & Gizir, 2017; Wang & Eccles, 2012). A variety of influences related to peer relationships have been implicated in perceptions of school belonging, including the quality of students' peer relationships, such as trust and closeness with peers (Allen et al., 2018), level of academic peer support (Kiefer et al., 2015), effects of mental health on peer interactions (Arslan, 2022; Arslan & Allen, 2021), and peer victimization (Chen et al., 2023; Espelage et al., 2013; Lo Cricchio et al., 2023). Regardless of the particular constructs under inquiry, robust evidence suggests that positive peer relationships are a strong positive predictor of school belonging (Cemalcilar, 2010; Kiefer et al., 2015; Slaten et al., 2016; Uslu & Gizir, 2017).

Teacher-Student Relationships

Supportive teacher-student relationships can have a positive impact on students' sense of school belonging (Ahmadi & Ahmadi, 2020; Allen et al., 2023; Cai et al., 2022). Teachers can build high-quality relationships with students by emphasizing care, respect, appreciation, trust, empathy, and cooperation (Allen et al., 2023; Cai et al., 2023; Ibrahim & El Zaatari, 2020; Wang & Eccles, 2012). Furthermore, teachers who offer academic and emotional support, treat students fairly, and are encouraging do much to support belonging in their classrooms (Ahmadi & Ahmadi, 2020; Wang & Eccles, 2012). In a study of 815 adolescent participants by Uslu and Gizir (2017), the authors reported that the quality of teacher–student relationships was a strong predictor of school belonging, accounting for 44.7% of the variance. Their model explained a further 2.4% of the variance, capturing the effects of parent involvement and peer relationships. Conversely, teacher–student power imbalances, characterized by a lack of care or respect towards students, have been widely shown to negatively impact students' school belonging (Ahmadi et al., 2020; Allen et al., 2023; Ibrahim & El Zaatari, 2022). The importance of positive and supportive relationships for healthy student functioning, both within school and beyond, is well documented (Allen et al., 2016, 2023; El Zaatari & Maalouf, 2022; Hayes et al., 2022).

Mesosystem Influences: School Climate, Extracurriculars, and Parental Involvement

The mesosystem represents the interactions and communications between a child's microsystems (Bronfenbrenner, 1993; El Zaatari & Maalouf, 2022; Hayes et al., 2022). In the context of school belonging, the mesosystem typically includes a school's climate, extracurricular participation, and level of parent involvement at school (Allen et al., 2016, 2023; Hayes et al., 2022).

School Climate

School climate is typically defined as a school's norms, values, and expectations, and extensive research has identified a strong positive association between school climate and school belonging (Encina & Berger, 2021; Klik et al., 2023; Long et al., 2021; Vang & Nishina, 2022). For example, in a study of 657 U.S. adolescent participants, Vang & Nishina (2021) reported that increased positive interethnic school climate (i.e., peer acceptance of cultural and ethnic differences, staff support for cross-ethnic peer interactions, and school celebrations of cultural holidays) was associated with higher levels of school belonging. Furthermore, in a study of 799 Turkish middle school students, Cemalcilar (2010) found that a school's social-contextual climate, including perceptions of school social relationships and satisfaction with the school environment, was predictive of school belonging.

In a 3-year longitudinal study of 6,537 Grade 7 to 10 Australian students, Klik and colleagues (2023) also found that school belonging was positively associated with school climate (i.e., school academic emphasis, student–student relations, staff–student relations, and shared values and approach). The authors stated that a more positive perception of school climate was also associated with lower depressive symptoms in students, indicating that shared school values, school relationships, and school academic emphasis impact student mental health. Schools can support belonging by creating a positive climate that prioritizes connection through its policies, leadership, and norms; this includes ensuring a physically and emotionally safe environment, implementing fair and consistent disciplinary practices, and upholding high academic standards (Allen et al., 2018; Riley, 2019; Shochet & Orr, 2020).

Extracurricular Involvement

Students' sense of school belonging has been positively linked to increased participation in school activities, such as extracurricular programs (Allen et al., 2016, 2018; Encina & Berger, 2021). Opportunities to engage in extracurricular pursuits, such as clubs or sports teams, foster social connection and peer relationships, positively impacting school belonging (Allen et al., 2016). In a study of 38,286 seventh to 12th-grade students across 754 schools, Encina and Berger (2021) found a positive association between school belonging and students' school engagement and extra-curricular involvement. The authors reported that a supportive school climate, which fosters strong educator-student relationships, increases extracurricular participation among students. This study also highlighted how students' sense of school belonging translates into specific behaviours (i.e., school participation) if schools offer ample opportunities for active engagement within the school community. As such, educators can play a direct role in creating school belonging by providing a variety of extracurricular activities that are likely to interest a broad range of students (Allen et al., 2016, 2018).

Parental Educational Involvement

A comprehensive body of literature has reported that increased family and community involvement at school has a positive effect on school belonging (Ahmadi et al., 2020; Allen & Kern, 2017; El Zaatari & Ibrahim, 2021; El Zaatari & Maalouf, 2022). Parents who provide educational support and hold positive views of their children as learners, in addition to being actively involved in their child's education, positively impact school belonging (Allen et al., 2023). Parental involvement at school helps instill positive values of school and learning, which supports children's school attendance and positive school-related behaviours (Ahmadi et al., 2020; Wang & Eccles, 2012). Schools can do much to support parental involvement, such as hosting family events, school fundraisers, maintaining parent communication, and providing opportunities for parents to connect with teachers through parent-led conferences or meet-the-teacher night (Allen et al., 2016; Hayes et al., 2022). Mesosystem influences differ across grades and individual students, as forces within a student's mesosystem do not remain stable over time (Allen & Boyle, 2018; Hughes et al., 2015; Niehaus et al., 2012). In sum, the mesosystem exerts both positive and negative effects on a student's education, influencing perceptions and experiences of school belonging across their formal years of schooling.

Exosystem Influences: Parental Workplace, Educational Policies, and Neighbourhood

A child's exosystem represents the environments and contexts with which a child is not actively involved, but nevertheless is indirectly influenced by (Bronfenbrenner, 1993; Haynes et al., 2022). Exosystem influences implicated in school belonging include parental workplaces, provincial policies and legislation, and the local neighbourhood (El Zaatari & Ibrahim, 2021; El Zaatari & Maalouf, 2022; Hayes et al., 2022). Most studies on school belonging have primarily focused on student-level, microsystem, and mesosystem effects, limiting our understanding of how broader aspects within the exosystem and macrosystem influence a child's education (Allen et al. 2016, 2018).

Parental Workplace

Literature discussing the influence of the exosystem on school belonging has suggested that parental workplaces may be a factor (Allen & Kern, 2017). Stressors within the parents' workplace can negatively influence the quality of parents' interactions with their children, in addition to

parents' capacity for involvement within the school (Hayes et al., 2022; Peters et al., 2008). Given the importance of parental relationships to school belonging, this may be one pathway through which parental workplaces influence students' experiences of belonging at school. In addition, parent-teacher meetings and school activities scheduled during typical working hours can create challenges for employed parents to become involved in the school, resulting in either lost income or fewer opportunities for school-parent engagement (Scorgie, 2015). There is also evidence to suggest a positive association between higher parental education levels and children's sense of school belonging (Marksteiner & Kuger, 2016; Pittman & Richmond, 2007; Ruedas-Gracia et al., 2020), likely due to the positive impact higher education has on employment opportunities.

Educational Policies

School belonging can be influenced by local and provincial educational policies, legislation, regulations, and initiatives, as well as how these influences are interpreted and implemented across schools and school boards (Allen et al., 2016; Saab, 2009). For example, educational reforms aimed at improving academic outcomes through increased emphasis on exams can lead to an exam-oriented approach to learning, resulting in changes in teaching strategies and practices, curriculum, and student evaluation systems (El Zaatari & Ibrahim, 2021). Such changes can negatively influence students' perceptions of school climate, in addition to their sense of psychological well-being and school belonging (El Zaatari & Ibrahim, 2021; Högberg & Lindgren, 2023). This association may partially be due to the overemphasis on academic success, which can exacerbate feelings of unbelonging among students who struggle academically (Högberg & Lindgren, 2023).

Furthermore, inclusion policies that support the education of students with disabilities in mainstream classrooms can have positive effects on students' academic, social, and affective outcomes; these effects are bolstered by teachers who are positive, flexible, receptive, and knowledgeable about their students' disabilities (Alesech & Nayar, 2021; Prince & Hadwin, 2013; Pesonen, 2016). Policymakers have a valuable opportunity to strengthen school belonging by making it a priority in educational initiatives, recognizing its positive influence on students' academic success and psychosocial well-being (Allen et al., 2016; Cemalcilar, 2010; El Zaatari & Maalouf, 2022).

Local Neighborhood

Many influences within the local neighbourhood can affect a child's educational experiences, and consequently, their sense of school belonging (Allen et al., 2018). Differences across rural and urban environments, along with levels of community violence, may play a key role in school belonging (Allen et al., 2018; Ludwig & Warren, 2009; Maurizi et al., 2013). In a systematic review of 51 studies conducted in the U.S. and Australia (n = 67,378), Allen and colleagues (2018) identified 10 themes influencing school belonging: academic motivation, emotional stability, personal characteristics, parent support, peer support, teacher support, gender, race and ethnicity, extracurricular activities, and environmental/school safety. Within all these themes except gender, geographical differences had a moderating effect. In general, schools in rural neighbourhoods had higher effect sizes between associations to school belonging ($r = 0.51$) compared to urban schools ($r = 0.25$). The authors of this paper hypothesized that smaller class sizes, fewer disciplinary actions, higher homogeneity, greater involvement in extracurricular activities, and increased opportunities for student-teacher interactions in rural schools compared to urban schools may explain this result.

Evidence in support of the negative effects of increased neighbourhood violence on school belonging is primarily indirect. For example, a two-year ethnographic study of one New York middle school conducted by Mateu-Gelabert and Lune (2003) examined the interrelationship between neighbourhood and school violence. The authors reported that for study participants, school and neighbourhood violence were bidirectional, with conflict originating from and flowing to both schools and neighbourhoods. Organizational structures in schools (such as classroom divisions) and neighbourhoods (such as rival drug affiliations) generated conflict and violence, in addition to bilingual and monolingual differences across groups and individuals. This has implications for school belonging, as lower instances of violence and higher levels of perceived physical, emotional, and psychological safety within schools are associated with increased levels of school belonging (Allen et al., 2018; Allen & Kern 2017; Cemalcilar, 2010). Other researchers have found a strong association between heightened exposure to community violence and lower school identification, conceptualized as a student's sense of school belonging and valuing of school (Ludwig & Warren, 2009). In conclusion, less is currently known about the impact of exosystem factors on school belonging; more research is needed to develop a thorough understanding of how these more distal influences affect students' perceptions of belonging across their education (Allen et al., 2016, 2018; Maurizi et al., 2013).

Macrosystem Influences: Country of Residence

A child's macrosystem represents the cultural and societal influences on development, such as sociocultural values and beliefs, and their impact on more proximal systems (Bronfenbrenner, 1995; Hayes et al., 2022). Children are not directly connected to the macrosystem; instead, distal social and cultural influences, such as shifts in political ideology, profoundly influence their lives (Allen et al., 2023; Bronfenbrenner, 1993). Within school belonging literature, the macrosystem is thought to impact school belonging through its effects related to a country's economy, social norms (such as gender roles), and social hierarchical structures (El Zaatari & Maalouf, 2022); however, little direct research has explored these theories (Allen et al. 2016, 2018; Allen & Kern, 2017).

Examining data across 52 countries, Allen and colleagues (2023) compared students' sense of school belonging in 309,785 adolescent participants. Their findings indicated that 92.86% of the variance in school belonging was explained by differences among students, while 2.48% was explained by variation between schools within the same country, and an additional 4.66% of the variance in school belonging was explained by differences between countries. In other words, student-level factors play a much greater role in predicting school belonging than more distal factors, but a country's economic development, legislation, policies, and government views nevertheless impact belonging at school (Allen et al., 2023). Given the dearth of literature in this area, future research is necessary to understand the indirect pathways that factors within students' countries of residence have on their sense of school belonging.

Chronosystem

The chronosystem reflects changes over time that impact each system within the ecological model, including individual changes and transitions, historical events, and the specific period in which a child is developing (Bronfenbrenner, 1993; Rosa & Tudge, 2013). Much research has found that school belonging is not a stable construct, but fluctuates throughout a student's education in response to changes within a child's individual, social, and environmental context (Allen & Boyle, 2018; Hughes et al., 2015; Niehaus et al., 2012).

School Transitions

Within the chronosystem, school transitions appear to play an important role in school belonging (Allen & Boyle, 2018; Hughes et al., 2015; Niehaus et al., 2012); consequently, school transitions have been a particular focus in school belonging research. Transitions, such as from preschool to elementary school, involve the chronosystem. These transitions also involve the microsystem and mesosystem, as they deal with temporality, new relationships, and school-related determinants, such as school climate (Hayes et al., 2022). Transitions are often accompanied by a range of changes, including a loss of peer groups, building new relationships, adjustment to new environmental spaces, and disruptions to learning, which can result in social and emotional changes that impact school belonging in complex ways (Allen & Boyle, 2018; Hayes et al., 2022). Transition times can also offer new developmental, social, and academic opportunities for students (Allen & Boyle, 2018; Hayes et al., 2022).

In particular, a successful transition to kindergarten is important to build a child's positive attitudes towards future learning, academic self-efficacy, and sense of school belonging (Dockett & Perry, 2005; Joerdens, 2014; McMahon & Wernsman, 2009; Wagle et al., 2021). Students who experience a positive start to school are more likely to view school as important and hold positive views of their ability to succeed, which can lead to improved school outcomes later in life (ETC, 2011; Peters, 2010). Consequently, early childhood educators should view fostering belonging among early learners as a top curricular priority (Johansson & Puroila, 2021).

Students entering middle school often experience a drop in school belonging, likely due to the increased stressors and reduced perceptions of school support and teacher connection after this transition (Hughes et al., 2015; Niehaus et al., 2012). Wylie and Hodgena (2012) examined a large New Zealand dataset from the Competent Learners Study to investigate changes in school engagement (effort and enjoyment of learning and quality of relationships with teachers) across the ages of 10 to 16. The authors reported a decline between early adolescence (age 12) and mid-adolescence (age 14), likely due to marked changes in activities outside of school, friendships, and values during early adolescence. Similar declining rates of school belonging have also been identified in students transitioning to high school (Benner & Graham, 2009; Wang & Eccles, 2012). For example, Benner and Graham (2009) followed 1,979 U.S. students from seventh to tenth grade and found that students transitioning to high school were lonelier and more anxious upon entry to high school and that the increased anxiety levels were maintained across time. Other research also suggests that school belonging and school liking steadily decline in adolescence (Wang & Eccles, 2012), likely due to increased academic demands and high levels of school-related stress (Lo Cricchio et al., 2023). Major influences across each ecological system interact in complex and interconnected ways in the context of time to impact students' sense of school belonging.

Promoting Belonging in Schools

In response to the growing recognition of the importance of school belonging for a broad range of positive student outcomes, researchers have begun to investigate how belonging can be fostered in schools (e.g., Allen et al., 2016; Allen & Kern, 2020). Strategies to facilitate school belonging include targeting students' social-emotional skills (Allen et al., 2022b; Frydenberg et al., 2017; Hassani et al., 2023; Pollak et al., 2023) and devoting time and resources to building positive student-teacher relationships (Allen et al., 2022b; Riley, 2019; Shochet & Orr, 2020). In addition,

fostering positive student relationships and interactions can support students' sense of belonging at school (Keyes, 2019; Leadbeater et al., 2023; Shochet & Orr, 2020).

School belonging is intrinsically tied to students' social and emotional well-being (Allen & Boyle, 2018; Castro-Kemp et al., 2020). As a consequence, initiatives geared towards promoting belonging in schools often focus on improving students' social and emotional health (e.g., Allen et al., 2022b; Allen & Kern, 2020; Pollak et al., 2023). Social Emotional Learning programs may address a broad range of capacities, including self-awareness, building a positive identity, emotion regulation skills, and social skills (Cervantes & Gutierrez, 2019; Frydenberg et al., 2017; Hassani et al., 2023; Ross & Tolan, 2017). Integrating psychoeducational social-emotional learning programs into the curriculum can help students develop the skills required for a strong sense of school belonging to occur (Allen et al., 2022b; Frydenberg et al., 2017; Hassani et al., 2023).

Students also need to feel supported and connected to the educators who work with them (Allen et al., 2022b; Riley, 2019; Shochet & Orr, 2020). They need to know that their teachers know them, care about them, and like them, regardless of their performance at school (Allen & Kern, 2020; Riley, 2019). Some researchers have even found that student-teacher relationships have a stronger influence on school belonging than peers or parents (Allen et al., 2018; Allen & Kern, 2020; Keyes, 2019). Consequently, improving the quality of teacher-student relationships is an essential component of enhancing school belonging (Keyes, 2019; Leadbeater et al., 2023; Shochet & Orr, 2020). Teachers can build nurturing relationships with their students by demonstrating care and respect through responsive communication, getting to know their students well, recognizing and believing in their students' strengths and abilities, and being encouraging and friendly (Allen et al., 2018; Allen & Kern, 2020; Keyes, 2019; Shochet & Orr, 2020). Educational policy makers and leaders would do much to support school belonging by ensuring that teachers are allocated sufficient time and opportunity to build strong relationships with their students (Allen et al., 2018; Allen & Kern, 2020).

Positive peer relationships built on kindness and mutual respect enable students to feel included and involved in their school environment, cultivating a sense of school belonging (Allen et al., 2022a; Riley, 2019; Shochet & Orr, 2020). School initiatives that build peer relationships and improve the quality of peer interactions are an important component of promoting belonging in schools (Allen & Kern, 2020; El Zaatari & Ibrahim, 2021; Hassani et al., 2023). Methods for enhancing peer relationships include prevention and intervention programs that target mental self-concepts, well-being, social-emotional skills, and anti-bullying strategies (Cervantes & Gutierrez, 2019; Hassani et al., 2023; Pollak et al., 2023). In particular, students benefit from explicit social skills instruction targeted at building empathy for others, social problem-solving skills, social perspective-taking, effective interpersonal communication, conflict resolution skills, and other healthy relationship behaviours (Allen et al., 2022b; Cervantes & Gutierrez, 2019; Hassani et al., 2023). Educators can also promote peer relationships by increasing peer interactions through classroom meetings, group work, collaborative games, and facilitating extracurricular involvement (Cervantes & Gutierrez, 2019; El Zaatari & Ibrahim, 2021; Mary, 2014; Shochet & Orr, 2020). Assisting students in developing positive friendships that support the development of prosocial behaviours can bolster students' sense of belonging at school (Allen & Kern, 2017).

Teachers can also foster school belonging by creating a positive and inclusive classroom environment through group work, collaborative activities, and engaging lessons that build on students' strengths and interests (Keyes, 2019; Mary, 2014). Furthermore, encouraging cultural awareness by facilitating respectful discussions on racial and ethnic differences can help students

feel a sense of belonging (Shochet & Orr, 2020). Effective classroom management that is supportive rather than punitive also has positive effects on school belonging (Keyes, 2019). Additionally, building strong relationships with families and involving the community in learning activities can further reinforce students' sense of connection to school (Allen et al., 2016, 2018; Riley, 2019). The benefits of a strong sense of school belonging are evident, given its positive impact on students' academic achievement, mental health, and social well-being (Ahmadi & Ahmadi, 2020; Arslan, 2019; Tian et al., 2016). Consequently, it is imperative that educators have a strong understanding of how to increase belonging at school.

Limitations and Future Directions

This narrative review has several limitations due to the methodological design and the broader literature on school belonging. First, unlike other types of reviews, narrative reviews do not follow a fully replicable or exhaustive search protocol, which may result in the omission of relevant studies and limit the ability of others to critically appraise or reproduce the findings. Second, the literature on school belonging is marked by inconsistent terminology and conceptual definitions, complicating the identification and inclusion of all studies that relate to the research topic. Third, the existing body of research on school belonging is predominantly quantitative, correlational, and situated in U.S. contexts with adolescent participants. This narrow demographic and methodological focus limits the applicability of findings to diverse socio-economic and cultural settings, especially among younger children or students in underrepresented regions. In addition, the lack of causal or explanatory research further limits our understanding of the mechanisms that explain the associations between school belonging and its various correlates.

Although school belonging has received a substantial amount of attention within educational research, some gaps in the literature have prevented the development of a holistic understanding of the construct. For example, there is a lack of literature on school belonging that is sensitive to developmental influences, despite the psychosocial and physiological changes that occur in students across their development (Balasundaram & Avulakunta, 2024; Dyussenbayev, 2017). Many studies neglect to consider how school belonging varies depending on the developmental stage of participants and the school context in which they exist (i.e., elementary, middle, secondary, and post-secondary) (Slaten et al., 2016). For example, Goodenow's (1993) definition of school belonging is widely used across the literature, even in the context of young children, even though it originated out of research with adolescent participants (e.g., Doumas & Midgett, 2019; Palikara et al., 2021; Wagle et al., 2021). Further research examining the extent to which common conceptualizations are applicable across child and adolescent development would be beneficial.

School belonging literature is also predominantly based on quantitative measures, limiting our understanding of nuanced variations of the construct across students (Bouchard & Berg, 2017). In particular, there is a dearth of literature in early elementary populations that captures young students' voices and perspectives (Erwin et al., 2024). The lack of qualitative investigations, particularly in early elementary students, presents a significant gap in the literature. Future qualitative research is needed to better understand the unique variations, perceptions, and experiences of school belonging in students.

Despite a wide body of literature identifying the importance of school belonging to student success (Ahmadi et al., 2020; Allen et al., 2016), globally, there exists little research within early elementary populations (i.e., kindergarten to Grade 2). As a consequence, our current

understanding of school belonging is developed predominantly out of research with adolescent participants (Palikara et al., 2021). This has left a large gap in knowledge of what factors contribute to early elementary students' sense of school belonging and how best to support belonging in this population. Future research on school belonging with early elementary students is greatly needed, given that a sense of school belonging is fundamental for young children's social and emotional health (Castro-Kemp et al., 2020; Palikara et al., 2021).

Finally, our understanding of the impact of distal influences within the exo and macro systems on school belonging is currently limited due to the indirect nature of these determinants and the lack of research in this area (Allen et al., 2016, 2018). The dearth of research may be due to the challenges in studying contexts that have indirect effects on students' sense of school belonging, the significant research requirements to compare similarities and differences across diverse communities to generate theories, or the complexities of the pathways between these influences and school belonging. Nevertheless, future research examining what exosystem and macrosystem factors influence school belonging would support a more comprehensive understanding of this important educational construct.

Conclusion

School belonging is the outcome of proximal and distal bidirectional influences reflected in each of Bronfenbrenner's (1993) ecological systems. Students' biological, academic, and psychological traits all play a key role in school belonging (Allen et al., 2018; Allen et al., 2023; El Zaatari & Maalouf, 2022; Tian et al., 2016). A child's microsystem also affects perceptions of belonging at school, including the quality of relationships with parents, peers, and teachers (Allen et al., 2016; Allen et al., 2023; El Zaatari & Maalouf, 2022). Mesosystem influences, such as school climate, engagement in extracurricular activities, and parent involvement at school, also impact students' sense of school belonging (Allen et al., 2016; Allen et al., 2023; Hayes et al., 2022). Some evidence suggests that the exosystem may influence school belonging through its effects related to parental workplaces, provincial educational policies and legislation, and local neighbourhood contexts (El Zaatari & Ibrahim, 2021; El Zaatari & Maalouf, 2022; Hayes et al., 2022). Distal influences within a child's macrosystem thought to impact school belonging include a country's sociocultural values, educational agendas, and social and cultural norms (Allen et al., 2023), although more empirical evidence is needed to confirm this.

One of the key challenges in drawing conclusions about school belonging lies in the fact that existing conceptualizations are largely based on quantitative research with adolescent participants in U.S. contexts. To develop a more nuanced and comprehensive understanding of this educational phenomenon, future research using a broader range of participants across diverse age groups, cultural and ethnic backgrounds, and global settings is required. To cultivate a sense of belonging in schools, educators and policymakers should nurture positive interpersonal school relationships, prioritize social-emotional curriculum, and create a school climate that students perceive as safe, inclusive, and supportive (Allen et al., 2018; Allen & Kern, 2020; Riley, 2019; Shochet & Orr, 2020). Educational leaders and policymakers would do much to support student achievement and social-emotional well-being by implementing educational reforms that support belonging in schools.

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Collaborating with Critical Friends: Exploring Picture Books Through Self-study in Secondary and Post-Secondary Classrooms

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Abstract

In this critical self-study, four educators located in two Canadian provinces in both secondary and post-secondary institutions investigated their pedagogical practices of using picture books as teaching tools. By exploring the intersection of critical friends and collaborative learning, we investigated how this synthesis enhanced teacher self-study practices and offered insights into effective strategies for professional learning in educational settings. Through self-study, we considered our use of picture books, our current personal and professional libraries, and our learning and growth from engagement in collaborative self-study with colleagues. This self-study revealed three critical findings: 1) the banning of books within educational settings, 2) the tendency of teachers to opt for books perceived as safe choices, and 3) the growing recognition amongst educators of the importance of selecting literature that reflects the diversity of individuals within the classroom. Implications for educators include exploring both the benefits of critical friendship in collaborative learning communities and teacher professional learning (TPL) opportunities to focus on equity and inclusion.

Keywords: collaborative self-study, critical friends, teacher education, critical literacy, picture books, inclusion

Collaborating with Critical Friends: Exploring Picture Books Through Self-study in Secondary and Post-Secondary Classrooms

The framework of Self-Study in Teacher Education Programs (S-STEP) offers a robust approach to enhancing teacher education, as it encourages reflective practice among educators across various levels, allowing them to critically analyze their teaching methods and effectiveness (Kitchen, 2023). Through self-study, we engaged with this non-linear methodology (Hamilton & Pinnegar, 2015) to examine our professional practices, specifically using picture books as pedagogy. In this context, picture books refer to texts that incorporate illustrations, typically accompanied by written language to convey the narrative. In some instances, they may forgo words entirely, relying solely on visual imagery. While often categorized as children's literature, picture books are not exclusively intended for young audiences. We are a professional learning community of four educators—an English and Social Studies teacher (grades 8–12) from a K–12 rural school on the island portion of Newfoundland and Labrador, Canada, and three teacher educators from a small university's Faculty of Education on Canada's east coast. Through our collaborative relationships, we established critical friendships (Kitchen & Berry, 2023; Stolle et al., 2019) to analyse our individual and collective professional experiences in teaching with picture books. Similar to Brewer et al. (2021), we adopted an equitable, authentic approach to cultivating our critical friendships. The members of our group had established longstanding professional relationships spanning several decades, which subsequently extended into personal spheres as well. The emphasis on collaboration and shared learning experiences with S-STEP supported our inquiry and afforded us opportunities to forge deeper connections between self-awareness and professional practice within our community (Berry & Kitchen, 2021). In bringing together colleagues from various levels of educational institutions, we aimed to contribute to Kitchen and Berry's (2023) call for more self-study involving secondary educators.

Self-studying and learning together with colleagues offer numerous benefits. For example, being part of a learning group fosters mutual responsibility and accountability (Diacopoulos et al., 2022). It provides opportunities to listen to and share diverse perspectives, enabling us to leverage each other's strengths and resources for enhanced learning outcomes. Like Appleget et al. (2020), we hope to further our professional learning journeys as educators. Below, we discuss our self-study within the context of using picture books as pedagogy and outline the critical friendship relationships that emerged through our shared learning and reflective practice.

In a previous broader study, the authors (Clarke et al., 2025) focused on a secondary school and the teacher education classrooms, where we examined equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) integration through the lens of critical literacy. In this collaborative classroom research, additional opportunities for teacher professional learning (TPL) through self-study emerged. We wanted to explore what happened when teacher educators intentionally studied their own practices, implementing EDI into their literacy and numeracy methods courses. As our self-study progressed, we extended our scope to include the following self-study questions grounded in professional learning:

- What did we learn about our use of picture books while investigating our current professional and classroom libraries through a critically oriented EDI lens?
- What was learned professionally from engaging in self-study through critical friendships with colleagues across post-secondary and secondary domains?

TPL, self-study, the importance of using picture books with students, and conversations with colleagues are interconnected through the shared goal of enhancing educational practices and outcomes. TPL involves ongoing reflection and adaptation of teaching methods to improve student outcomes by empowering teachers with the tools and insights needed to navigate the complexities of the classroom (Fullan et al., 2017). This is central to the self-study process. By engaging in self-study with critical friends, teachers collaboratively address specific challenges and opportunities within their own unique educational settings and take ownership of their professional growth. Picture books provide versatile educational tools for teachers to explore, through self-study, how they support diverse learning preferences, promote literacy, and foster critical thinking amongst students. This reflective practice not only enriches the TPL journey but also directly benefits student engagement and learning outcomes (Fullen et al., 2017; Hargreaves, 2019). By exploring the intersection of critical friends and collaborative learning, we seek to uncover how these factors synergize to enhance teacher self-study practices and offer insights into effective strategies for TPL in educational settings. Our study examines the role of critical friendship in facilitating self-study, addressing how collaborative and dialogic interactions between educators can deepen reflection, challenge assumptions, provide critical feedback, and foster professional growth.

Literature Review

As educators, we recognize the importance of reading the world through texts and encouraging students to bring their lived experiences into the classroom (Freire, 1983). Picture books provide occasions to share narratives of diversity in our society through the use of illustrations and are often combined with words. A growing movement to tell stories of complex issues in picture books (Clarke & Broders, 2022) signifies that these stories are for all readers, not just young children. As Kelly et al. (2020) have indicated, all children need access to stories that represent their identities and expand their knowledge. Reiker (2011) claims that it may be challenging for educators to use picture books with older students, as their colleagues and administrators sometimes feel that such books do not meet the rigour required in secondary classrooms. We believe, however, that picture books are significant teaching tools that promote literacy learning at all grade levels. There is limited research to suggest otherwise. Indeed, what research there is at this level focuses on students' reading and writing development or remediation for struggling learners (Premont et al., 2017; Reiker, 2011).

Picture books help initiate interesting conversations between teachers and students, and their inclusive and welcoming nature strengthens student-teacher relationships (Clarke et al., 2025). Picture books promote literacy learning; the simplified texts allow readers to concentrate more on comprehension rather than on decoding. While it may appear that students are engaged in a simplistic text, these books can portray multiple complex issues. As described by Leland et al. (2022), picture books offer fresh perspectives, and one of the main goals in their use is to create critically thoughtful citizens.

Picture books may be used as teaching tools from pre-school to post-secondary. Daly and Blakeney-Williams (2015) found that picture books were central for many teacher educators and an important part of their teaching pedagogy. They are often used to integrate curriculum across subjects such as language arts, mathematics, science, and social studies. Picture books can also reflect diverse voices and perspectives, promoting inclusivity and cultural values (Throop-Robinson, 2023). Picture books are complex and powerful pedagogical tools in preservice teacher education (Daly & Blakeney-Williams, 2015; Johnston & Bainbridge, 2013); therefore, valuable

teaching tools at all levels of education. To explore picture books, we engaged in teacher self-study with a group of critical friends.

Critical friendship is a vital component of teacher self-study, providing a supportive and challenging environment for reflective practice and professional learning. In embracing critical friendship, educators achieve deeper understanding, continuous improvement, and meaningful transformations in their teaching practices. In self-study, critical friends listen carefully, ask challenging questions of each other, and encourage reflection to help clarify ideas and improve the coherence and quality of the research process (Alan et al., 2021). Olan and Edge (2019) highlight the role of collaborative meaning-making and dialogic interactions in the critical friendship process. Stolle et al. (2019) provide a detailed examination of the layers involved in critical friendships, revealing the complexities and benefits of these relationships in the context of teacher self-study. Through open and honest conversations (Grant & Kastberg, 2023; Olan & Edge, 2019), as well as trusting relationships (Stolle et al., 2019), teachers can explore their beliefs, challenge assumptions, and co-construct knowledge. This collaborative process enhances reflective practice and ensures that multiple perspectives are considered, thus leading to a more nuanced understanding of teaching practices (Hargreaves, 2019). For teaching professional learning to be optimal, it is cradled in critical friendships.

Teacher professional learning (TPL) emphasizes the importance of continuous, reflective, and collaborative processes in enhancing educators' skills and knowledge. Bautista and Ortega-Ruiz (2017) highlight the role of professional learning communities (PLCs) where teachers engage in collective inquiry, share experiences, and collaboratively solve problems to improve their instructional practices. This collaborative approach fosters a culture of mutual support and shared responsibility for student outcomes. Postholm (2012) underscores the significance of reflective practice, whereby teachers critically analyze their teaching methods and outcomes to identify areas for growth and innovation. By integrating these perspectives, TPL becomes a dynamic process that not only focuses on individual development but also leverages collective wisdom to foster a culture of continuous improvement and pedagogical excellence.

In education, 'experts' are often expected to offer quick-fix or one-size-fits-all learning models. Instead, we must prioritize tailored solutions within our own organizations to meet learners' needs effectively. As Routman (2018) explains, the rarity of such professional learning stems from our persistent reliance on external programs or experts to solve problems when, in fact, we should be empowering “ourselves as experts” (p. 106). With traditional professional development facing criticism (Fullan, 2015; Fullan et al., 2017), there has been a shift towards collaborative learning within and between schools (Katz & Dack, 2012). This approach to TPL encourages an inward look at what is happening within our schools and how educators can all learn from one another; hence, self-study with critical friends.

Critical friendships may have a transformative impact on individual teachers (Grant & Kastberg, 2023). The support of critical friends within TPL is crucial in allowing teachers to step out of their comfort zones and explore new teaching strategies. The research showed how critical friendships led to significant transformations in teachers' professional identities and practices. As teachers developed a deeper understanding of their roles and responsibilities, it led to meaningful changes in their teaching practices (Grant & Kastberg, 2023). TPL with critical friends within self-study allowed us to come together as secondary teachers and post-secondary educators, extending our personal and professional relationships. Such an opportunity addresses the gap in education of secondary and post-secondary educators working collaboratively.

In what follows, we first describe the conceptual framework underpinning our conversations and the methodology guiding our self-study before discussing our learning as it occurred among critical friends.

Conceptual Framework and Theory

The conceptual framework for this paper arises from the complex intersection of teacher self-study, critical friends, and collaborative learning. Drawing on a robust theoretical foundation encompassing critical literacy (Comber, 2001, 2016; Luke, 1995), reflective practice (Roffey-Barentsen, 2013), and social constructivism (Adams, 2006), we aim to conceptualize the dynamic process of teacher self-study.

Critical Literacy

Critical literacy is an area which resists a final or single definition, and there is no recipe for teaching critical literacy. Like many terms, critical literacy is always 'under construction' and will always defy an exact definition. Critical literacy, however, is a major part of social transformation. It fosters a questioning stance in students concerning whose interests are being served by various texts in a range of contexts (Comber, 2001; Vasquez, 1994). Critical literacy is not used only to 'read' the everyday world but to transform and to address issues of social justice in the world. Luke (1995) claims that individuals "use texts to make sense of their world and to construct social actions and relations required in the labour of everyday life" (p. 13). When critical literacy becomes a focal point in classrooms and schools, it encourages students to use language to question the everyday world. It also provides opportunities for students to interrogate the relationship between language and power to understand how power relationships are socially constructed. As Comber (2016) explains, no texts are neutral, and critical literacy theorists point out that power relations are always embedded in language practices. When negotiating critical literacy practices in classrooms, young children often develop a sense of "how texts work for and against the interests of different people" (Comber, 2016, p. 10). Critical literacy is crucial so that learners develop critical thinking skills that bring about change and socially just practices. We see books and other texts as a bridge to a safe, supportive, and engaging space for conversation, where learners can make meaningful connections to themselves and others.

Reflective Practice

Reflective practice (Roffey-Barentsen, 2013) is a fundamental component of TPL and emphasizes the critical examination of one's teaching experiences to foster continuous improvement. The process involves a deliberate and systematic approach to reflection, whereby teachers analyze their instructional methods, student interactions, and educational outcomes to gain deeper insights into professional practice. Roffey-Barentsen highlights that reflective practice is not merely a retrospective activity but also a forward-looking one, and guides teachers to set goals and implement changes based on their reflections. With an increased awareness of their strengths and areas requiring growth, educators execute more intentional and effective teaching. This ongoing cycle of reflection and action creates a responsive and adaptive educational environment that enhances student learning and promotes professional growth.

Social Constructivism

Social constructivism posits that knowledge is constructed through social interactions and collaborative processes. Vygotsky's (1978) seminal work emphasizes the role of social context and cultural tools in cognitive development, highlighting the concept of the Zone of Proximal

Development (ZPD), where learners achieve higher levels of understanding through guidance and collaboration with more knowledgeable others. Adams (2006) builds on this by illustrating how learning environments that promote dialogue, negotiation, and shared experiences contribute to deeper understanding and critical thinking. Kapur (2018) further explores the practical applications of social constructivism in educational settings, demonstrating how problem-solving and collaborative activities enable students to co-construct knowledge and develop higher-order thinking skills. Together, these perspectives underscore that learning is inherently a social process, facilitated by interaction, communication, and the shared construction of meaning within a community.

Within this framework, we conceptualize self-study as a deliberate and systematic inquiry into one's own teaching practices, emphasizing the role of self-reflection and inquiry in fostering professional growth (see, for example, Kitchen & Berry, 2023 – S-STEP). Integral to this process are critical friends, individuals who provide supportive yet constructive feedback (Schuck & Russell, 2005) in a collaborative learning environment (Azorín & Fullan, 2020; Fischer et al., 2020), which facilitates collective exploration and knowledge sharing.

Methods

Teacher self-study has emerged as a significant methodology in educational qualitative research, providing teachers with a reflective practice framework to critically analyze and improve their teaching methods (Kitchen & Berry, 2023). This qualitative research approach empowers educators to be both practitioners and researchers, fostering a deeper understanding of their pedagogical practices and their impacts on student learning. Self-study helps develop and contribute to educators' professional capital; through a collaborative approach, it enhances school culture. Collaboration, open dialogue, and shared purpose enhance the collective efficacy of professional groups. Teachers' willingness to collaborate with colleagues as they question and reflect on personal practices helps them grow in confidence, explore new strategies and practices, and achieve the best learning outcomes for all learners. As a group of educators who collaborated and reflected on our pedagogical practices and were open to new strategies and practices, our study aligns with these beliefs. As a method for research within teacher education, it is important that self-study must be a lived experience (Diacopoulous et al., 2022; Gregory et al., 2017). Self-study is a journey of learning without a single defined route (Loughran, 2018), which is rooted in curiosity and practice (Pithouse-Morgan, 2022). Within our critical friendship group, we exposed our own vulnerability within the goal of improving our teaching practices, professional attitudes, and a focus on building better relationships with students (Frambaugh-Kritzer & Stolle, 2019; Nolan, 2010). These claims reiterate the importance of self-study across all levels of education.

Initially, we began our collaborative self-study as a group of researchers investigating the diversity of and in picture books. We were new to self-study research, acting simultaneously as researchers and learners in this process. We acknowledge that we grappled with the complexities of constructing a path and made shifts throughout the process. The efficacy of the self-study would not have been possible without critical friendship. We had already built, amongst the group, friendships where we could be honest, vulnerable, and critical (Frambaugh-Kritzer & Stolle, 2019; Nolan, 2010, 2016). This degree of comfort allowed for great discussions on our varied uses of picture books in the classroom, which embraced the values of EDI. Individually and collectively, we advocated for and embraced critical literacy as a means for social justice and as a means of continuous engagement in transformative learning endeavours (Zapata, 2024) and to promote allyship and support through critical friends (Wideman-Johnston & Brewer, 2014). The use of

picture books emerged as a possible pedagogical tool for depicting narratives of diversity and complexity within society, for challenging the conventional notion of their exclusivity to young audiences (Throop-Robinson, 2023). The process of collaborative self-study allowed us to explore, question, and reflect on using picture books in our classrooms, as well as to analyze books in our current professional libraries. We believe that our learning and our teaching will reflect the beneficial nature of this practice.

A pivotal component of our conceptual framework and collaborative learning involves adapting an analytic framework to evaluate picture books through an EDI lens. Relying on the tenets of critical friendships, we worked to adapt the *framework for selecting and using children's literature to support EDI in mathematics education* (Throop-Robinson, 2023) for use in literacy by adding 'thinking about critical literacies' (see Table 1). This critical adaptation promotes interdisciplinary approaches to TPL, where the principles and strategies employed in one domain, such as mathematics education, can be effectively applied to another, such as literacy instruction.

Table 1

Framework for Selecting and Using Children's Literature to Support EDI in Education

Building relationships	Thinking about critical literacies	Thinking mathematically	Reading the world	Integrating for learning
Does the book reflect the uniqueness of the child and consistently consider EDI with/in power relations?	Does the book use images and language that are inclusive?	Does the book foster inquiry and wonder about mathematical ideas and the connections to culture?	Does the book broaden appreciation for and connection with students' culture, heritage, and world view?	Does the book facilitate application of ideas in the students' world?
Does the book promote ethnic, gender and cultural inclusiveness?	Does the book make visible a variety of identity groups (gender, race, ethnicity, ability or disability)?	Does the text incorporate vocabulary familiar to mathematics teaching?	Does the book allow students to see themselves and understand the interrelatedness of peoples in the world?	Does the book provide broad and rich perspectives to reinforce the learning process?
Does the book show and encourage positive role models and relationships with family,	Does the book address current issues or past issues appropriately and accurately?	Does the book model problems connected to students' mathematical experiences and talk in the world?	Does the text show students how to use language to communicate ideas, challenge dominant ideologies and	Can this book be used as a stimulus to promote an active learning environment?

community, and others?			stir emotions creatively and playfully?	

Note. Adapted from *Framework for selecting and using children's literature to support EDI in mathematics education* (Throop-Robinson, 2023).

By leveraging this framework, educators can systematically select and integrate picture books into literacy curricula, harnessing their potential to enhance EDI in literacy education. Pre-service Teachers (PST) can also be equipped with the necessary knowledge and skills to effectively select and use picture books as a tool for promoting EDI in literacy instruction, thereby fostering a more inclusive and culturally responsive learning environment in classrooms.

Context

Initially, a group of four critical friends, three researchers at a rural university and one secondary school teacher, all located in Atlantic Canada, embarked on exploring the benefits and challenges of incorporating picture books in various educational settings, including secondary school and teacher education classrooms. Carolyn has spent more than 30 years in education and held positions including Elementary teacher, District Literacy Leader, Consultant, and Administrator. She has worked at the university level for many years. Carolyn's educational journey has always valued collaboration, and making a transition to self-study with critical friends was a natural part of the learning process. Participating in self-study research with critical friends helped her gain a deeper understanding of the benefits and challenges of using picture books in secondary and post-secondary school classrooms. It allowed accountability, not always present when independently exploring a topic or engaging in professional learning.

Evan was an elementary teacher who is now a teacher educator with experience in schools and universities in Canada. As a consultant, he supports teacher training and curriculum revisioning in mathematics education outreach activities across the Caribbean. Evan continues to work in classrooms through research, incorporating picture books with mathematics education for children and supporting discourse development for preservice teachers through number talks. For Evan, the presence of critical friends has been invaluable in challenging and refining pedagogical decisions and strategies. Thoughtful questioning and commentary with critical friends have fostered continuous improvement while providing safe spaces for the emergence and discussion of EDI issues.

Ellen taught for many years in public school settings, teaching in upper elementary, middle school, and secondary mathematics before joining the faculty of education. Her interest in mathematics education includes trauma-informed practices and decolonization. She is committed to advocacy and support for the education of children and youth in care. Ellen began this project with critical friends believing in the importance of incorporating diverse perspectives and voices, promoting cultural awareness, empathy and critical thinking, and holding some foundational knowledge of equity and diversity. As a secondary mathematics educator, she has a small library of picture books used to support inclusive practices and was just beginning to explore their potential in mathematics instruction.

Jo Anne is a secondary English Language Arts (ELA) and Social Studies teacher at a rural school in Newfoundland and Labrador (NL) with twenty-eight years of teaching experience. She continues to focus on critical literacy within her teaching and learning experiences. She previously

worked as an assistant principal and as an ELA program specialist for grades 7, 8, and 9 with the Department of Education (NL). After Covid-19, Jo Anne observed that people were ready again for collaboration and friendship to reestablish the socialization they had missed. For Jo Anne, collaboration is always positive as it means sharing plural perspectives on topics and thereby offering a range and diversification of thoughts conducive to improving accuracy and extending learning. Through collaboration, critical friends can achieve new social partnerships that offer opportunities for learning partnerships. Jo Anne believes that collaboration is a way to refreshingly change and enliven a daily schedule as well as effectively invigorate and motivate our pedagogical approaches.

The team received approval from both the university research ethics board and the public school board ethics committee to conduct classroom research. Our focus was on "picture books as pedagogy" across different education sites: In summary, Carolyn in elementary literacy; Evan in elementary mathematics; Ellen in sociology and secondary mathematics; and Jo Anne in teaching English and Social Studies to secondary students.

Through our collaborations as critical friends, we felt the need to respond to the current trends on social media platforms, other media outlets, and public discourse, which show an increase in book banning and the prohibition of topics in schools. Given current trends in many countries to exclude diverse groups and take away rights, there is a need to expand social justice practices at all levels of education. Picture books can help provide entry points into difficult conversations on many topics with students (Clarke & Broders, 2022). It is more important than ever that educators advocate for institutions that are experiencing pressure to exclude voices.

Data Generation

The data sources for this self-study came from the examination of our own professional libraries, our classroom library, student-created books, live notes and transcripts from Zoom conversations, and notes compiled while analyzing books using a framework and the Nova Scotia Bias Evaluation Instrument (NSBEI). The self-study unfolded in two phases (see Table 2). In Phase one, we examined our professional and classroom libraries at the Faculty of Education and Secondary School to identify prevalent picture books and evaluated them using an analytical framework (see Table 1) and the NSBEI (2015) to determine representation of diverse individuals and ethnicities (Tate et al., 2022). Jo Anne then engaged students in creating their own picture books. Jo Anne shared these books with critical friends (Schuck & Russell, 2005) during our conversations. These student-created books served as data and discussion points, shaping our understanding of picture books as pedagogical tools with secondary and post-secondary students, tools we could use to enhance teaching methods, learning activities, and instructional strategies. In Phase two, our findings and reflections from Phase one deepened our discussions, guiding the next steps of the self-study.

Table 2

Data Collection

Researcher Role	Phase One Data
All researchers	Examined classroom libraries – Field Notes

All researchers	Reviewed book being used in classrooms using the *Framework for selecting and using children's literature to support EDI in education* and *NSBEI*
Researcher 4 worked with students to create books	Student created books
All researchers	Regular Zoom meetings (monthly approximately 1hour) and live notes
Researcher Role	**Phase Two Data**
All researchers	Reviewed field notes from Phase 1
Researcher 4	Shared student created picture books with critical friends.
All researchers	Independently read and analyzed transcripts from Zoom meetings to identify themes.
All researchers	Met on Zoom to discuss themes that emerged during data analysis.

Building upon the groundwork of Phase One, we incorporated selected picture books into our classrooms, making them a regular part of our teaching practice. Data was generated through reflective notes on the overall experience of reading and creating picture books with students, and from student-written reflections on the process of listening to and creating personal picture books. Evan used math-themed picture books to foster cultural awareness of mathematics among pre-service teachers (PSTs). In Ellen's sociology of education class, PSTs evaluated picture books using the framework (see Table 1) to determine their suitability for classroom use and their potential to address EDI concerns. Carolyn used picture books as entry points for discussions on various topics such as equity, implicit bias, and identity with elementary PSTs. Jo Anne continued to engage secondary students in reading, creating and sharing picture books to support learning. Her students also completed written reflections about the process and experience after they finished their books.

During Phase two, over six months, our group of critical friends met monthly for collaborative one-hour conversations. These conversations occurred on Zoom, were video recorded, and later transcribed. At the first meeting, we discussed the purpose of our study, how often we would meet and plan for our next session. At each meeting, we shared 'what was right on for us in our investigation of our personal library, the school library, and how students responded to creating their own books'. We also discussed the advantages and disadvantages of the books available in our classroom libraries. Books within our personal and classroom libraries constituted a variety of literature: picture books addressing diverse topics, mathematics-themed literature, young adult novels, poetry, etc. The investigations and reflections conducted before our meetings served as entry points into the conversations with our critical friends. Any live note-taking during the Zoom sessions was also included as data. Researchers' notes from using the Framework for selecting and using children's literature to support EDI in education were also part of the data generation. Our conversations involved our personal reflections and shared analysis about what was happening in our classrooms.

Data Analysis

We employed an emergent design of analysis through reflection on our critical friends' conversations, live note-taking, student-created books, and student reflections. Each researcher had access to all transcript data and their individual live notes. Individually, we reviewed the transcripts and identified emerging themes (Lankshear & Knobel, 2004), came together to discuss those themes and decided "which data to include as evidence for the story that is developing" (Simons, 2009, p. 118). Each researcher individually identified themes that emerged from their notes, the transcripts, and student reflections; the researchers dialogued collectively to identify common themes. All researchers colour-coded, labelled and categorized their findings. When we regrouped, we shared our findings and then identified themes that were common to all.

Concerning our first research question (What did we learn about our use of picture books while investigating our current professional and classroom libraries through a critically oriented EDI lens?) the three main categories identified included: 1) banning books; 2) books to avoid conflict; 3) books to reflect diversity and authenticity. Our categories of book banning and books that avoid conflict surfaced from our analysis of the transcripts of our Zoom Meetings and were identified by all four researchers. The third category, books representing diversity and authenticity, emerged from our reflective notes recorded when investigating our personal and classroom libraries and the written reflections of secondary school students. During the research journey, our critical friendship pushed us to think about the importance of the representation of all students in the classroom. It led us to investigate whether our libraries were diverse and inclusive. For example, we discussed whether our libraries included books representative of various cultures, diverse families, genders, sexual identities, races, socioeconomics, abilities/disabilities, etc. Additionally, to address our second research question (What was learned professionally from engaging in self-study through critical friendships with colleagues across post-secondary and secondary domains?), the self-study data shed light on the benefit of professional learning with critical friends across different educational institutions.

Through data analysis and sharing, we found synergies, overlaps, and dissonance amongst the individual thematic reflections. For the duration of our analysis, we focused on the data representing our pedagogies of practice as "partial, incomplete, and always in a process of a re-telling and re-membering" (Jackson & Mazzei, 2012, p. ix) while keeping in mind the framework and theoretical components that solidified our work (Jackson & Mazzei, 2012). As identified by Mena and Russell (2017), constant comparative analysis helps enhance the trustworthiness of the qualitative self-study process. As a group of researchers with more than a century of collective teaching experience, our critical friendship played an important role throughout this research process and pushed our thinking. Our extensive experience and the level of comfort we felt in each other led to trustworthiness between all researchers and a trust in the self-study process (Brewer et al., 2021).

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness is a crucial aspect of any self-study conducted with teachers in education. In the context of such research, trustworthiness refers to the credibility and reliability of the findings, ensuring that they accurately reflect the experiences and insights gained through the self-study process (Hamilton et al., 2020). In our context, for example, we offered honest voices about issues that arose in our classroom and within ourselves, which were ignited by the diverse issues that picture books evoked. We could comfortably talk about controversial issues such as cultural

identity and implicit bias. Our collective experiences gave us the confidence to address any concerns that arose during the research.

Establishing trustworthiness involves employing various strategies such as member checking, peer debriefing, and maintaining detailed documentation of the research process (Creswell & Guetterman, 2020). Our self-study process integrated each of these strategies. For example, member checking occurred regularly during our Zoom meetings, and we often asked each other to clarify or further explain our thinking. Peer debriefing was accomplished by sharing and discussing our findings from our data analysis through the process of labelling, coding and categorizing data. We maintained detailed documentation through the entire research process by recording and transcribing each Zoom meeting, live individual note-taking, and reflective notes from classroom sessions. By upholding principles of trustworthiness, self-study researchers with teacher educators and teachers can enhance the validity of their findings and contribute valuable knowledge to the field.

Findings

Throughout the analysis of the data generated through our critical conversations, three prevalent themes emerged: 1) Choosing books to reflect diversity and authenticity, 2) Addressing book banning trends and the Nova Scotia bias evaluation instrument, and 3) Playing it safe: Teachers choosing books to avoid conflict. In the next section, we share a description of our three key findings.

Choosing Books to Reflect Diversity and Authenticity

The self-study highlighted a growing recognition amongst educators of the importance of selecting literature that reflects the diversity of individuals within the classroom and in society. The importance of diversity and authenticity in picture books was also highlighted by all researchers in the student response data, which Jo Anne brought to the group. As one student explained, "I can write about my culture in my book, and other students can learn about my culture." This statement reinforced for us the need to expand classroom libraries to include authentic stories from various cultural backgrounds and marginalized communities. Central to the members in this study was a framework developed by Evan for selecting and using children's literature to support EDI in mathematics education and to support EDI more broadly in picture books (see Figure 1). We used an adapted framework to analyze our classroom libraries. The analysis allowed us to see a variety of patterns in the picture books available to us. For example, Evan spoke about the books for the mathematics classroom that use math concepts (e.g., the number zero, the addition sign, multiplication, etc.) as characters, thus avoiding the inclusion of any kind of diversity that might reflect the young audiences. The prevalence of animal characters also provoked our thinking because "it kind of erases diversity for students, particularly with respect to race (Carolyn)." Evan argued that animal characters are "geared toward a generic society where there are no inequities, no diversity, and no issues." He also pointed to the use of fairy tales, which may not be "sending the right message [because] they are stereotypical heteronormative." Our critical friends' conversations, however, shifted our thinking to looking at multifaceted perspectives. Sometimes, difficult conversations can be supported by creating an emotional distance for children through books using animal characters (Burke & Copenhaver, 2004). Ellen highlighted the book, *Tiam* (Young & Paul, 2014), written from the perspective of the moose in the story. A complication arose for Ellen using the framework as support for *Tiam*. Mi'kmaw culture and values are central to the story. Mi'kmaq people are represented, yet the narrative of the story comes from the

perspective of the animal and speaks to the responsibility of the people to care for the moose. The self-study group felt this was a unique approach to using an animal character that avoided the cute animal hook for young children and the neutrality of character symbols. This particular book generated conversation regarding the lens we use to critique and assess our picture books. Ellen also commented on the use of animal characters, saying that some writers may be "intimidated in terms of the diverse and inclusive nature of writing. So, animals are safe."

A central theme arose in the critical friends' conversations about embracing authentic narratives from the community to enhance students' sense of belonging and foster empathy and understanding. Evan showed books bringing a range of diversity in the mathematics community "that show women and Black men, Black women, men and women from India, gay mathematicians, lesbian mathematicians...to diversify our understanding of what a mathematician looks like." He described a class assignment that involved choosing a picture book and developing rich tasks around its themes. One group chose *Blockhead* (D'Agnese, 2010) to tell the story of the well-known mathematician Fibonacci, who used observation to describe patterns and sequences in nature. The group first outlined the mathematical concepts and the Fibonacci sequence to develop tasks. As they unpacked the story further, however, they gravitated towards the social dynamics of his life and "issues of being different, of being an outsider, being bullied and the consequences on mental health." Similarly, Carolyn referenced multiple books: "All of those books have more diverse characters". But she reflected on a comment from a colleague who made her think more deeply about the picture books she was choosing, "or trying to choose picture books that show diverse characters. Are we sharing books that are being told from African history perspectives, or are we telling stories of how ~~Black~~ people of colour were accepted by white people?" This shift towards inclusivity underscores a commitment to promoting social justice and equity within educational spaces.

Increasing recognition of educators toward the importance of selecting texts that reflect the diversity of individuals, culture, and society is necessary within the classroom. The importance of diversity and authenticity in picture books allows all learners to see themselves inside the walls of the classroom, positioning them as respected participants within the learning community. Intentionally incorporating a variety of voices and experiences through picture books, educators can provide both windows and mirrors for students—windows into the lives and experiences of others, and mirrors that reflect their own identities. This allows all learners to see themselves as respected participants within the learning community and can challenge stereotypes, fostering a deeper understanding of the world around them.

Addressing Book Banning Trends and the Nova Scotia Bias Evaluation Instrument

The self-study revealed a concerning trend of book banning within educational settings, particularly in secondary classrooms, indicating a potential threat to academic freedom and the diversity of perspectives available to students. The practice of book banning is increasing, as is its focus in media and public discourse. Ellen identified that the two most important points for her were about "banning books and how that [book banning] may impact pedagogy, and whether we'd use the books again or wouldn't use the books again." The practice of banning books may undermine the professional autonomy of educators, who value students' intellectual independence and encourage the exploration of diverse ideas, however controversial, challenging, and uncomfortable. Book banning also emerged as an important theme for Carolyn as she believed that "finding ways to use books that may cause conflict and controversy and focusing on that as an educational perspective instead of just really sanitizing our curriculum" is crucial for critical

literacy development. Limiting access to certain texts risks silencing marginalized voices and narrowing the range of perspectives to which students are exposed. In contrast, a commitment to inclusivity affirms the value of all voices in the educational landscape.

During the self-study collaborative conversations, we noted instances of censorship and restriction of literature, notably with Jo Anne, who commented on the banning of *Catcher in the Rye* (Salinger, 1951) for use in some classrooms and with Carolyn, who recalled recent bans on JK Rowling's texts because of the author's comments on social media. The introduction of the Nova Scotia Bias Evaluation Instrument underscored a proactive approach to addressing biases within educational materials and books. For example, Ellen asked teachers in a differentiated instruction and mathematics course to evaluate picture books according to their inclusivity and representation. One book, *We Move Together* (Fritsch & MacGuire, 2021), became the focus of a learning center on ableism and representation.

Evaluating texts serves as a mechanism to assess and mitigate biases present in picture books, fostering a more inclusive and equitable learning environment. Evan commented on the systemic nature of book banning, whereby administrators rationalize, "We can't mandate teachers to do things a certain way or have this knowledge like we hope it would be." Systemically, there is "an assumption that we have a lot of teachers who aren't doing this [critically evaluating texts]" and therefore, "as a system [school systems] need to make that decision because we can't trust that it will happen otherwise." In this context, the use of a bias evaluation tool can serve as a valuable resource to support educators in making informed and reflective decisions about the texts they bring into their classrooms.

Our self-study underscores the critical importance of addressing book-banning trends within educational settings, while initiatives like the NSBEI offer proactive steps toward fostering inclusivity and equity in the curriculum. Ongoing discussions within our self-study highlight the need to balance the removal of books which may be seen as controversial with respect for teachers' autonomy and professional judgement, acknowledging systemic challenges in promoting critical evaluation of texts.

During the critical friends' conversations, Carolyn introduced us to author Deborah Appleman, who wrote *Literature and the New Culture Wars* (2022) and offered educators ways to continue teaching troubling texts while confronting the conflict and controversies they invoke. Carolyn described Appleman's hope that children, young people, and university students be given the tools to think critically about texts, and ultimately, the opportunity "to make their own decisions about books themselves." Carolyn elaborated on a growing concern amongst educators of a "blanket ban" on certain texts that imposes on the "professional decision-making processes of teachers." For Carolyn, this is akin to "stealing from the children an opportunity to have some of those difficult conversations that would be sparked [from reading the text]." It is important to ensure all learners have access to a variety of texts through which they can view and evaluate through a critical lens. There was hope across our study that such conversations are happening regardless of obstacles and the concern that all teachers may not feel comfortable or culturally competent to engage students in "difficult conversations and invite students to make [their own] decisions (Carolyn)." Decision-making is an important skill for all children of all ages. Evan also reflected on recent classroom experiences with banning topics and books from the classroom, saying, "Just about the time Florida decided that they were going to take LGBTQ issues out of their curriculum...I was holding up and reading *The True Story of Alan Turing* (Revell, 2017) and his mathematical code breaking that would eventually lead to the end of the Second World War."

Evan explained that as a gay man, Turing was persecuted by the authorities and eventually incarcerated, leading to his eventual suicide. Evan described the students' conversation in his class; they were "reminding me that in some places in the world we can't even hold this book up because of who he was." Students felt that it was precisely because of who he was and what he had accomplished that "We need to talk about this person" and tell his full story. Students need to engage in conversations to help understand how merely banning books prevents individuals from seeing themselves in classrooms. The critical friends' conversations underscored the importance of equipping students with critical thinking skills to navigate complex and controversial texts. Censorship threatens democracy (Leland et al., 2022), and while it is essential to advocate against blanket bans that restrict educational opportunities, it is equally vital to recognize the responsibility of educators to intentionally facilitate critical literacy and social justice learning through their use of controversial texts. Educators must move beyond neutrality to actively foster classroom environments where students critically engage with issues of power, privilege, and representation. This includes using controversial books as pedagogical tools to challenge dominant narratives and affirm marginalized voices.

Current trends on social media, in public discussions, on podcasts and webinars show an increase in book banning and the banning of certain topics in schools. Public libraries face scrutiny of their holdings and are experiencing pressure to purge picture books dealing with human sexuality, racism, and particularly those showing representation of the LGBTQIA2S+ communities (Jones, 2024). Jones (2024) claimed this movement increasingly makes it challenging for teachers to use their professional judgment and choose the books that they deem the best teaching resources. Routman (2023) explained that such moves degrade our faith in children, educators, and public-school systems. Appleman (2022) had a similar view, claiming that it is important to trust students to be capable of learning to read the words and the world through a critical lens and cautions against reactionary attempts to remove any material that is potentially "offensive in any way to anyone" (p. 78). Leland et al. (2022) claim it is imperative to consider the perspectives of others, or issues such as racism, that go unchallenged. Their claims aligned with Appleman, who challenges those in power to disrupt and reread texts rather than simply resorting to book banning.

Playing it Safe: Teachers Choosing Books to Avoid Conflict

A prevalent theme identified by all researchers in the transcript data was instances of teachers "playing it safe". Teachers often opt for books perceived as safe choices, particularly in the aftermath of sensitive events such as suicides or natural disasters that claim lives. While books perceived as "safe" may reflect a commitment and a desire to protect the emotional well-being of students, they may also limit opportunities for critical dialogue and difficult but meaningful conversations with children. Jo Anne described how when she had worked for a publishing company, employees were advised that "if the language in the book is considered racial or if there's a lot of offensive language, turn the book down because you didn't want the teacher, in the classroom, to get negative feedback from parents. We could not approve something that could get teachers in trouble." Given the accessibility of social media and comments that are posted, casting teachers and schools in a negative light, teachers and administrators often make the safest decision. Leland et al. (2022) refer to the proclivity of teachers to 'play it safe' as self-censorship, where they opt to protect themselves rather than include controversial books or topics in their teaching.

This careful approach may also be connected to the complexity of maintaining respectful and inclusive environments while navigating diverse community values. Teachers may

demonstrate a reluctance to introduce literature that could potentially provoke conflict or questioning among students or parents. For example, Carolyn recalled teachers at the school where she was an administrator debating the use of *And Tango Makes Three* (Richardson & Parnell, 2015) in classrooms. The picture book tells the true story of two male penguins at Central Park Zoo, who form a bond, get help from the zookeeper, look after an egg that hatches, and care for the baby penguin. Teachers were fearful of parents who might question their decision to promote same sex marriage. This reluctance was exemplified when Jo Anne recalled a tragic event in her classroom, the death of a student, "I had never experienced [this] before, there was no PL [Professional Learning] on it." Reflecting deeply on the emotional well-being of her students, Jo Anne decided to omit some literature that touched on sensitive topics (e.g., *The Outsiders*, Hinton, 2006). *The Outsiders* (2006) has long been a controversial book, banned in some schools for gang violence, underage smoking and drinking, strong language, and family dysfunction, while part of the curriculum in others (Baldassarro, 2011). Jo Anne continued, "I left out so much stuff for about 3 years. I would not deal with it, and it wasn't about me; it was about protecting those [students]. I didn't want them to feel extra sad when they came to my class." Jo Anne referred to her actions as "self-banning," yet in the critical friends' conversations, others commented on Jo Anne's choice as a "professional decision" rather than a ban that may have come from an "outside" source. Carolyn responded to Jo Anne's strategy of "purposeful selection" saying, "critical selection is so valuable." Jo Anne's cautious approach to book selection may have inadvertently limited the exposure of students to diverse perspectives and critical discussions. The avoidance of books related to sensitive topics, however, reflects a broader need for educators to navigate challenging subjects with sensitivity, prioritizing the importance of fostering critical thinking and empathy in students.

The critical friends' conversation continued to dig deeper into issues of professional decision-making, purposeful selection, and critical thinking. For example, Carolyn interjected with the possibility that teachers could do more than remove troubled texts, "We need to trust our students and ourselves to teach them, to trouble them, and to engage [them] in the kind of rigorous, intellectual and authentic debate that is a critical part of literary study." Jo Anne quickly agreed, recalling a conversation in her secondary classroom with Deborah Ellis, author of *The Breadwinner* (2000). Students, teachers, and Jo Anne discussed the importance of young adults reading texts that describe difficult accounts of war and brutality. Jo Anne recalled Ellis' powerful statement, "Because it's just happening to one group in the world [Afghan children], the other group [Canadian children] should be able to read about it, in the same age group." Ellen connected this conclusion with educators' responses to the rise of the Black Lives Matter movement after the murder of George Floyd. With some teachers choosing not to talk about it in classrooms, Ellen reflected that many Black families are necessarily already engaged in this conversation. She asked educators to "hold a mirror up to yourself [to reflect] the privilege that you can safely decide to not pay attention to this." As Ellen reiterated, "For many people, it is not a choice to not talk about it." Indeed, Ellen described parents in her community talking to young children about socio-cultural issues like "how we behave when police are around in order to keep [us] safe." She highlighted *Up Home* (Grant, 2008), written by an African Nova Scotian woman who recalls growing up in the Black community of North Preston, and questioned other books in her library, "Who are telling our own stories? ...not from our White perspective ... that is different." Her question raised other concerns in the critical friends' conversation about how, "even though we're trying to be inclusive and using books that we think are diverse, are they still sending the messages that we want to send?" The conversation highlighted the imperative for educators to trust students

with challenging texts, engage in rigorous debate, and confront socio-cultural issues head-on, recognizing the privilege inherent in the ability to choose whether to address them.

Benefits of Professional Learning Through Self-Study with Critical Friends

The importance of self-study has been demonstrated through professional learning, collaborative learning communities, and opportunities for inclusivity. Self-study can provide schools and other educational institutions with opportunities to promote reflective practice with critical friends and continuous improvement. Through a group of trusted professionals, teachers currently facing anxieties in choosing resources, lacking a voice within the system, and diminishing authority in curricular decision-making, will have an opportunity to express concerns, receive collegial support, and reach meaningful solutions. As Jo Anne explained, "coming together to talk about what we've been doing and using—this sort of self-study to me is the most effective model of professional development or professional learning that we can be involved in." Our critical friendships served to highlight the shared concerns within our professional community and strengthened our reflective practices. As Evan stated, "being with critical friends provides an opportunity to feel safe to discuss learning."

Establishing collaborative learning communities through critical friendships can also enhance the effectiveness of self-study by providing teachers with peer support and diverse perspectives. Through collaboration, "we're having excellent conversations, but then we're also accountable to us as a group of professionals, because we're all going back and doing our thing and coming back and talking about it" (Carolyn). Evan continued, "It's that engagement in conversation with each other, going back, trying things, and then coming back and sharing whether it worked." That is the essence of collaborative learning communities with a group of critical friends.

Teacher self-study could be leveraged to address inclusivity and equity, encouraging teachers to develop culturally responsive and inclusive teaching practices. Our focus on picture books opened space to talk. The notes recorded while each researcher investigated their classroom libraries highlighted the importance of a diverse collection of picture books. It also brought to light current issues of book banning that have become prevalent across many provinces in Canada. We are hopeful that through discussion and education, we can help others understand the importance of using all texts as critical resources and pedagogical tools. As Ellen explained, we have to analyze books "to see who's represented, who's not, and how they are represented, it's all connected to identity." Students at all levels—from the earliest grades to post-secondary—need to see themselves represented in their learning environment. As a result of self-study, we acknowledge the importance of continued professional learning and collaborative learning communities with critical friends. We also acknowledge the benefits of socially constructed knowledge (Vygotsky, 1978) and the value of critical literacy (Comber, 2001, 2016; Luke, 1995; Vasquez, 1994) to enhance learning.

The findings of this self-study illuminate the complex dynamics surrounding book selection and censorship within educational settings. While concerns regarding book banning and the avoidance of controversial topics persist, there is also evidence of a growing awareness amongst educators of the importance of diversity and authenticity in literature. Moving forward, there is a need for ongoing dialogue and professional development to empower educators in navigating these challenges while upholding the principles of academic freedom and inclusivity. By fostering a culture that embraces diverse perspectives and authentic narratives, educators can

create enriching learning experiences that empower students to become critical thinkers and compassionate global citizens, as well as further develop their own professional learning.

Discussion and Implications for Teachers and Teacher Educators

Engaging in self-study with critical friends was indeed a professional learning journey (Appleget et al., 2020; Loughran, 2018). The concepts of critical literacy (Comber, 2001, 2016; Luke, 1995; Vasquez, 1994), reflective practice (Roffey-Barentsen, 2013), and social constructivism (Adams, 2006; Kapur, 2018; Vygotsky, 1978) were the theoretical underpinnings of the research process. As educators, it provided us an opportunity to strengthen our relationship between self and practice (Berry & Kitchen, 2023; Frambaugh-Kritzer & Stolle, 2019) as well as with colleagues. Learning together is a process facilitated by interaction, communication and shared meaning within a community (Adams, 2006; Kapur, 2018; Olan & Edge, 2019), which was demonstrated by our self-study. The connection across institutions—secondary school and post-secondary—enhanced our learning and deepened our understanding of both self-study and our professional practice.

Even after our formal self-study, we continued to share information and current happenings related to our collaborations. For example, *The Hate U Give* (Thomas, 2017) was removed from Nova Scotia's curriculum because of language in the book. The Department of Education claims that it was not banned but merely removed from the recommended reading resource list; the book will be available in school libraries if a student chooses to read it. Such a move links to our critical friends' conversation that limiting exposure limits the depth of conversation for students from local affected communities. Chisholm (2023), reporting for CBC News, notes that one Nova Scotian teacher responded to the removal of *The Hate U Give* by writing, "Are we sending the message that the topics, experiences, and language a Black author chooses to use are not welcome as a choice in high school? How do we address systemic racism and disrupt inequalities from our history, without the history?" (n.p.). These questions are well aligned with the conversation of our collaborative self-study. We also add questions such as: How are teachers positioning themselves if they choose to use a book not on an approved list? Will teachers self-ban the book? Will teachers continue to play it safe? Are they willing to put themselves in a place and space to be questioned and challenged and feel supported to do so? Will teachers be willing to speak out?

This study enhanced the connection between secondary and post-secondary educators and the need for further collaborations between these groups. It is beneficial for both teachers and students in these classrooms, as many commonalities exist across educational fields. Our collaboration and exploration identified both strengths and concerns that can benefit teaching and learning in secondary and post-secondary classrooms. Kitchen (2023) identified that there is a need for self-study to be promoted as a valuable tool for professional growth at all levels of education. Our study addresses the need by extending our self-study to include secondary and post-secondary educators, which makes this a more unique self-study. Additionally, we recommend that more educators in secondary and post-secondary education embrace similar self-study.

As Jo Anne reiterated, "collaboration is a great tool to help improve teaching, but more importantly and more crucially, it is a tool to help improve student happiness and understanding as they grapple with issues they face in their own lives". If it did not help students, we would not value it as we do; our students are the leaders and are a daily inspiration for us to do our best as educators. We feel privileged to have participated in a collaborative self-study with other educators, all of whom are invested in improving and invigorating education.

Limitations

While a self-study involving three education professors from a single institution and a secondary teacher from a different province can provide valuable insights into teaching practices and collaboration across geographic boundaries, it also presents certain limitations. The small size of the group may restrict the diversity of perspectives and experiences represented, potentially limiting the generalizability of findings. The self-study, however, was intended to examine the personal, not create a generalization. The geographical distance between the secondary teacher and the institution prevented face-to-face interactions, thereby impacting the depth of collaboration through online platforms and email exchanges. The focus on a single institution and a secondary teacher from a different location may also overlook the broader contextual factors and variations in educational settings that could influence the effectiveness and applicability of the study's findings. These limitations underscore the importance of considering the scope, diversity, and context of participants when conducting self-study research in education.

Concluding Thoughts

Throughout our collaborative self-study, we experienced learning as a journey with multiple ways to get to a destination (Loughran, 2018). Our journey left us at multiple destinations—as one never truly arrives at a final destination on a learning journey—our journey left us with as many questions as it did answers. For future self-study and professional learning, we are contemplating a book study through collaborative self-study. In Appleman's *Literature and the New Culture Wars* (2022), the author makes a very solid case for not banning books, concerns with book banning resonated with us all; as Carolyn stated "we wish we had time that we could actually all read this and come back and have that conversation in a book study...not just this book [*Literature and the New Culture Wars* (2022)], but we have a potential way of extending our learning and our knowledge through this approach [self-study] that we're doing, right now". We hope that our experiences will contribute to the existing scholarship about collaborative self-study among critical friends. We hope our readers will embrace self-study with critical friends as a means of professional learning and to grapple with issues that arise during the learning journey. As well, teachers may find the DEI framework and NSBEI tool useful to question their choice of texts used in classrooms. We recognize the differences between and similarities to other self-study researchers and hope that our contribution will ignite a passion for others to engage with colleagues to learn together through self-study.

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Strength-Based Pedagogies in Mathematics Education: "I Like Being Your Little Teacher"

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Abstract

This article presents a strength-based, cross-age mentorship program where second and sixth-grade students in a multicultural primary school collaborate in mathematics. The sixth-grade students serve as mentors/tutors for the younger students. Drawing on positioning theory and storylines, we have focused on the mentor's outcome, specifically how the program can help mentors position themselves as mathematics learners. The study presented is a single study based on observations and subsequent interviews with twenty students and their two teachers. The identified storylines suggest that well-structured strength-based cross-age collaboration in mathematics can create learning-focused relationships and learning contexts that enrich mentors (and mentees) both socially and academically. In this strength-based learning environment, mentors are valued for their personal strengths and mathematical proficiency, allowing them to experience a sense of achievement and pride.

Keywords: strength-based pedagogies, cross-age collaboration, multicultural mathematics education, positioning theory, mentoring, classroom tensions

Strength-Based Pedagogies in Mathematics Education: "I Like Being Your Little Teacher"

In the Norwegian tradition of implemented cross-age mentorship programs, known as "fadderordning," first-grade students are paired, individually or in small groups, with a mentor or a mentoring group from the same school. These mentors, usually four years older, provide guidance and support within the school environment. The duration of the collaboration varies. At some schools, the partnership dissolves after a few months, while at other schools, it lasts until the mentor's graduation. Aligned with UNICEF's (n.d) mentorship program 'One for all—all for one,' which emphasizes the Rights of the Child, the aim is to cultivate inclusive school environments where students are taught to value diversity. Following the goals of UNICEF, the multicultural suburban school where the data collection took place has a long tradition of cross-age peer mentoring. The motivation behind such a program aligns with the perspectives of Slavin and Cooper (1999), who posit that positive social interactions among students within heterogeneous groups have the potential to forge cross-ethnic friendships and diminish racial stereotyping, discrimination, and prejudice, with the ultimate goal of creating a belonging and a positive school environment.

This article examines a strength-based mentorship program in a multicultural primary school in Norway, where two teachers extended the typical cross-age peer mentorship program to foster relationships across age groups, not only for relational purposes, but also to provide students with opportunities to discuss and apply mathematics. Within their regular classroom setting, the mentors demonstrated tensions related to cultures, languages, and (unacceptable) behaviour –issues that teachers and school administration have grappled with since the mentors started school. A plethora of resources, including increased adult presence, rules, and structures, have previously been deployed and evaluated by the teachers and school leaders, though with minimal impact. This article illustrates the influence of cross-grade peer mentoring on mentors' perceptions and experiences related to mathematics, even when mentors face challenges, both socially and academically, within their own classroom environment. More specifically, we investigate how cross-grade peer mentoring can positively influence mentors' positions related to mathematics. We propose that a well-developed cross-age peer mentorship program can serve as a context for cultivating learning environments that resonate with principles of strength-based pedagogies.

The Concept: Cross-Age Peer Collaboration

The concept of Cross-Age Peer Mentoring is used for various arrangements where older and younger students spend time together during school hours. The framework and objectives of the program presented in this article align with Karcher's (2014) definition, which, in short, states that a middle or high school mentor meets regularly with the, ideally, minimum two years younger mentee for more than 20 sessions. They engage in conversations, play, or structured activities, where the aim is to build a close relationship, where the mentee receives empathy, praise, and attention. Program staff, teachers in this case, should prioritize this relationship development as the key mechanism for change. We emphasize that the cross-age mentorship program highlighted in this article integrates aspects of both mentoring and tutoring. Nonetheless, to align with the school's objective of promoting developmental relationships, we use 'mentor/mentoring' when discussing relationship-building, and 'tutor/tutoring' when addressing mathematics learning.

Cross-Age Peer Collaboration in Literature

A significant part of research on cross-age mentoring predominantly centres on the program's impact on mentees. While the mentees constitute an integral aspect of this research, our study primarily focuses on the outcomes of the mentors.

Despite limited research on mentor outcomes, a literature review investigated the impact of peer and cross-age tutoring in mathematics on minority students (Robinson et al., 2005). The review indicates that cross-age peer mentoring fosters positive attitudes, behaviours, and academic advancements for both tutees and tutors. An early study showed that Australian tutors in the fifth and sixth grades significantly enhanced the operational mathematics achievements of their tutees. Moreover, the improvements observed in both the tutors' and tutees' mathematics achievements were considerably greater than those recorded for the students in the control group (Sharpley et al., 1983). Positive academic results were also found in a brief five-week study with students aged 7 and 11 (Topping et al., 2003). Using mathematical games, a noticeable increase in the use of mathematical terminology, strategic dialogue, and praise, along with a decrease in procedural talk among tutors and tutees, was observed. The project also appeared to successfully raise and improve the amount and quality of interactive mathematical discussions between students. Additionally, the tutors' general social and communication behaviours were enhanced. Furthermore, a study by Karcher (2009) reports that mentors in grades 10 and 11 made substantial gains in school-related connectedness and self-esteem compared to their peers, who were not involved in a mentoring program. This conclusion was drawn from surveys conducted with trained mentors participating in an after-school program.

Among the few recent studies on cross-age peer tutoring in mathematics, a study involving middle school tutors and first-grade tutees with low mathematical skills reported that the majority of the tutees' teachers observed measurable improvements in mathematics and enhanced attitudes toward the subject (Haynes & Brendle, 2019). Conversely, most tutors' teachers did not observe a noticeable improvement in the tutors' mathematical abilities; however, we note that the age difference and the lower-than-expected competency level of the tutees may have influenced this outcome. Still, the tutors' teachers endorsed the cross-age tutoring experience, noting that the tutors developed increased leadership skills and confidence and found assisting others to be rewarding. The teachers' experiences align with Riessman's (1965) helper's theory, which posits that 'helpers'—mentors in this context—benefit from their position through mechanisms like feeling worthwhile, self-persuasion, and experiencing the status of a helper position, suggesting that helping others can foster efficiency and motivation. Barahona et al. (2023) conducted an observational study in middle schools primarily serving Hispanic students in the US, where the tutors were two grade levels above the tutees. Barahona et al. (2023) discovered that the strength of this cross-age program was closely tied to positive emotional experiences. The study indicated that the tutees exhibited favourable attitudes toward their tutors, seemingly enjoying the cross-age collaboration. The relationships between tutors and tutees were characterized by warmth and support, further enhancing the positive experience. Notably, tutors also appeared to derive satisfaction from this program. However, Barahona et al. (2023) identified weaknesses in the program's implementation related to the quality of instruction. Key issues included a lack of positive reinforcement and ineffective use of class time.

This review of cross-age peer mentoring and tutoring in mathematics education underscores that cross-age collaboration is underrepresented in mathematics education research. Despite this, the existing findings show potential benefits and effectiveness of cross-

age peer mentoring, suggesting that cross-age collaboration could be a significant yet largely unexplored resource in mathematics.

Objectives and Research Question

Our two-fold aim is to demonstrate that a cross-age mentorship program can serve as a beneficial learning environment when classroom norms and the learning environment in mathematics classrooms fall short of satisfactory standards, and that mentee-mentor collaborations can foster strength-based learning opportunities that could alter and improve students' perceptions of themselves as both individuals and mathematics learners. To examine how strength-based learning processes can support mentors in positioning themselves as learners of mathematics, we posited the following research question: *How can a strength-based cross-age peer mentorship program in primary school support mentors in assuming positions beneficial for learning mathematics?*

Theoretical Lens

In positioning theory, Davies and Harré (1990) highlight the dynamic aspects of self-understanding in contrast to the static nature of the concept of "role" (p. 43). They propose that 'positioning' directs attention to how we perceive ourselves in dialogues, using the terms 'positioning' and 'subject position' based on existing narratives. Metaphorically, positionings are used to symbolize relationships (Herbel-Eisenmann & Wagner, 2010) and occur through words and actions grounded in one or more such narratives as in any statement; hints in the choice of words, or related actions bring forth images of familiar storylines and positions within that story (Harré & van Langenhove, 1999). Harré (2012) described a position as a "cluster of beliefs with respect to the rights and duties of the members of a group of people to act in certain ways" (p. 196). This element implies that cultural traditions and boundaries influence people's actions to follow already-established patterns. The "positioning process" (Herbel-Eisenmann et al., 2015, p. 190) is thus restricted by the cluster of beliefs and the social and logical possibilities of a given context because "A position can be looked at as a loose set of rights and duties that limit the possibilities of action" (Harré & Moghaddam, 2003 p. 5). In other words, the actions of individuals within a group are influenced by the collective beliefs and expectations present in their social environment.

While we constantly negotiate positions for ourselves, consciously or unconsciously, we also participate in shaping the positions of others. When others take or are given a place in a shared experience, "whether explicit or implicit, a speaker makes available a subject position which the other speaker in the normal course of events would take up. A person can be said thus to 'have been positioned' by another speaker" (Davies & Harré, 1990, p. 43). By resisting a position, alternative positions become available (Wagner & Herbel-Eisenmann, 2009). In this manner, cultural storylines and interactions influence the "production of selves" (Davies & Harré, 1990, p. 62) and others. As importantly emphasized by Davies and Harré, we also want to underscore the presence of agency and choice in the positioning process. Not all individuals and groups have their actions recognized or acknowledged by those in positions of power, resulting in significant limitations on their ability to act.

We define taking a position as a mathematics learner as actively making choices that foster the development of mathematical competence. To support students in embracing these positions, learning environments must consistently facilitate such processes. From a societal perspective, it is imperative that students are afforded these opportunities, as societal growth is enhanced by individuals who appreciate, understand, and effectively employ mathematics.

Storylines: What Are They, and Why Are They Helpful in Mathematics Education Research?

As mathematics teachers and researchers, we have recognized that students' attitudes often resonate with one or several recognizable patterns that validate their self-perception and position as learners or non-learners (Andersson et al., 2015). In positioning theory, these patterns are referred to as storylines and are used to shape and make sense of "our own and others' lives" (Davies & Harré, 1990, p. 4). In the context of mathematics education, Herbel-Eisenmann et al. (2015) describe storylines as "the ongoing repertoires that are already shared culturally, or they can be invented as participants interact" (p. 15).

The cultural element in storylines is intrinsically linked to positions through implicit "taken-for-granted systems of rights and duties" (Harré, 2012, p. 191). These sets of rights and duties vary across cultures, influencing how individuals interpret and navigate situations. Adding more depth to storylines, Herbel-Eisenmann et al. (2016) explain that, at certain times, relevant storylines serve as the backdrop for enacted positionings. In other words, our self-understanding and our perceptions of others depend on the context and culture and can change based on the situations we encounter and the storylines available at any given time.

This study concentrates on a micro-sociological unit (Delgado-Gaitan & Trueba, 2023) of two classes engaged in cross-age mentorship. This group possesses "specific sets of experiences shared collectively by individuals of those units but interpreted by each in a different way" (Delgado-Gaitan & Trueba, 2023, p. 25). In the context of this study, this proposes that although students engage in shared experiences and storylines, their interpretations of these shared elements differ. Consequently, how they express these storylines can vary from one individual to another.

Despite frameworks established by other scholars, it is challenging to concisely describe a storyline, as it can be explicitly articulated or implicitly recognized. In this research, storylines were identified through interviews with students and the first author's observation. Within this micro-sociological unit, we sought storylines that might explain how the cross-age peer mentorship program helps mentors assume positions that are beneficial for learning mathematics. To do so, we defined storylines as ongoing repertoires in interviews that are (1) recognized by others, (2) cultural, as they are connected to a specific micro-sociological unit, and (3) impact students' actions.

Strength-Based Pedagogies from a Positioning Theory Perspective

The two teachers who developed the focused cross-age mentorship program take a strength-based pedagogical perspective on their students and possess an approach that associates with culturally relevant pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1995), culturally responsive teaching (Gay, 2018), and Funds of Knowledge (Gonzalez et al., 2005). Despite their diversity, these pedagogies share a common thread: a shift in focus from a deficit to a strength-based perspective. This shift represents a change in focus from education aiming to improve what students "lack" to acknowledging and nurturing what students possess regarding their skills, abilities, potential, and (cultural) experiences.

The teachers also emphasize elements of Silverman et al.'s (2023) 'universal strengths approach,' which "recognizes that all people […] have inherent strengths that are in part determined by their life experiences" (p. 256). Inspired by positive psychology (Peterson & Seligman, 2004), Silverman et al. (2023) illuminate various types of strengths. Character strengths define the best in people. They are stable and general yet influenced by context and thus capable of change. Examples include open-mindedness, fairness, and patience. Signature strengths represent a specific set of character strengths most distinctive to an individual. These

are strengths “that a person owns, celebrates, and frequently exercises” (Peterson & Seligman, 2004, p. 18). The "exercise of signature strengths is fulfilling" and “convey[s] the motivational and emotional features of fulfillment with terms like excitement, yearning, inevitability, discovery, and invigoration” (p. 18). Silverman et al. (2023) also identify “identity-specific strengths approach,” which “recognizes people’s systemically marginalized identities and associated lived experiences as a direct source of strengths that can help them succeed and contribute to their societies, regardless of how these identities and experiences differ from those of privileged individuals” (p. 256).

From a mathematics education perspective, focusing on students' strengths can be a turning point for fostering a more inclusive and empowering learning environment. Additionally, the combination of strength-based pedagogies and positioning theory is particularly compelling for the field of mathematics education because, together, these theories provide a framework for understanding and discussing how students perceive themselves as learners or non-learners in mathematics, which, in our opinion, is the most critical aspect of mathematics education.

Methodology

Data Collection Site

The data collection site is a large, multicultural primary school located in a municipality neighbouring Oslo, Norway's capital city. Both authors know the participating teachers and school leaders well. In recent years, the school has made a deliberate effort to foster diversity within its community. One key strategy for achieving this has been the development of the cross-age mentorship program. As part of the school's tradition, the cross-age mentorship program dates back to the 1990s. The program emphasizes active engagement and relationships between mentors and mentees in various contexts, primarily during break time and extracurricular activities such as forest trips, games, and sports. While mentoring initially involved one-on-one interactions, the current standard practice involves group mentoring.

Observation

Observation First Phase

Kaja, the first author, initiated her observational study in February 2022, focusing on acquainting herself with the mentor class, a class struggling with behavioural issues and adherence to classroom norms, aiming to explore strength-based pedagogies in mathematics. Unexpectedly, during the spring semester of 2023, Kaja learned about the established cross-age mentorship program in which the now sixth-grade students mentored second-grade students during mathematics classes. To clarify the research context, we briefly summarize Kaja’s initial observations and field notes:

> *In February 2022, I, Kaja, visited the teachers and classes in the primary school that had agreed to participate in my research project. I immediately understood that one of the classes faced challenges. After the first week, Grete, the teacher, apologized for the student's behaviour and explained that the class had struggled with challenging attitudes and behaviour since they started school. With a twinkle in her eye, Grete also said something like, “Well, at least in this class, we have real challenges. It’s not the kind of class you read about in textbooks”. And she was right; the classroom was chaotic. After a few weeks, the situation escalated. The class was, of course, divided into separate groups, and some students were guided to other classrooms, but altogether, there were seven adults involved to handle 18 5th graders. Frustrated after a lesson days later, Grete said: “The only thing that works with this class is to take a bus or be mentors.” I noted her statement in my notebook but didn’t think to ask her*

about the mentoring, as this is a regular thing in Norwegian schools. Months later, when the mentors had started 6th grade, I saw the mentorship program in action. The mentees, a class of 2nd graders, had their classroom just across the corridor from the mentors' classroom. In groups of 2–6 students from both classes (carefully assigned by the teachers), the 6th graders, now positioned as mentors, demonstrated remarkable skill and dedication in assisting their mentees with mathematics tasks. It was almost as if a magical enchantment had spread over the students. The atmosphere was light, and the students seemed content and exhibited a sense of joy. The mentors read out problems, counted on their fingers, and demonstrated with pen and paper to their mentees. When I overheard one of the more challenging sixth graders addressing a second grader: "You have to read the problem first, if not, you won't understand what to do. Listen, I'll read it out loud to you", I immediately felt compelled to investigate why the cross-age mentorship program impacted the mentors' positioning and whether this collaboration was also beneficial for the mentors' development of mathematical competence.

Observation Second Phase

To gain insight into the program's practical implementation and to understand the aspects of the change in the mentor's behaviour, Kaja conducted weekly observations of the cross-age collaboration over three months in 2023. The students met between one and three times a week, sometimes for outdoor activities and play, and at other times, for reading to each other. They met regularly once a week for mathematics. The duration varied depending on the activity, but mathematics sessions typically lasted a regular school hour of 60 minutes. Depending on the activity, older and younger students were grouped, sometimes with a shared task to solve collaboratively, and other times with assignments tailored to their grade levels. During mathematics sessions, mentors provided support and guidance to the mentees, acting like little teachers. In situations involving joint tasks, there was less guidance and more collaboration. Occasionally, mentors also taught mentees new games or applications.

During the participatory observation phase of mathematics classes, Kaja typically assumed a role similar to that of a teacher. However, at times, she stepped back to observe group interactions as students engaged with mathematical tasks. Throughout this period, detailed field notes were maintained, which later informed the structured interview guides used in interviews with the teachers, mentors, and mentees.

Participants and interviews

Students

While this article focuses on the mentors' benefits of the cross-age mentorship program, their experiences are intrinsically connected to those of the mentees. To gain a deeper understanding of the mentors' experiences, interviews were conducted in September and October 2023, with ten mentees now in third grade and ten mentors in seventh grade. The students in the two classes come from varied backgrounds and reflect typical diversity in terms of minority language backgrounds, which in and around larger cities in Norway is slightly over 30% (Directorate for Education and Training, 2022). Some of the interviewed students are first-generation immigrants with less than two years in Norway, while others are Norwegian born, with some having native languages other than Norwegian. The group includes students from socioeconomically advantaged families and those who have arrived in Norway as refugees, representing diverse religions and cultural backgrounds. Several of the interviewed mentors faced behavioural challenges in their regular classroom settings.

Participation in interviews was voluntary; mentees were asked if they wanted to be interviewed by their teacher, Sigrid, and the mentors were asked by Kaja. Given the young age of the students, all parents and students were clearly and repeatedly informed that participation in the interview was entirely voluntary and that pseudonyms would be used in line with approved Norwegian ethical guidelines. All students chose their pseudonyms. Mentees were interviewed in pairs, while mentors chose to be interviewed individually, in pairs, or in groups of three. Student interviews lasted between 20 minutes and an hour, varying based on the group size and the depth of responses, and centred on their experiences with the mentorship program. Each interview followed a semi-structured guide and was recorded for later review.

Teachers

In August 2023, a joint interview, lasting approximately two hours, was conducted with Sigrid, the mentee's teacher, and Grete, the mentor's teacher. Utilizing a semi-structured interview guide, the objective was to understand the rationale behind their selection of this specific form of cross-age collaboration in mathematics, and to examine the practical aspects related to planning and implementation, as well as how the teachers perceived their intentions materializing in practice. The interview was audio recorded for accuracy and reference.

The Cross-Age Mentorship Program and Teacher's Class Description

To provide a deeper contextual understanding of this study, we include the teachers' characterizations of their classes. The mentor's teacher, Grete, gave the following description in the interview:

> *A collection of remarkable individuals. […] In peacetime, they are all lovely children […]. It is demanding because, what can I say, the combination of students in this class is very unfortunate, quite simply. That's it. The parents were very determined that they should not be together, but then there has been some mismatch here in terms of communication [from kindergarten], or that someone has not bothered to listen, we don't know. […] so it has to do with that, quite simply, that those kids should not have been together.*

While this depiction may seem harsh, it aligns with Kaja's empirical observations. The students undeniably exhibit remarkable capabilities and skills. However, the persistent presence of negative tensions significantly undermined the classroom environment, resulting in a less conducive learning atmosphere. Conversely, Sigrid, the teacher of the mentee class, described the mentee class as follows:

> *[...] we were 20 when we started [in first grade]. We have become a large group [28 students]. I have received many new [students]. Yes, so my class, the way it is now, they are the nicest, kindest, calmest group I've ever had. Good mix, boys and girls, fantastic parent group. They are academically strong, they are socially strong, good with each other, concerned about each other, playing, dancing, singing, committed, I have never had a group like them.*

Mentor-Mentee Grouping

The teachers involved in this project had not received specific training in strength-based pedagogical processes. Nonetheless, their efforts and outlook embody aspects that are consistent with it. The student groups were carefully configured with three primary objectives: (1) to nurture collaboration and friendship within and across grades; (2) to create a learning environment where students can utilize and develop their strengths; and (3) to promote the discussion, application, and learning of mathematics. Recognizing and acknowledging their students' diverse strengths, the teachers leveraged these strengths to form cross-grade groups.

For instance, they grouped students with similar interests and ensured that uncertain mentees were paired with compassionate mentors who could also provide thorough mathematical explanations. Other groups were put together for linguistic purposes. As Sigrid articulated, “The aim is to assist students in fostering beneficial relationships”. Group rotations were applied as needed based on teachers' observations. While some groups remained stable for months or years, others were adjusted when teachers believed changes would enhance social and academic outcomes.

Analysis

Building on the work of Herbel-Eisenmann and Wagner (2010) and Perlander and Sjøberg (2023), we utilized the concept of positionings as a framework to investigate the experiences of mentors and mentees within the mentorship program. We analysed the interviews with mentors and mentees to explore how they ascribed and claimed positions for themselves and others by defining emotions, roles, rights, and duties within the given context.

The analytical process began with transcribing all audio recordings, followed by an inductive categorization of the text into themes reflecting the students' experiences. These themes encompassed the students' efforts to support each other's mathematics learning, the learning opportunities provided by the program, the responsibilities students held toward one another, and the emotions and relationships between mentors and mentees. Next, we thoroughly reviewed the transcripts and identified three key dimensions of the experiences mentors and mentees shared during the interview: (1) the mentor role, (2) emotions, and (3) how cross-age collaboration affected the mentors' mathematical competence. During this step, we also reviewed the first author's field notes, taken during observation phase 2, which supported the three identified dimensions.

To identify storylines within each dimension, we adapted a four-component process inspired by Perlander and Sjøberg (2023). Specific attention was directed towards personal pronouns as indicators of positioning (Fairclough, 2001) and self- and other-positioning (Harré & van Langenhove, 2010). This involved examining how mentors and mentees positioned themselves and others to belong or to be excluded from a position. Additionally, we identified statements that correlated positioning with cultural connection (Herbel-Eisenmann et al., 2015) and elements relating to rights and duties (Harré, 2012; Harré & Moghaddam, 2003), often connected to emotional factors influencing students' behaviours.

Table 1

Process of Identifying Storylines

Components of the process	Examples in italics
Component 1: Identify repertoires of action to belong to or be excluded from a position. Connected to pronouns (I, you, we, one), nouns, verbs, and descriptions of others or places.	*Eirik: We [mentors] have to behave more maturely than we do otherwise [during mentor-sessions].* Explanation: Eirik's (mentor) statement demonstrates his understanding that mentors need to adapt their behaviour to meet the expectations and duties of their role.

Component 2: Identify positions related to emotional connections and the reasons for acting in specific ways. Visible in clear choices, taking a stand, accepting consequences, commitments, etc.	*Linda: Because if they [mentees] can't do it [mathematics] and I can, I think it's nice to be able to help others.* Explanation: Linda (mentor) likes to help mentees because she believes it is a nice thing to do (commitment).
Component 3: Identify actions, emotions, values, social dynamics, etc., related to cultural elements. Visible concerning the mentioning of activities, desirable features, expectations, persons, memories, and futures, etc.	*Fariah: Eh, that it is good that the mentors exist, and it is better to be with the mentors and the mentees have a good time and then they learn a bit more.* Explanation: Fariah (mentee) states that when mentors are present, mentees learn more while having a good time (connection to the micro-sociological unit).
Component 4: Identify positioning related to rights and duties. Visible when pronouns are combined with verbs and their consequences, autobiographical aspects, future choices, struggles, conflicting statements, emotions, etc.	*Eirik: So that we [mentors] don't teach them to use, maybe, swear words and stuff like that.* Explanation: Eirik (mentor) changes his behaviour when he is with the mentees because he does not want them to learn bad behaviour (consequence of duty).

Note. Adapted based on the work of Perlander and Sjøberg (2022)

To be qualified as a storyline, all components were present, even if not every element is evident in the final phrasing of the storyline. We identified several storylines at play (Herbel-Eisenmann et al., 2016), but focused on the storylines, we regarded as most significant to the research question. We acknowledge that despite our backgrounds as mathematics teachers and the first author's relationship with the students, our roles as researchers may constrain our capacity to fully interpret the students' experiences and, hence, potentially overlook significant storylines.

To facilitate discussion of the students' collective experiences as patterns rather than individual statements, we formulated the storylines into eight phrases across three dimensions, each encapsulating our interpretation of the essence of the patterns identified in the students' interviews. To gain additional perspectives on the analysis, we presented the storylines and transcripts to the [project name] research group, where their formulation and significance to the research question were thoroughly discussed. This process resulted in a ninth storyline and reformulation of two storylines to reflect the students' statements more accurately.

Table 2

Dimensions and Storylines Identified in the Transcripts

Dimensions	Number	Storylines
Dimension 1: The mentor role in mathematics education	1A	Mentors: “Mentors need to be good role models”
	1B	Mentees: “Mentoring is a respected and highly regarded role”

Dimension 2: Emotions linked to learning mathematics with mentees/mentors	2A 2B 2C 2D	Mentees: “We admire you” Mentees: “When you are close to me, I feel better” Mentors: “I like being your little teacher” Mentors: “Helping others makes me proud”
Dimension 3: The process of learning mathematics together	3A 3B 3C	Mentors: “Mathematical explanations are challenging” Mentors: “Challenges bring mathematical thinking forward” Mentors: “Mastering a task on your own signifies learning”

Findings: Identified Storylines

Dimension 1: The Mentor Role in Mathematics Education

Storyline 1A, mentors: "Mentors have to be good role models," was present in all mentors’ interviews. This storyline reveals the mentors' self-positioning through phrases such as “our job is to teach them and make sure it goes well,” and “have to behave more maturely,” which demonstrate that the mentors are aware of the rights and duties associated with the mentor role. This awareness, confirmed through Kaja's observations, influences the mentors' actions toward their mentees. By taking the position as a role model, the mentors acknowledge their position as being older and having more knowledge and experience than the mentees, which, in turn, places upon them the responsibility to demonstrate good behaviour and ensure the well-being of the mentees. For instance, the element of trust articulated by Rizwan can prompt mentors to exhibit greater maturity than they typically show in their regular classroom.

Table 3

Examples of Transcripts Supporting Storyline 1A

Rizwan: We're not adults exactly, but we're still older than them and know more than them, and our job is to teach them and make sure it goes well. Rizwan: And they [mentees] trust you
Jesper: Role models! Eirik: ... behave properly and be role models, yes. Kaja: Mmm, is it something you consciously think about, or does it just happen naturally? Eirik: It happens naturally. Jesper: Kind of on its own. Kaja: Mmm. Why do you think it happens? Eirik: So that we don't teach them to use, maybe, swear words and stuff like that. Jesper: […] not teach them [mentees] to be mischievous and things like that. We have to behave more maturely than we do otherwise.

Another reason related to rights and duties is evident in Jesper and Eirik's transcripts. These boys use the term ‘role model’ and explain that they do not want to teach the mentees to swear or engage in other negative behaviours.

Storyline 1B, mentees: "Mentoring is a respected and highly regarded role," was recognized with cheerful tones and eager articulation in all mentee interviews. The storyline implies an eager anticipation of becoming a mentor. Iselin’s and Henrik's words indicate that they look forward to assuming the responsibility of caring for younger students.

Table 4

Examples of Transcripts Supporting Storyline 1B

Iselin: Oh, it’s going to be very, very, very, very fun! [to become a mentor]
Henrik: […] then we kind of get our own child to be with, in a way.

Another example of this storyline is evident in the dialogue with Linda, which reflects her view of the mentor's role as a helper in aiding her mentees' understanding of mathematics.

Table 5

Example of a Transcript Supporting Storyline 1B

Linda: […] we can help them with difficult things.
Kaja: Do you like helping people?
Linda: Mmm…
Kaja: Why?
Linda: Because if they can't do it [mathematics] and I can, I think it's nice to be able to help others.
Kaja: Why is that?
Linda: Because then they understand much more of what they're supposed to do.
Kaja: How do you feel about that?
Linda: I feel that it's nice. And that I become happy.

Field notes highlighted a relationship and atmosphere characterized by friendly and productive collaboration between the mentors and mentees. This dynamic contrasted with the mentors' behaviour in their regular classroom environment, which was described as chaotic and stressful. Within the mentorship context, the mentors demonstrated a notable shift in behaviour, taking on roles as responsible and compassionate helpers; a transformation influenced by the exchange of positions and the change in context. Additionally, the field notes suggested that the way the mentors embodied their positions had a significant impact, inspiring the mentees to envision themselves in similar roles in the future.

Dimension 2: Emotions Linked to Learning Mathematics with Mentees/Mentors

Dimension 2 comprises four distinct storylines, centring around the emotions and attitudes that mentors and mentees experience in their relationships. These storylines relate to interpersonal dynamics and emotions.

Storyline 2A, mentees: "We admire you," originates from the mentees' shared admiration for their mentors. Although this admiration is only evident in the written words presented here, the distinct loving tone and joy in the mentees' voices when discussing their

mentors prompted us to use the word 'admiration'. In almost every interview, the mentees highlighted various strengths they perceived in their mentors. These strengths ranged from kindness, exemplified by Nora's comment that "we can have fun and ride on their backs," to helpfulness, with Iselin noting that "they always want to help us." Fariah remarked on their physical stature, describing the mentors as "taller and taller and bigger," and also recognized their mathematical proficiency, stating, "they become better at math every single day."

Table 6

Examples of Transcripts Supporting Storyline 2A

Iselin: I think mentor class is fun because then we get to be with the mentors and then we can have fun and ride on their backs! Nora: And then you can learn things that you don't quite know yet. Kaja: So, you think it's nice to have a mentor class? Nora: Yes. Iselin: Yes, really fun! Nora: […] if someone needs help with something. Not that kind of help, help with math, but help if they get stuck or something like that. Iselin: And they are kind, they are almost like friends. Almost, just that they are older than us. And then they always want to help us and those boys are a bit naughty, but the girls are always quite kind.
Fariah: […] they are getting taller and taller and bigger, and then they almost become adults, and that's when they become better at math every single day.

The transcripts illustrate that mentors effectively leverage their inherent strengths and natural abilities during their mathematics sessions with the mentees. Emphasizing the importance of relationships, the mentees' storyline reveals that mentors' support is not confined to academic help, such as mathematics. Instead, it extends to assisting mentees with various challenges, exemplified by Nora's comment, "help if they [mentees] get stuck or something like that."

Kaja noted the mentors' multifaceted roles across contexts. Working on mathematics together, mentors also aided mentees with finding materials and navigating new apps. Additionally, the mentors assisted in articulating the mentees' struggles to the teachers when the mentees found tasks challenging or when the mentors' explanations were insufficient. This involvement illustrates the mentors' active role in facilitating communication and their extensive involvement in diverse aspects of the mentees' lives. Jakub's comment in the following transcript offers an interesting perspective on the mentors' competence, attributing it to their daily practice of mathematics. This reflects Jakub's basic understanding of skill development, recognizing the effort and time necessary to acquire mathematical knowledge.

Table 7

Example of a Transcript Supporting Storyline 2A

Jakub: […] so every day, they had math, that's why they are so good at math.

The admiration storyline, driven by mentees' anticipation of becoming mentors (storyline 1b), reflects a learning context where mentees feel secure and happy. This aspect can be crucial to the success of cross-age collaboration because the mentee's admiration motivates mentors to position themselves as responsible leaders, enhancing collaboration.

The admiration storyline is supported by another mentee storyline, **storyline 2B**, **mentees: "When you are close to me, I feel better,"** which encapsulates the essence of the mentorship program. The heart of collaboration is articulated by Fariah:

Table 8

Example of a Transcript Supporting Storyline 2B

Fariah: Eh, that it is good that the mentors exist, and it is better to be with the mentors and the mentees have a good time and then they learn a bit more.
Kaja: Mmm, why do you learn more when you're having a good time?
Fariah: Because when you have a good time, you also learn math at the same time. Then you sort of learn something while having a good time.

Fariah's statement is deeply connected to human bonds. Her words indicate that enjoyment and learning are not mutually exclusive. Instead, when people enjoy themselves, they are more receptive to learning, even complex subjects like mathematics. The physical proximity provides immediate, accessible support, which contrasts with waiting for a teacher's attention:

Table 9

Example of a Transcript Supporting Storyline 2B

Jakub: It's best to have a mentor because when the teacher, when, it's best not to shout Sigrid, Sigrid, Sigrid, come, come, Sigrid come, it's difficult, come! It is best to have a mentor, then you must not shout for the teacher, but you have a mentor by your side to help.

Having an older, more knowledgeable student for immediate assistance supports the learning process. Extended waiting periods can lead to diminished patience, inducing a shift in focus towards alternative activities, such as drawing or engaging our peers in distraction. During Kaja's observation of this collaborative process, it was common to see numerous mentors and mentees working together on the same task. Most of these tasks were resolved without requiring teacher involvement. Even when mentors lacked the exact solution to a problem, they provided problem-solving strategies.

Another key finding is the mentors' joy in assuming a helper's position. **Storyline 2C**, **mentors: "I like being your little teacher,"** shows that the mentors appreciate the position that comes with mentoring and tutoring. The term "little teacher" is used affectionately and embraced positively by the mentors, suggesting they view the role as significant:

Table 10

Example of a Transcript Supporting Storyline 2C

Thea: So, in a way, you become like a little teacher. You go around helping students just like a teacher.
Madelen: I liked that word. I like that word a lot.
Thea and Madelen: Little teacher [giggling laughter]. Or young teacher?
Madelen: I like little teacher. A little teacher.
Kaja: Do you think it's okay to be a little teacher then?

Madelen: Yes, very nice. It's like, "Hey, you, little teacher." It's [koselig]

Table 2: Koselig is a Norwegian word that is challenging to translate directly into English due to its broad and culturally specific meaning. It describes a pleasant, comfortable, or enjoyable atmosphere, experience, or feeling.

Having the knowledge and experience to help mentees learn mathematics and assist them with personal difficulties (Nora, storyline 2a) appears to boost the mentors' self-esteem. The use of phrases like 'I feel,' a notable indicator of personal positioning (Fairclough, 2001), along with terms such as “strong,” “cool,” and “old,” demonstrates a sense of accomplishment and self-confidence.

Table 11

Example of a Transcript Supporting Storyline 2C

Madelen: You feel like you're so smart and strong!
Thea: You feel like you're the big, strong, smart, cool one.
Madelen: Not cool?
Thea: No? I feel...tough!
[…]
Madelen: Yes, I feel I like it because I feel smart. And I'm actually smart in my class too, just saying.
Thea: Yes, you are.
Madelen: I feel [giggles, laughs] better than the others, I feel a bit egoistic but [giggles].
[…]
Thea: I feel kind of tough. I feel like the old and cool one, like a little, little teacher or whatever it was. It's quite fun to be the one that they, in a way, look up to.

Particularly interesting is Madelen's assertion of feeling “smart” and her affirmation of being "actually smart in my class, too." This reveals her confidence in her academic abilities beyond mentoring. Additionally, her statements about feeling "better than the others" and experiencing a sense of "egoism" reinforce the growth of self-esteem.

Storyline 2D, **mentors: “Helping mentees makes me proud”** is intricately interconnected with the previous storyline. Kaja observed that mentors often exchanged high-fives with mentees upon task completion. This celebratory gesture suggests that mentors take pride in their mentees' achievements, recognizing their role in successes.

The following transcripts show Jesper describing the "satisfying feeling" associated with successfully teaching the mentees. Guro, Bertine, and Sofie describe the act of helping and being needed as a source of happiness that enhances their day. Rizwan uses the word "proud" to describe his experience.

Table 12

Examples of Transcripts Supporting Storyline 2D

Jesper: A satisfying feeling. We've taught them how to do it.

Eirik: Nice.
[…]
Jesper: I get a bit excited because then I'm happy that they managed to solve what they struggled with before.
Guro: It makes me have a better day afterward.
Bertine: You feel like...
Sofie: ...you've done a good job!
Bertine: ...and that you're needed for something. That you're helpful and things like that.
Guro: It's that good feeling in your body that you've been helpful.
Rizwan: I just teach them what I've learned.
Kaja: But how does it feel for you, when you manage to teach another child?
Rizwan: I feel proud.

The four interconnected storylines within dimension 2 clarify the reciprocal nature of how constructive storylines can operate within specific contexts or cultures. The mentees' admiration and affirmative emotions towards their mentors are mirrored in the two mentor storylines, demonstrating a reflective process where positivity is reciprocated. The relationships are not merely a one-way transfer of knowledge or guidance; they are also enriching for the mentors.

Dimension 3: The Process of Learning Mathematics Together

The third dimension explores the mentors' role as tutors and the benefits they acquire in the helper position. **Storyline 3A, mentors: "Mathematical explanations are challenging"** highlights mentors' experiences when adapting or relearning methods and algorithms and their efforts to elucidate their functionality to younger students. In the following transcript, Bertine, Thea, and Sofie talk about how tutoring mentees challenge them.

Table 13

Example of Transcript Supporting Storyline 3A

Bertine: We have to learn other methods to calculate or explain in a different way.
Kaja: Why is that?
Bertine: Because they don't understand adult language like we do.
[…]
Sofie: Explain it in a different way. It's harder for us but easier for them.
Kaja: What's more challenging for you and easier for them?
Bertine: It's harder for us to explain it.
Sofie: Because they have other methods.
Bertine: But it's easier for them to understand it.
Thea: So it's a bit difficult because they have a completely different method that we probably did in 3rd grade, but we have now become accustomed to a completely

different method, and it's a bit difficult to help them when they don't understand the way we're trying to help them.

This storyline is followed by **storyline 3B, mentors: "Challenges bring mathematical thinking forward,"** which informs us about how providing explanations enhances the mentors' learning and indicates that mentors' efforts to elucidate mathematical concepts with the mentees enhance their own mathematical comprehension. The following transcripts indicate that as mentors work on explanations, they simultaneously process and expand their own mathematical understanding.

Table 14

Examples of Transcripts Supporting Storyline 3B

Bertine: […] I learn how to do it in other ways, and I learn more about how to simplify questions.
Madelen: Sometimes I just have to stop and then I have to write it down in my method, and they ask, "What is that, what is that?" And I say, "I just have to calculate it this way, I can help you after that, I just need to get the answer for myself first".

While demanding, these cognitive processes hold potential to enhance mentors' comprehension of mathematics. For example, Madelen's strategy of writing down her preferred method before assisting the mentees demonstrates her understanding of the importance of thoroughly grasping a problem before providing practical help.

Storyline 3C, mentors: "Mastering a task on your own signifies learning" was explicitly articulated in all the mentor interviews and concurrently reflected in the dialogues with the mentees. For instance, Jesper underscores the importance of explaining the problem-solving process to the mentees rather than simply providing them with solutions. Eirik expands on this discussion, suggesting that without mastering the method, mentees might struggle with similar problems when their mentors are not around.

Table 15

Example of Transcript Supporting Storyline 3C

Jesper: […] we have to show them how to arrive at the answer!
Kaja: Why is it not okay to just say that the answer is 12?
Jesper: Because they won't learn anything.
Eirik: They won't learn anything.
Kaja: No. So, that would be poor mentoring?
Eirik: Yes. They wouldn't learn the method. In case we're not there.
Kaja: Yes, because what you teach them, they should be able to do...
Eirik: …themselves.

Eirik and Jesper's comments underline the mentors' understanding of the importance of process over product. At the same time, the boys also demonstrate that they want to help the mentees develop independent thinking and problem-solving skills.

Discussion of the Storylines

Guided by the research question, *"How can a strength-based cross-age peer mentorship program in primary school support mentors in assuming positions beneficial for learning mathematics?",* this article presents a long-term strength-based cross-age mentorship program implemented weekly in mathematics classes at a multicultural suburban school in Norway. The initiative is driven by the aspirations of two teachers to create positive change for their students. The teachers' primary focus was on the mentor class, a group dealing with significant cultural, linguistic, and behavioural tensions within their classroom environment. Despite the school's extensive efforts to initiate change, the teachers broadened their perspective beyond the classroom walls when these measures proved insufficient.

As our study reveals, the cornerstone of the strength-based pedagogy approach inherent in this program lies in the relationships between the two teachers and their students. Their intimate knowledge of students' strengths equipped them to capitalize on the mentors' strengths (Silverman et al., 2023) to form cross-age groups that accentuate both personal and mathematical strengths. While this article predominantly focuses on the mentor's positionings and storylines, it is important to note that the cross-age collaboration also had profound implications for the mentees.

We identified three distinct dimensions of storylines from interviews and observations. In the following sections, we will discuss these dimensions separately and conclude by synthesizing them to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the cross-age mentorship program.

Dimension 1: The Mentor Role in Mathematics Education

Primarily, we argue that the mentor role in mathematics education holds significant importance for both mentors and mentees. In the context of positioning, storyline 1a, "Mentors need to be good role models," clearly ties the mentor role to specific rights and duties (Harré & Moghaddam, 2003). Their behaviour reflects a commitment to positively impact their mentees, exemplify (a new) commendable behaviour, and situate the mentors in a position (Riessman, 1965).

Adopting the position, the mentors leverage many strengths that transcend mathematical strengths. Mentors utilized their character and signature strengths (Silverman et al., 2023) to foster strong relationships with their mentees. The fact that mentors, who struggle with relationships in their home classroom, engage in relationship building where they find their signature strengths to be indispensable, bolsters their self-confidence and self-belief. Furthermore, through this form of collaboration, mentors gained practical experience in leadership within a real-life context. These experiences can prove beneficial across various life domains, nurturing transferrable life skills.

The storyline "Mentoring is a respected and highly regarded role" illustrates the mentors' success in embodying the role of role models and holds significant implications for future generations of mentors, establishing a standard for mentorship in mathematics throughout the entire school context. Furthermore, the storyline elevates the mentorship role to a desirable position, emphasizing its crucial influence within the school community.

Dimension 2: Emotions Linked to Learning Mathematics with Mentees/Mentors

The second dimension of the interviews has its genesis in the interpersonal bonds between mentors and mentees. The four intertwined storylines reinforce the positive emotional exchanges among older and younger students. Guided and supported by the mindful instruction and scaffolding teachers offer, the learning environment fosters warm, supportive relationships

and atmospheres, as documented by Barahona et al. (2023). The cross-age collaboration establishes a learning context that cultivates democratic values. It provides a secure environment where students engage with cultures, languages, and religions. Given the long-term collaboration, students become intimately familiar with, gain understanding of, and acquire more knowledge about others. We believe the age difference could potentially ease the process of exploring and understanding others. We imagine that this form of collaboration could foster students' appreciation of human diversity, a central component of the Norwegian curriculum (Ministry of Education and Research, 2017).

The central element in this dimension is the storyline of admiration, "We admire you." This storyline is pivotal in the relationship dynamics between mentors and mentees and is not limited to the mentor's mathematical competence. Mentees admire their mentors for their signature strengths, physical capabilities of being older, and because they sit close and spend time together, which in turn offers mentors a position of respect. In this context, such positioning could hold particular significance for the mentors due to challenges within their mathematics classroom environment. Being participants in a learning environment where mentors consider themselves as “smart and strong” (Madelen) and “cool” (Thea), and where active participation and practical application of skills underscore the usefulness and importance of their mathematical competence, could reinforce the mentors' self-conception as learners of mathematics. This improved self-conception can boost their confidence in their abilities, triggering increased motivation and interest in the subject, ultimately fostering a deeper commitment to learning mathematics. Over time, this can nurture a more positive attitude towards mathematics.

Through the storyline “When you are close to me, I feel better,” the mentees outline the mentors as sources of comfort and positivity, implying that the presence of the mentors directly influences the mentee's emotional balance. The storyline invites the mentors to take a position where they are providers of comfort, trust, and empathy. The storyline "I like being your little teacher" suggests that mentors find joy in sharing knowledge and guiding their mentees, which aligns with the notion that "Mentors need to be good role models." The mentors' tone when discussing their role as 'little teachers' indicated their satisfaction in being the more experienced students who could exert a level of influence or control. As Topping et al. (2003) highlighted, mentoring can enhance the self-esteem of mentors. We confirm this as “Helping mentees makes me proud," which shows that mentors consider their position valuable and believe their efforts and support positively impact the mentees.

Dimension 3: The Process of Learning Mathematics Together

The third dimension highlights the process of learning mathematics. As acknowledged in the review, there is limited research on tutors' mathematical gains in cross-age collaborations. However, the storylines in the third dimension reveal that such collaborations in mathematics create opportunities where mentors are challenged to engage in reflective thought processes to explain and demonstrate mathematical concepts to the mentees. This supports Topping et al. (2003)’s findings, which showed an increase in the use of mathematical terminology and strategic dialogue, thereby contradicting Haynes and Brendle (2019), who reported that most first-grade tutors' teachers did not identify any detectable mathematical gain from tutoring kindergarten students. The storyline "Mathematical explanations are challenging" positions mentors in a tutoring role. The mentors must actively navigate various methods or approaches to explain mathematical concepts at a level the younger mentees understand. The challenge takes the mentors further along in the process of their mathematical understanding, which is evident in the storyline "Challenges bring mathematical thinking forward."

Here, we see a shift in how the mentors position the mathematical tasks: the first storyline positions mathematical explanations as obstacles. In contrast, the second storyline frames these challenges as mechanisms for advancing mathematical thinking. The mentors acknowledge that explaining mathematics to the mentees encourages them to delve deeper into mathematical thinking, which could be a step toward positioning themselves as strong mathematical learners. This supports Sharpley et al. (1983), who posits that tutors' mathematics achievements were significantly higher than those of the control group students.

The mentors' readiness to overcome the mathematical challenges is likely linked to the storyline "Mastering a task on your own signifies learning." Additionally, when the mentees have acquired the necessary skills and understanding to work on mathematics independently, the mentors feel a sense of pride, as shown in "Helping mentees makes me proud". Also illustrated, mentors are depicted as enablers in this process, possessing the capacity to empower their mentees. These three storylines may explain the observed increase in the use of mathematical terminology and strategic dialogue noted by Topping et al. (2003).

Conclusion

The identified storylines in this study highlight several wide-ranging benefits of a strength-based, cross-age mentorship program, where mentors were encouraged to position themselves as caregivers, role models, leaders, helpers, and, importantly, as “little mathematics teachers” as opposed to less constructive or even harmful positionings. Initially, we questioned whether such a program could support not only mentors but also mentees in positioning themselves as mathematics learners. The presented storylines indicate that this is feasible.

In addition to supporting mentors in interacting with mentees (and peers) with varying levels of mathematics experience, familiarizing themselves with individuals from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds, and hence gaining valuable collaborative experiences that extend beyond school life, the program also supports mentors to develop crucial mathematical skills like explaining concepts clearly, problem-solving, and articulating mathematical reasoning, positions, and competence. These are indispensable in a democracy, where we are to "live, learn, and work together in a complex present and the face of an unknown future" (Ministry of Education and Research, 2017, p. 3).

The cross-age mentorship program, as outlined in this article, can inspire pedagogical developments and, in turn, pivot deficit storylines (Andersson et al., 2022; Gerbrandt & Wagner, 2023), providing students with positive experiences, relationships, and positionings that promote mathematics learning. This research may, in particular, inspire teachers who face tensions within their mathematics classrooms. Even if peers do not treat each other well, they may take other positions when given the chance, especially in the presence of younger students. As one mentor said: We have to behave more maturely than we do otherwise”.

Additionally, this work can be inspiring for mathematics education research, as the widespread practice of mentoring in primary schools means that teachers and school leaders, in Norway and elsewhere, already have experience with cross-age mentoring, allowing for relatively simple expansions of existing mentoring programs.

In future studies, we see rich opportunities to further explore cross-age mentoring in mathematics, especially given the limited research that has been done. We believe there is significant potential in developing strength-based cross-age mentor programs, specifically in mathematics education.

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APPENDIX

Appendix 1, Interview Guide for Mentees Interviews

1. How do you feel about having a mentor class?
2. Tell me about what it's like when they come to work on tasks with you.
3. What do the mentors help you with? (Examples)
4. How do you learn from them? (Examples)
5. Would you say that you collaborate with the mentors? (What do you think about collaborating to learn something?)
6. Could you provide an example of how the mentors do it when they teach you?
7. Do you show the mentors things sometimes?
8. What do you like best about being with the mentors?
9. Do you feel like you are friends? (What is it like to have a friend older than you?)
10. Does it make a difference during recess? (Do they help you then? Do you talk to the mentors at other times besides during class?)
11. What do you think about becoming a mentor?

Appendix 2, Interview Guide for Mentors Interviews

1. Tell me about the mentorship program in Praxis.

(Examples of what you do when you are with the mentees during mathematics class?)

2. How do you feel about being a mentor?
3. How do you find working on math with the mentees?
4. Do you feel like you can teach them something?

(Tell me more about that. How does it make you feel?)

5. How do you like working with the younger students?

(Are there any specific activities or ways of working that are better than others?)

6. Do you think you learn anything from working with them?

(examples, why?)

7. Do you sometimes prepare things to teach the younger students?

(How do you prepare?)

8. What is the relationship between you?

(What is it like to be with someone younger than yourself?)

9. Do you think it's important for the younger students to have mentors?
10. Does it make a difference during recess?

(Do you talk to mentees, play, help, support, etc.?)

7 of 8: Decreased Planning Time as a Barrier to Reconciliation Education

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Abstract

This article considers the way neoliberal reductions in teacher planning time work to impede progress in reconciliatory education. Methodologically informed by phenomenology, the study described here was qualitative in nature and featured interviews with six Nova Scotia high school teachers who were teaching the social studies course *Mi'kmaw Studies 11*. This paper represents one consideration from the larger study. It focusses on the ways participants pointed to the restrictions on planning time in their workload as a direct impediment to actualizing reconciliatory work in education. Drawing together the literatures of time and neoliberalism in education, the authors argue that without time to engage with colleagues, to connect with students, and to just think about the process of course building, teachers—both in Nova Scotia and internationally—are being moved away from Giroux's (2025) idea of educators as transformatory intellectuals. Teachers need time and space to think and feel their way through the complex histories and contemporary contexts involved in reconciliation, and the data presented in this study suggest that Nova Scotia high school teachers currently have neither. To conclude, the authors call on governments, particularly those that profess a commitment to truth and reconciliation in and through education, to make truth and then reconciliation education more than a discursive shift by abating policies that reduce teacher planning time.

Keywords: reconciliation, reconciliation education, teaching time, neoliberalism

7 of 8: Decreased Planning Time as a Barrier to Reconciliation Education

The Time of Truth and Reconciliation

It has been 10 years since the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (TRC) released its calls to action and final report (TRC, 2015). In the ensuing decade, discursive shifts in the way Indigenous topics are discussed in both K-12 and postsecondary education have been plentiful, including the emergence of "truth and then reconciliation education" as a field of study (Howell & Ng-A-Fook, 2023, title). Yet, the literature of truth and then reconciliation education is often replete with descriptions of barriers to substantive change. Indeed, teachers' fears of trespass (Bascuñán et al., 2022), self-presumed lack of knowledge (Dion, 2009), and moves to innocence (or movements in thinking that assuage settler guilt; see Tuck & Yang, 2012) are all commonly referenced as things that need to be worked through in order to actualize meaningful reconciliatory education (Haige-Brown & Green, 2022). The current article contributes to the literature by identifying more of these barriers. Specifically, here we consider how, in Nova Scotia, neoliberal policy in education has reduced teacher planning time, and in doing so impeded the progress of teachers of *Mi'kmaw Studies 11* toward creating models of reconciliatory education. We suggest that without the necessary time to think, learn, and reflect on Indigenous issues, efforts toward truth and reconciliation in public education are truncated.

Our discussion of teacher planning time and reconciliatory education emerges from interviews conducted by Susan and supervised by Adrian,[1] with public high school teachers in Nova Scotia. As with all Canadian provinces, Nova Scotia forms a unique curricular context within the landscape of Canadian education. Specifically, in 2015, the government of Nova Scotia signed an agreement with the Mi'kmaq of Nova Scotia on treaty education, which made a commitment to "…teach Treaty Education in all classrooms, grades and schools across Nova Scotia, not just in the Mi'kmaq ones" (Treaty Education, n.d., p. 2). This commitment to treaty education was a major step forward for a province that had long ignored and misrepresented Indigenous people within its public curriculum (Peters, 2016). The exception to this systemic erasure was the high school history course *Mi'kmaw Studies 11*, which was originally introduced as *Mi'kmaw Studies 10* in the early 2000s, then rewritten as a grade 11 course in 2016. In its current curriculum document, *Mi'kmaw Studies 11* is described as,

> a course that . . . provides opportunities for learners to gain an understanding of how they [students] are connected to the history and culture of the First Peoples of the Maritimes… enable[ing] them to achieve a greater understanding of, and respect for, both Mi'kmaw society and Mi'kmaw contributions to Canadian society. (Nova Scotia Curriculum, 2016, p. 1)

The six teachers interviewed for this project were all teachers of *Mi'kmaw Studies 11*; each of the participants commented on how important the course was and how they often lacked time to do the course the justice they felt it deserved.

In the paper that follows, we present the findings of the interviews in more depth, focusing on the ways that participants pointed to the restrictions on planning time in their workload as a direct impediment to actualizing reconciliatory work in education. To begin, in the next section, we describe the Nova Scotia curricular context in more detail, offering something of a cursory

[1] Susan is a settler-Canadian. Adrian has Indigenous and settler ancestry, and his maternal family are all members of the Qalipu Mi'kmaq First Nation.

literature review in the process. We also describe previous writings around the concept of time in education. Then, we outline the methodology underpinning the larger study. Finally, we turn to the interviews with participants, showing how all the teachers in the study pointed to the lack of time as being a major restriction on their progress toward reconciliatory action in education.

Nova Scotia Social Studies Curriculum, Neoliberalism, and Time

Before proceeding to discuss the methodological positioning of this study and the interviews in more detail, three areas of research deserve some attention: the Nova Scotia curricular context, neoliberalism, and time as manifest in education. This section will discuss each of the above.

First, to contextualize the current education climate in Nova Scotia, in 2018, the provincial government abolished English language school boards and removed principals and vice-principals from the teachers' union (Doucette, 2018). The previously publicly elected school boards were replaced with unelected regional centres for education, and the role of school administrators morphed from one of curriculum leadership and teacher support to that of educational management. A result of these changes is that it has become "easier for a government to impose top-down curricula and directives" (Gillis & Hurd, 2023, para. 9). Specifically, in the six years since Bill-72 (The Education Reform Act) became law, teachers have suffered the consequences of a system that has consistently underfunded and overtasked education support workers (including educational assistants and substitute teachers) and expected teachers to simply fill the gaps left when those workers leave the system (Gillis et al., 2019). A tipping point for high school teachers occurred in 2021, with the imposition of an extra course of study, from six teaching sections per year to seven. With a school day that contains four teaching blocks, this means teachers are in an active instructional role for a full day, at least two, and sometimes three, days per week. In the wake of those changes, teachers have reported increasing workloads, feelings of being overwhelmed and burnt out, and greater than expected numbers have left teaching through retirement and attrition (Agyapong et al., 2024; Cooke, 2024; Laroche, 2022).

The study under consideration in this article looked at a specific course within the Nova Scotia social studies curriculum. There have been a limited number of studies within that specific curriculum context (e.g., Rogers, 2011, 2018; Tinkham, 2013; Tompkins, 2002; Peters, 2016). Despite this dearth, however, it is widely and precisely acknowledged that over the last three decades, regardless of the political party that has formed provincial government, the direction of Nova Scotia educational policy has been toward neoliberalism (Campbell, 2024; Rogers, 2018; see also Frost, 2020). In Nova Scotia, the high school curriculum places a strong emphasis on students choosing courses that will enhance their perceived economic futures, which forms a neoliberal logic that devalues and draws learners away from social studies (Rogers, 2018). Indeed, as discussed by participants below, the social sciences are often and actively devalued relative to the hard sciences in Nova Scotia public schools.

In many ways, the influence of neoliberalism on Nova Scotia's education system mirrors its influence on education globally (Kumar, 2019). Neoliberalism can be described as the ramping up of capitalism, manifest in the removal of social safety nets in favour of an unbridled free market. In education globally, neoliberalism manifests as more teacher accountability measures, an erosion of the autonomy of teachers, more standardized tests with higher stakes, attempts to privatize public education, and a shift in curricular content toward those skills that are most economically rewarding (Giroux, 2013, 2025; Kumar, 2019). In Nova Scotia, many of the above are also true (Campbell, 2024; Rogers, 2018; see also Frost, 2020), and recent research in the province has also

pointed to massive increases in teacher burnout and emotional exhaustion (Agyapong et al., 2024; Ritchie et al., 2023). For us, the two are clearly linked: the conditions of teacher work have become untenable because of the influence of neoliberalism on education, and teachers are suffering as a result.

In this article, we suggest that one precise moment when teachers can feel the effects of neoliberalism is when their time for planning is replaced with more instructional time. As such, time deserves some discussion here as well. While time has not historically been a major focus of educational research, recent work has brought it into the fold of educational thinking. Specifically, Rose and Whitty (2010) argued that time could form something of a tyrannical control over the way learning occurred in the early childhood classroom. In response, Pacini-Ketchabaw (2012) pointed out ways of thinking with time rather than against it. More recently, Saul (2020) has suggested that divergent experiences of time, those that do not conform to the dominant expression of time in school, can be a manifestation of oppression. Adrian has contributed to this work on time as a dimension of education thinking, showing how the industrial expression of time in schooling works against meaningful learning in Indigenous education contexts (Downey, 2021) and through the expression of a lived curriculum more broadly (Downey & Whitty, 2019). As discussed in more detail below, the current research reinforces some of this previous literature, showing that the lack of teacher planning time, as a result of the previously referenced increase of teaching responsibilities from six to seven courses in Nova Scotia high schools, directly impedes progress toward reconciliation in and through education.

Drawing together the literatures of time and neoliberalism in education, we argue that without time to engage with colleagues, to connect with students, and to just think about the process of course building, teachers—both in Nova Scotia and internationally—are being moved away from Giroux's (2025) idea of educators as transformatory intellectuals. Instead, teachers are being tasked with more courses to manage every day, resulting in "the devaluation of critical, intellectual work on the part of teachers and students" (Giroux, 2025, p. 116) and reducing teaching to training. In more traditional Marxist terms, when teachers' planning time is reduced, they are further removed from the "means of production" of knowledge, being treated as trained technicians rather than sensitive and critical intellectual workers. Throughout this piece, we argue that such an erosion of the intellectual autonomy of teachers directly impedes meaningful work toward truth and reconciliation education.

Having now offered some characterization of the curriculum context in Nova Scotia through a discussion of the literatures to which we see this article contributing, we now move on to discuss the methodology of the study.

Methodology

The research reported on in this paper was undertaken as part of Susan's master's thesis (Legge, 2024), which was supervised by Adrian. The larger project worked from the central research question, "What is it like to teach *Mi'kmaw Studies 11*?". The purpose driving this research was to learn what teachers experienced when they taught the course as a way to learn about how reconciliation was being taken up in K-12 education in the province.

Toward the goal of learning what it is like to teach *Mi'kmaw Studies 11*; phenomenology was selected as a guiding methodological framework—specifically, the phenomenological research process described by Carl Moustakas (1994) in his book *Phenomenological Research Methods*. Phenomenology is the study of lived experiences; it is descriptive (about the experience),

reflective (on what has been described), and reflexive on the part of the researcher. The phenomenologist focusses on the experiences of participants in order "to determine what an experience means for the persons who have had the experience" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 13). This reflection, as expressed by the speaker to the researcher, forms the basis of an interpretation of that experience. From the specific experiences of the individual may come "general or universal meanings" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 13). It is through this lens of lived experience that insight may be gained into larger systemic processes.

This study reflected the lived experiences of six teachers of *Mi'kmaw Studies 11* working in the public school system in Nova Scotia. Semi-structured interviews of between sixty and ninety minutes were conducted with each teacher. Interviews took place between April 1 and May 31 of 2024 and were often held in schools to accommodate the teachers' busy schedules. As part of the informed consent process, each participant was provided with questions for the interview intended to stimulate memories of teaching *Mi'kmaw Studies 11*. Participants were also encouraged to bring topics and personal experiences about teaching the course to share during the interview. During the interviews, Susan posed the following question to each participant: "Can you describe any constraints on how you teach the course?" In their responses to this question, a significant portion of the participants reflected first on increased teaching assignments and decreased preparation time as a constraint to their teaching. In addition, as the final portion of each interview, Susan provided an opportunity for each participant to reflect on topics they wished to discuss in greater detail. Again, participants returned to concerns about the lack of time available to learn from Mi'kmaw Elders and Knowledge Keepers, to create a relevant, anti-colonial curriculum for the course, and to support students as they grappled with the idea of reconciliation in their learning.

Ethics approval for the project was granted by both the University Research Ethics Board and the Regional Centre for Education's Research Department. Because of the tangential relation between the topic of study and the local Indigenous population (i.e., the Mi'kmaq), an exemption was also sought and received from Mi'kmaq Ethics Watch, a committee that reviews research pertaining to Mi'kmaw peoples, knowledges, arts, treaties, spiritualities, and cultures. As per the conditions of participation in the study, each of the six teachers was assigned a pseudonym to ensure the protection of their identity. This was felt to be necessary because participants shared information and experiences that sometimes showed colleagues and administrators in an unfavourable light, and they also spoke frankly about community experiences and political issues.

Generally, the participants' responses fell into two overarching categories that together formed an answer to the research question: the experience of teaching *Mi'kmaw Studies 11* felt constrained and contested (Legge, 2024). It felt contested in the sense that reconciliation is both important and politicized, and non-Indigenous teachers often grappled with their positionality in doing this work. It felt constrained by bureaucratic pressures emergent from the neoliberal education policy described above. In the current article, we focus on one dimension of the constraints teachers faced: time. Although other constraints, such as financial and material support, were mentioned frequently by participants, it was ultimately time that all the teachers asked for repeatedly.

Findings

Having thus discussed the methodology of the larger study and the relationship of the current article to that larger work, we now proceed to discuss the participants' comments about how time prevented progress toward reconciliatory education.

Seven of Eight

In the interviews, I (Susan) was curious to find out if time and money for curriculum development and teacher education connected to reconciliation education and treaty education were being provided in an identifiable way for these teachers. I was disappointed but not surprised by what they told me. The participants spoke about the education system they work in, providing less and less time for them to create curriculum as opposed to more. They spoke of their workload increasing yearly and of planning time being excised from the teaching day (see also Cook, 2024; D'Entremont, 2022, 2024; Kelloway et al., 2015; Lau, 2024; LaRoche, 2022; News-NSTU, 2021; Pacaol, 2021). According to the study participants, the breaking point was reached in September of 2021 when their workload was increased from six of eight teaching sections to seven of eight (see also Nova Scotia Parents, 2021; Frost, 2021). As I listened to the lived experiences of these teachers, a common concern emerged: they were not receiving either the time or the resources needed to plan, to learn, or to work together to create the curriculum called for by the TRC. The phrase I kept hearing that encapsulated this lack: "seven of eight".

As described above, "seven of eight" refers to the increase in the high school teachers' workload from teaching six courses per year to teaching seven. This amounts to a 12.5% increase in teaching time annually. It is another full class (usually between 25 and 30 students) to be planned, taught, evaluated, and reported on for teachers. Depending on whether the additional course is a duplicate of one already on the teacher's course assignment, it may also mean developing plans for an extra course of study. Three years into the change, a high school teacher in this system is teaching four out of four periods of the day (i.e., all day with only a lunch break) between two and three days a week. One participant expressed specific concerns about the effect of the increased workload, saying, "I think it's scary… doing seven of eight [courses]. If I were teaching five new courses a year… and I was trying to come up with this [Mi'kmaw Studies curriculum] on my own, I just feel like I wouldn't do it justice". Each participant in the study acknowledged that the curriculum document produced in 2016 by the Nova Scotia Department of Education provided a starting place for curriculum development but also pointed out that assignments and support material for teaching had to be sought out from external sources. A majority of teachers understand that creating classroom material is an expectation of the job. Nonetheless, being given the responsibility of teaching between twenty and thirty additional students over the school year and then being expected to create a curriculum from scratch is a significant increase in workload. During the 2022/23 school year, the second when this increased workload was in place, Agyapong et al. (2024) collected data from Nova Scotia teachers that revealed 77% of the respondents to the survey felt emotionally exhausted by their current working conditions. This statistic lends support to the experience of the study participants, one of whom told me as she reflected on her own increased course load, "I'm so tired, Susan, I'm just so tired… [I need] time, time."

The impact of this increased workload on the teachers I spoke to was profound and complicated. Five of the six teachers interviewed had worked in the Nova Scotia education system before the change, and they felt and saw the effects of having substantially less time to spend developing curriculum, working with students, and being involved with the life of the school. The sixth teacher, who was new to teaching, simply felt overwhelmed by the workload but had no experience of teaching before the addition of the seventh course, and thus did not refer directly to

the change to seven out of eight. Looking more specifically to developing education for reconciliation, the teachers were concerned that they were not working toward an anti-colonial pedagogy in their classrooms in large part because of the time constraints and mental fatigue created by their increased workload.

Time Constraints and Developing Anti-colonial Classrooms

All six teachers in the study felt *Mi'kmaw Studies 11* was a useful starting place to teach students about reconciliation and the role that Canadians must undertake in this process. One participant reflected on both the process of reconciliation, as she perceived it, and how the course provides a beginning step of understanding, and perhaps action, for students. She said,

> You can't have reconciliation without understanding, and you can't have understanding without the truth, right? So, I see the Mi'kmaw Studies course as being part of the truth-telling that has to happen. I see it as being a door to the conversation of reconciliation for a lot of young people… They are open and want to learn and understand and are primed and ready in a lot of ways… Reconciliation is the end that we hope for, but there's a lot that has to happen in between the truth-telling and the reconciliation, too. I think justice is like the missing word from this conversation; it's that you tell the truth, and then there has to be justice. And there has to be restitution. You can't have reconciliation without restitution… we talk a lot about how messy it all is… reconciliation is messy, and painful.

Reflecting on her words, creating a curriculum to help students understand what it means to live as treaty people is a complex undertaking, and *Mi'kmaw Studies 11* is a resource that can assist in that process. *Mi'kmaw Studies 11* was created by a joint committee of Mi'kmaw and settler educators and has been available to high school students in Nova Scotia for almost ten years in its current form. Although the present curriculum document is strong in terms of historical knowledge and cultural practices, there is much work to be done to update the course as we move toward models of anti-colonial education and reconciliation. As above and below, a major impediment to that work is the demand on the time of teachers who are tasked with ever-increasing numbers of courses and students.

The majority of teachers currently teaching *Mi'kmaw Studies 11* in Nova Scotia are not Mi'kmaq, and as a result, are faced with a huge learning curve of both content and pedagogical philosophies as they work to implement this course for students. Within this study, every participant expressed a desire for professional development specifically targeted at the *Mi'kmaw Studies 11* curriculum, anti-colonial education practices, and ways to teach about reconciliation. They were interested in time for teachers of the course to work together to share and create resources, and to read, think and learn about reconciliation education. In the words of the participants: "there's so much to learn". All the teachers I spoke to understood that curriculum development will necessarily extend beyond the teaching day, no matter what course is being taught. However, with two to three days of the teaching week without any preparation time to even arrange peer-to-peer consultation or make contacts outside the school environment, more of the workload is shifted to post-work hours. This is compounded by the addition of more students that each teacher is responsible for as a result of the increased course load.

The two participants who were new to teaching the course related that they spent inordinate amounts of time just locating resources. Although there is a course document available, unless a mentor teacher for *Mi'kmaw Studies 11* is on staff and willing to share their own course material, the expectation voiced by the teachers I spoke to was that they were responsible for creating their

own instructional materials. When asked about potential support at the board level for a teacher new to the course, one participant responded that she didn't even know who to contact.

Additionally, the teachers in this study, recognizing the limitations of their own knowledge and experience, expressed a desire for opportunities to be taught by Mi'kmaw Elders and Knowledge Keepers. Such a desire is reasonable given the ways that Indigenous people have often been misrepresented in settler-run education systems (Peters, 2016). Indeed, Newhouse and Quantick (2022) note that "the Indigeneity of the instructor is critical for courses that deal explicitly with Indigenous culture and Indigenous Knowledge" (p. 275) in the context of their university courses, and similar sentiments were held by some participants about the *Mi'kmaw Studies 11* course—that it would be best taught by a Mi'kmaw person. While recognizing this desire to learn directly from Mi'kmaw Elders and Knowledge Keepers comes from a good place, it must also be acknowledged that such a desire can put an undue burden on Indigenous people to educate non-Indigenous people. In reconciliatory work, settler folk, thus, have some obligation to educate themselves and their kin with publicly available resources and events before looking directly to Indigenous people for significant education pieces that require explanation, demonstration, or discussion from the community (Toulouse, 2016; see also Atho, 2019; Chapman & Whiteford, 2017; Ducharme, 2013). For the participants, however, there was no budget or time commitment available from the teacher's school administration or centres for education to support connecting with Elders or Knowledge Keepers, and so their learning was limited to secondary sources.

Only two of the six participants had their own connections in the Mi'kmaw community that they could contact with questions about the curriculum. The participant who was brand new to the Nova Scotia education system explained that a timetable where he taught all four periods of the day for three days of the week meant that there was literally no time in the school day for him to meet with mentor teachers or other support staff (including the Indigenous student support worker[2] based in the school). He said, "Often I'm busy throughout working hours, and then, like at 3:30, okay, I'm finally free, but the support staff are already gone." Many support staff positions in Nova Scotia high schools are either part-time or split between more than one school, and so not being able to meet with these staff members during their actual work hours meant that there was no way to meet at all. Mentor teachers are also in the same position with workday time challenges, and so scheduling professional development with other teachers did mean looking to the pre- or post-school day, which also presents challenges.

A related issue is the lack of support by the Nova Scotia Board of Education for learning experiences for students beyond the typical western classroom. Each of the participants who had taught *Mi'kmaw Studies 11* before 2020 recalled how resources, like field trips and guest speakers, did seem more available then but were noticeably absent now. In their words, "[Now] buses are not available; money is not available… there's no coverage [for classroom teachers] because of seven of eight [courses being taught by high school teachers]. It used to work, but not now…" One

[2] The job description of Indigenous student support workers in Nova Scotia is to work directly with Indigenous students in the school to "ensure improved achievement and a positive school experience" (Halifax Regional, 2024, Scope of Responsibilities section, para. 1) for Indigenous students. Assisting teachers to create relevant programming is not part of their job description. Nonetheless, the experience of the study participants was that the Indigenous support workers in their schools did take time from their already oversubscribed daily schedules to help *Mi'kmaw Studies 11* teachers with curriculum development and Indigenous pedagogies.

teacher recalled pre-pandemic times at her school: "[One year] I had seven, I think, guest speakers… We went to a powwow at Dalhousie, we went to Millbrook cultural centre, we took a bus to Debert and did the Debert walking trail… It was amazing." A second teacher spoke about feeling stymied by board policy and lack of administrative support at her school,

> To bring in guest speakers now, the board has made that almost impossible. I tried to have one last year… It has to be approved by the principal… and, when I tried last year, it was just like I'm [the principal] too busy, I don't have time for that right now, and it didn't happen.

A third teacher mused on what is missed as a result of these policies and the new time constraint:

> And you can talk about those things in a classroom, but it's not nearly as impactful… [Now], those things are expensive, hard to organize, hard to make work logistically… even something as simple as going to Millbrook to the cultural centre… Even something that should be pretty simple is difficult to arrange.

These teachers understood what was possible and yet found themselves increasingly frustrated with the continued neoliberal erosion in the system where they work of a basic teaching resource: time.

Effects of Neoliberalism on the Education System

The teachers I spoke to offer a window into an education system they see as less and less supportive of teachers. Twenty years after the publication of Giroux and Giroux's (2006) "Challenging Neoliberalism's New World Order: The Promise of Critical Pedagogy", it is clear that the authors' worries about an education system fallen victim to a neoliberal agenda, where students are simply a convenient product and teachers are the widget makers tasked with their creation, has come to pass in Nova Scotia. The stressor that continues to build for teachers is the ever-increasing speed of the assembly line on which these student "products" are expected to be "manufactured".

As alluded to above, participants discussed their experiences with lack of support for teacher professional development and course funding of *Mi'kmaw Studies 11* as tied to the perception within their schools and centres for education that *Mi'kmaw Studies 11* is a social science course and, as a result, not worthy of any extra expenditures to support either new or experienced teachers to deepen their understanding of the course material and pedagogies. In their experience, the Nova Scotia education system is marginalizing its investment in both the course and its teachers because there is no perceived economic gain for students flowing from the credit. Ironically, the environmental science course called *Netukulimk 12,* currently being piloted in Nova Scotia public high schools, is an Indigenous knowledge course that is receiving large amounts of government funding and release time for teachers involved in the pilot (CBC News, 2024; Nova Scotia, 2024). Why are these funds available for one course and not another? One study participant opined that *Netukulimk 12* is a senior-level science course and Mi'kmaw Studies is a grade 11 social studies course, so "make the connection". An examination of the difference between who is expected by the system to be in a senior science class (*Netukulimk 12*) versus an open social studies class (*Mi'kmaw Studies 11*) points to a bias of resources being made available to a university stream science course rather than an open-level social studies class. As Rogers (2020) puts it, "Nova Scotia demonstrates the neoliberal education reform pattern perfectly: consult, reform, dismantle, and repeat" (p. 8). There's no easy solution for teachers when the government that controls

education funding appears to dismiss the value of the course (*Mi'kmaw Studies 11*) you are teaching.

All six participants referred to constraints on their time for curriculum development and student contact, and even their personal health and work-life balance, as a result of their current workload. One participant's reflection was particularly poignant, as he delineated the effects for both teachers and students of increased teaching time and decreased time to prepare for classes and interact with students:

> We need to know our kids in order to teach them. And yet we are not given the opportunity to know them. If this [*Mi'kmaw Studies 11*] is truly going to be a success, if the message of what happened to the Mi'kmaw people and the importance of the culture itself surviving is going to be taught, we need to know our kids. We need to be given the opportunity. And seven out of eight don't allow that. Not being able to do things with our kids outside of the classroom doesn't allow that because we don't have the time to do it. We don't have the time to improve our teaching methods, and we don't have the time to learn the things we need.

This experience is reflected in the literature, which comments on the trend toward educational systems directing resources primarily to skill-based education:

> Everywhere we look these days, there is evidence of education being understood as an economic good. Parents navigate 'education markets' in the hope of choosing 'the best' school for their children. Policymakers talk about the economic benefits of increasing young people's literacy and numeracy skills… public schools increasingly operate like private businesses. More than ever before, school principals are positioned as managers, accountable to the needs and wishes of 'clients' (parents and students). The content of school curricula is also being reimagined in line with changing economic demands... and a focus on science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM). (Savage, 2017, p. 143)

This dilemma of more students and less time is premised on a capitalist business model of neoliberal ideals that value most "efficiency and accountability through measurable performance standards and extensive standardized testing" (Scheutze et al., 2011, p. 79), demonstrating the change in school culture(s) from "a collectivist and public orientation to norms of individualism and… parental choice that is the result of neoliberal economism" (Scheutze et al., 2011, p. 79). While the education system in Nova Scotia today, like many across the world, was built on an industrial model of production, the neoliberal push in the last three decades has intensified the system, pushing it to its limits on the backs of a teacher population that is increasingly burnt out.

Without the time to work with colleagues, to connect with students, and to just think about the process of course building, the teachers in this study are being moved away from their status as intellectual workers who work with students to think about why things are not just "how to". The participants in the study recognized Giroux's (2025) concern that being tasked with more courses to manage every day is resulting in "the devaluation of critical, intellectual work on the part of teachers and students" (Giroux, 2025, p. 116) and that as a result "teaching is reduced to training" (Giroux, 2003, p. 2). These teachers were frustrated by a system that viewed time as a precious resource only when it pertained to direct instruction. With that in mind, the notion of rebuilding a curriculum to reflect the expectations of the TRC's calls to action 62 and 63, which deal with making age-appropriate curriculum around residential schools and supporting

Indigenous education more broadly, is being subsumed into an education machine focussed on students as products rather than critical thinkers.

The Dream of Time to Read and Think

This growing lack of time during the school day for high school teachers in Nova Scotia to think, create, and connect heightens a fear in the participants about presenting culturally specific subject matter and pedagogies that, coming from a non-Indigenous person, might appear appropriative or disingenuous as a result of ignorance or incomplete knowledge. The non-Indigenous participants talked about being so taxed by student needs and increasing amounts of administrative paperwork that they simply had no energy left for deeper dives into curriculum. For example, they expressed trepidation about teaching Mi'kmaw vocabulary as they worried about creating unintentional offence with mispronunciation or incorrect translation. One participant's reflection encapsulated the feelings of most, saying,

> I have qualms about being the person passing on this knowledge to people who again are essentially outsiders as I am... it is a bit of a dance because I am not [Indigenous], but I'm gonna share what I know and have come to understand with you because that's my job and that's what I've been hired to do. But I need you to know why I shouldn't be and why I am and why there's no alternative here at the moment.

This worry about making mistakes is addressed within the literature (Downey, 2018; Bascuñán et al., 2022; Carroll et al., 2020; Koops, 2018; Rice et al., 2022); the overall conclusion of the researchers is that mistakes are a part of learning and that fear of getting something wrong isn't a sufficient reason for not teaching it (Bascuñán et al., 2022). Further to that is an understanding that neither learners nor teachers are perfect and that the work toward anti-colonial education and reconciliation will be imperfect:

> Moving from anxiety and feelings of discomfort to action is necessary for educators in all settler colonial contexts […] Although we can never be 'perfect' as settlers, we can aim to be imperfect accomplices – always striving to work with and for Indigenous peoples on their lands. (Carroll et al., 2020, p. 17)

The literature does support that a greater good is accomplished for reconciliation education through educators who are willing to take the chance of making mistakes, and that this is preferable to being Dion's (2007) "perfect stranger," too nervous to even try. But this knowledge is presented in academic scholarship, and it is not readily available to classroom teachers whose available time is spent, according to the study participants, just fulfilling the demands of the day. This paralysis of teachers as "perfect strangers" without the time to even find these academic conversations, let alone engage in peer discussions around them or work through their own discomfort, is precisely illustrative of the problem under discussion. Teaching well cannot be rushed, least of all when the topic requires a high level of reflexivity.

It is worth noting, briefly, that in recent years, faculties of education in the province have begun offering pre-service teachers' courses in Indigenous education, with some including them as mandatory in their programs. Those courses offer an initial space for a deeper consideration of Indigenous topics, including but transcending the teaching of *Mi'kmaw Studies 11*, but given their

relatively recent inclusion in B.Ed. programs,[3] many teachers in the province have not had coursework in Indigenous education as part of their primary teacher certification.

A related desire/dream expressed by the study participants was to have time to read widely, think deeply, and work together to learn about reconciliation and anticolonial education models. In the words of the participants: "I want some time to be able to sit down and collaborate with many different people about how to do this [teach *Mi'kmaw Studies 11*] and how to do it well" and "If they [centres for education] really care, we need time for more teachers to work together." Unfortunately, this dream was being set aside as a result of the ever-increasing workload demanded by neoliberal policy reforms, which left no time even to search out relevant materials. Classroom teachers are too often expected to create student materials "right now" and then catch up with the research literature when (and if) they can. Their curriculum becomes a surface pedagogy with little opportunity for deep reflection or sometimes even awareness of exactly what is being talked about in the wider academic community. The teachers I spoke to want more than this. They identify with Carolyn Roberts' description of what it means to be an accomplice to Indigenous people, to be

> someone who is always learning more, asking more questions, and always taking it upon themselves to do better in the spaces they are in. Knowing that in education, the narrative is always shifting and it will always be a learning journey, not a destination. (Roberts, n.d., para. 8)

This vision of education as a process of continual learning was a dream for the participants, one that had continually been stifled by the increasing demands of their jobs.

Conclusion

In this paper, we have highlighted the myriad ways in which public high school teachers in Nova Scotia point to time as being a limiting factor in preventing them from doing more meaningful reconciliatory work in education. While specific to the context of Nova Scotia curriculum, this finding is anticipated by earlier work on time in education (e.g., Rose & Whitty, 2010; Downey & Whitty, 2019). While some argue that time is something that can be worked-with (Pacini-Ketchabaw, 2012), there remains a tyranny about the way time is operationalized in schools for both students and teachers.

This tyranny is felt acutely as neoliberal education policy, the presence of which has been well-documented in the context of Nova Scotia (e.g., Campbell, 2024; Rogers, 2018), restricts teachers' time for reflection and planning in favour of classroom instruction time. In many ways, the change from six to seven out of eight identified by these teachers is a precise manifestation of what Giroux (2025) might call the erosion of the intellectual status of the teacher. Rather than being viewed as sensitive, thoughtful, and reflective intellectual workers, teachers are treated as cogs in a system, who are only useful to that system when they are actively engaged in the act of teaching. Their mere presence becomes more important than their actual work.

These conditions are untenable for teachers, as has been shown by the research pointing to the extensive emotional exhaustion teachers experience these days (Agyapong et al., 2024; Ritchie et al., 2023). Here, the intensification (but also routinization and bureaucratization) of teacher work

[3] As an example from the experience of the Authors, our university first offered a course on Indigenous education in 2015 as an elective. It was made mandatory for secondary education students in 2021-2022 and mandatory for elementary education students in 2024-2025. It is, of course, possible that our university is an exception in the region. Future research may be warranted in teacher education's role in reconciliation education in Nova Scotia.

manifests in the decrease of planning time, which not only results in teacher fatigue and burnout as suggested by previous research, directly impedes the work toward reconciliation being done in classrooms. Teachers need time and space to think and feel their way through the complex histories and contemporary contexts involved in reconciliation, and the data presented here suggest that teachers currently have neither.

To conclude our paper, then, we call on governments, particularly those that profess a commitment to truth and reconciliation in and through education, to make truth and (then) reconciliation education more than a discursive shift by abating policies that reduce teacher planning time. We recognize that our call may well go unheeded in the context of Nova Scotia, as a current shortage of teachers has spurred the progressive conservative government to propose drastic decreases in the requirements for teacher education in the province (Ayers, 2024; Henderson, 2024). Yet, even in the face of neoliberal policy, we remain heartened by teachers' commitments to reconciliation. The teachers interviewed for this study want to do more to actualize meaningful reconciliatory education with their students, and every day, they make incredible things happen, even as their working conditions deteriorate. In short, teachers want to do this and do it well, and it is *time* that government, administration, and society more broadly give them the time and space to do so.

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Morality and the Academic Journey: Perspectives of Indigenous Scholars

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Abstract

Following high profile cross-Canadian examinations of Indigenous[1] peoples and their experiences such as those of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, many universities and colleges have begun to make commitments that support Indigenous engagement; the institutional effort to engage with the experiences, histories, and perspectives of First Nations, Inuit, and Métis peoples to improve the academic journey. These initiatives, called for in many institutional statements of commitment such as those found in strategic plans, support institutional change in which the experiences, histories, and perspectives of Indigenous peoples are central. Many of these initiatives involve the exploration of Indigenous spiritual and religious orientations that may guide personal and academic journeys. In this study, we sought to acquire knowledge on moral understandings that are resident in the consciousness of Indigenous faculty, professors, and instructors working in universities and colleges across North America. This study showed that participants found that their professional situations supported their respective journeys of self-discovery. Participants also reported that their roles were informed by how they navigated Indigenous and non-Indigenous values, as well as how they can support and/or mitigate their institutions' influence upon the advancement of Indigenous engagement. Although much of the professional responsibilities of participants, such as instruction and research, were predominant in their working lives, a prevailing sense of responsibility to the journey of reconciliation and the support of Indigenous engagement was reported.

[1] In this article, the term *Indigenous* refers to the First Nations, Inuit, and Métis peoples of Canada and related territories.

Morality and the Academic Journey: Perspectives of Indigenous Scholars

In recent decades, Indigenous education has been a developing area of study and practice in primary, secondary, and post-secondary schools in Canada. Since 2015, the final report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada and its 94 Calls to Action has informed how many in education have approached institutional change, which improves Indigenous education. Central to the journey of Reconciliation is an understanding of the experiences of Indigenous people and their perspectives on such things as the world in which we live, the relationship we have or may have, and the problems/challenges that face us all. Given that spirituality and associated ceremonial observances are important to many Indigenous peoples and have been explored in a number of schools and universities, their inclusion in academic and non-academic school programming merits exploration. As many Elders and Knowledge Keepers who work with various communities use moral frames, such as the traditional medicine wheel, in order to provide direction and support, the character of the moral journey may merit consideration, especially in diverse contexts, such as those found in universities.

An increasing concern across various fields of study is that of morality. From psychology to neuroscience, philosophy, sociology, and anthropology, scholars have long been seeking to understand how moral judgements are developed differently across individuals and cultures (Haidt, 2008; Hitlin & Vaisey, 2013; Hofmann et al., 2014; Zigon, 2020). Haidt (2008) commented that morality is the oldest topic of study in the history of the world, as the Code of Hammurabi, the Hindu Vedas, the Egyptian Instructions of Amenemope, and the Hebrew Bible demonstrate. In surveying the literature on this topic, two broad approaches to morality emerge: the consequentialist and deontological models. The former model judges the acceptability of one's actions based on their outcomes; the latter judges the acceptability of actions according to a set of rules, regardless of their consequences (Crockett, 2013). Zigon (2020) expands on this classification and identifies *virtue theory* and *natural law* as suitable frames for the analysis of morality. Virtue theory, with roots in Aristotle's Nicomachean ethics, argues that "what is virtuous can only be determined in specific situations" (Zigon, 2020, p. 24). Natural law, on the other hand, stems from Stoic thought as it "unites all of humanity as moral beings through the right use of reason" (p. 26).

A departure from the revealed codes of conduct resident in many religious orientations, morality as it may be understood by Indigenous people, is often conceptualized as contextual and experiential (Cordova, 2004; Stonechild, 2016, 2020). Stonechild (2016) observes that "Western knowledge tends to be reductionist and limited to the rational mind. It treats knowledge as something 'outside' and foreign. True knowledge is more holistic and flexible" (p. 64). For many Indigenous peoples of the prairie regions of North America, morality is generally guided by the seven principles, which stem from the Seven Sacred Teachings: respect, courage, love, generosity, honesty, humility, and wisdom (Stonechild, 2020). While some similarities between the Seven Sacred Teachings and religious sets of commandments may be cited, Indigenous morality is responsive to ever-changing human relationships (Stonechild, 2016). Such understanding seems to resonate with Johnson King (2023), who argues that "it is unclear precisely what the content of Morality is—or, in other words, precisely what one grasps when one grasps Morality" (p. 4). The notion that emerges from explorations of morality in Indigenous consciousness is that it is not adequately reflected in codified and unchangeable prescriptions upon behaviour, but rather a dynamic journey for which cyclic and intercultural features of Indigenous experience are central.

The holistic and flexible character of Indigenous morality is reflected by Gregory Cajete (1994), who explored the principles of Indigenous moral and religious views. Cajete observed that such moral frames as best seen not as codified sets of rules or guiding principles, such as those found in Christianity, but rather as a process for understanding right and wrong and acting accordingly. Cajete's work was cited by Friesen (2000) when he explored how morality is understood by Indigenous peoples: "The traditional First Nations' metaphysical belief system did not adhere to an overall, organized description. It was a way of life, not carefully catalogued delineation of major and minor doctrines, subdoctrines, and corollary beliefs" (p. 12).

At a general level of analysis, Indigenous morality may be understood in this way. It is a landscape upon which the holistic and flexible character of right and wrong is not only something to be observed but experienced (Deer, 2018). There may be guidance offered by frameworks of principles, such as those in the Seven Sacred Teachings, but it is the responsibility of the individual to navigate this moral landscape in a righteous manner.

Since the release of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada's Calls to Action in 2015, universities throughout Canada have been striving to Indigenize their institutions through such efforts as "providing equitable employment opportunities for Indigenous faculty and staff and centering the needs of Indigenous Peoples in teaching and research" (Universities Canada, 2023, para. 3). One of the benefits of having adequate number of academic staff who have knowledge and experience in Indigenous knowledge and consciousness is the support they may offer to Indigenous students, colleagues, and community members in their respective academic and personal journeys. This study sought to investigate how Indigenous understandings of morality may be resident in the Indigenous experience of Canada, specifically in post-secondary educational contexts. Through the acquisition of data on how morality may be understood, the results of this study contribute to the growing academic works out of Canada and elsewhere that explore how Indigenous knowledge and belief systems may be made resident in ostensibly secular educational contexts. Furthermore, this article evidences the many ongoing challenges in the pursuit of genuine academic Indigenization and reconciliation in Canada.

Indigenous Morality in Canadian Higher Education

Despite institutions' apparent efforts to Indigenize academia, Indigenous Faculty members across different fields in Canada have consistently expressed the challenges they face when seeking to meaningfully integrate Indigenous perspectives into the academic and non-academic aspects of environments on campus (Doria et al., 2021; Habermacher, 2020; Louie et al., 2017). Besides contradictions in such Indigenization efforts and the incongruencies Indigenous scholars face in their institutions (Louie, 2019; Louie et al., 2017; Steinman & Sánchez, 2023), many scholars have also registered the ongoing pervasiveness of racism and 'microaggressions' in Canadian universities (Glauser, 2019; Henry et al., 2017; Mohamed & Beagan, 2019). As Henry et al. (2017) state, there is a "lack of adequate mechanisms in most Canadian universities to address racism, racial harassment, and bullying, or the inhospitable climate faced by racialized and Indigenous scholars" (p. 8). Such realities may pose obstacles for the integration of Indigenous knowledge, heritage, and consciousness into the university ethos. It is such integration that may best support Indigenization, which will in turn support the academic and spiritual journeys of Indigenous peoples who study in Canadian post-secondary institutions (Deer, 2024; Gaudry & Lorenz, 2018).

It is within the scope of Indigenous engagement that many post-secondary institutions are exploring how support for the academic and spiritual journeys of Indigenous students, faculty, and community members may be improved. As Deer (2024) stated:

> The moral frames of Indigenous people have become to be reflected in some aspects of content and programing in schools, universities, and colleges. In a number of institutions in Canada, frameworks for morality are put forth by invited Elders and community members who employ this notion of process, reflecting the act of relationship-making and/or restoration. (p. 7)

The relevance of this development was one focus of Stonechild (2016), who observed that "if virtues are undermined, this results in the weakening of relationship ties, the invisible spiritual bonds that hold a community together" (p. 60). As Canadian universities continue to be shaped by colonial ways of being and thinking (Schaefli & Godlewska, 2020; Yeo et al., 2019), such ontologies and epistemologies must be examined, deconstructed, and re-constructed in light of Indigenous knowledges.

Any genuine reconciliatory effort must strive to broaden the horizons of moral conceptualizations and recognize how Indigenous ways of knowing may (and must) co-guide education, and that is the rationale that drove this study.

The Study

The purpose of this study was to acquire knowledge on moral understandings as they may be resident in contemporary Indigenous consciousness. The research team consisted of Frank Deer and Rebeca Heringer. Deer is Kanien'kehá:ka from Kahnawake. Having previously taught elementary school in a Cree community in Northern Manitoba as well as in the culturally diverse Inner City of Winnipeg, Deer's work and experiences as a Kanien'kehá:ka educator has informed his contributions to his areas of research. Heringer was born and raised in Brazil and began to learn about Indigenous knowledges and morality in Canadian contexts after she moved to Winnipeg in 2016. In a spirit of cultural humility and reconciliation through her academic endeavours, Heringer seeks to promote anti-racism education, anti-oppressive research methods, and the holistic well-being of racial minorities in Canada.

With a focus on how Indigenous scholarship may consider this topic, this study's research questions were: 1) What are Indigenous Faculty members' understandings of morality? 2) What sources of knowledge are associated with such understandings?

After receiving their signed consent form, 14 Indigenous Faculty members of various national backgrounds and academic fields were recruited from universities in Canada and the United States. Individual semi-structured interviews were conducted with each participant, either online or in person. The initial guiding questions posed in the interviews were designed to foster a climate of discussion in which participants would share narratives: 1) Please tell me about yourself (e.g., national identity, home community), 2) Please describe your experiences in working with Indigenous knowledge, 3) To what extent has spiritual knowledge and teachings been a part of your experiences?, 4) In what ways has morality been a part of your experiences/learning? In the spirit of narrative inquiry, participants were invited to share their views, experiences, and insights; it was through this process that issues related to Indigenous morality emerged.

Pseudonyms were attributed to each participant to protect their identity. Any identifiers (e.g., name of the university) have also been removed during the transcription process and replaced

with a word that would retain their meaning (e.g., "name of the university"). Each participant had the opportunity to review the transcript of their interview and make any edits they deemed necessary. An inductive thematic data analysis process (Creswell & Creswell, 2018) was conducted, and the emerging themes are presented in the following section.

Findings

Six main themes emerged from the data analysis: self-discovery; practical values; influence of non-Indigenous values; values through professional practice; responsibility; and Indigenous vs. institutional values. Each of these themes helped delineate how Indigenous Faculty members have come to conceptualize morality the way they do, how their understandings have influenced their lives, and the challenges they face when seeking to exercise such values in their daily work.

Self-discovery

Each interview began by allowing participants to share a little bit about their background, such as their national identity, cultural identity, home community, and anything else they thought would be germane to the conversation. As such, each participant commented on how they came to understand themselves as being an Indigenous person, what or who influenced them, and where they see themselves in that journey.

For some participants, that learning came early on through their upbringing: "My mom worked really hard to raise me in a cultural, spiritual way, which she was supported by my dad to do. So I'm very grateful for that because it makes me feel... complete" (Star). Sparrow, who notes that any cultural teaching was absent from his education at school, also said: "I was fortunate enough to have my mother, who was very, very adamant to engage in culture as much as we could, as much as she could and us as growing up."

Yet, a common observation among those who were raised with Indigenous teachings was that this was done experientially (such as jigging, sash weaving, beading, moccasin making, fishing, hunting, and traditional harvesting activities), without necessarily labelling it as "culture":

> I would say that in terms of Indigenous knowledge, we were lucky that we practice and still do like hunting, fishing. We make maple syrup every spring. So I don't think we [say] like, 'oh, I'm doing Indigenous knowledge stuff' today. You just kind of do it, right?

For some participants, however, their Indigenous identity is something that was developed only later in life, whether because they did not know they were Indigenous or because they were not taught traditional teachings. Tiger, for example, felt that there was something different in him, but which he would only understand as an adult:

> It came later, you know, I mean, there was always something, there was always something. I felt like my relationship to the world and nature and… how I could I say… I subconsciously knew that it was something I inherited from the one that ancestors that wouldn't give meaning to that, you know, even in hunting and killing an animal and eating it, that something was missing. And it was culture. It was how you framed that. But I sensed that. I knew it was there.

In a similar vein, Dove observes that only later in life was she able to start understanding the importance of her Métis identity:

> Because I felt, even as a teenager, very disconnected, not understanding who we were and how much power, how powerful that makes you feel to acknowledge who you are as an

> Indigenous person and to be able to be proud of that and learned that through a lot of teachings and the local and participation in our own community that was really missing in our family, part of that.

Some participants, therefore, express feeling as though they had only just begun this process of self-discovery and the implications it brings for life:

> I just feel like I'm at the start of a journey. I feel like I still have a long way to go to... I don't even know how to say this, but to like…to not feel like an imposter. I think that might be the best way for me to say that. And it's something too that I want my children to know about that culture. And part of me feels a little bit lost, because I didn't grow up really embracing the culture. So now I'm like, okay, what do I need to do to make sure that I can pass on the culture to my children? But I'm still learning about the culture myself. So, for me, I still feel like I have a lot to learn. (Butterfly)

Regardless of when their self-discovery journey began, all participants revealed a myriad of values which they carry with them today, as the next section will depict.

Practical Values

For most participants, the morals they affirm today stem from their upbringing and the Indigenous knowledges with which they were taught. As Macaw puts it:

> I guess for me, the morals come from those stories, right? So, not only those interpersonal stories that are told, those experiential stories, but also our stories of our legends. Like that, Nanabush, for example, figures largely amongst the Anishinaabe. You can learn a lot from those stories. And that's where our morality comes from. I think part of our morality comes from anywhere other than, of course, from the Creator. (Macaw)

Rainbow, who notes having been raised with her aunts, comments that their teaching was sometimes direct, giving her instructions on what to do. But for the most part, she observes, she would simply "watch their eyes, to see what they're thinking," that is, pay attention to what they were doing and learning from that. Tiger shares a similar perspective, observing that his Indigenous knowledge came "directly by growing up in the community and seeing it, observing it, and then of course, living it."

With her aunts, Rainbow was taught the virtue of humility and to serve others (during a ceremony, for example) without seeking recognition:

> And you serve the elders first. Notice that an elder doesn't have food, you go and do it. These little things that the behind the scenes that happens at these gatherings. I've kind of taken that on as something that I think is really important, that humility that you're not the ones taking up space in the room, but you're doing the important work. People might not notice that you've done it, but they would notice if it wasn't happening, kind of work and not doing it for recognition, but doing it because it's what you're supposed to be doing.

Indeed, the importance of family was mentioned by some participants as being a key aspect of their identity today. As Snow observes:

> We Métis people, we look out for one another. Family is important. We take care of our family. We always make time for our family. There's always room, right? Like if family asks to stay, if there's room on the floor, there's room for family. With all these different things that I was always being told and just how we functioned around food, like sharing

> food, and around visiting, and always having food, and you know, just different things that I grew up understanding.

Within the family, Tiger commented on the strong role played by women, the matrilineal value, which is still strong in his family. Also, within the family, Snow learned the importance of hard work: "My mother would say, 'Métis, we're hard workers. We work really hard. We're not lazy."

Sparrow grew up understanding that virtues have the purpose of fostering cooperation and peace, which entails telling the truth and not gossiping or backstabbing:

> The most important thing is that you want to have peace among your people. That's why gossip was such a bad thing. Like the top, top thing that our old ones never did. You know, lying. Was it bad? Really bad, stealing was bad. You know, even above murder. All those were the top ones. You know, gossip and lying were the scourge upon the people because they bred discontent.

Through stories and ceremonies, Tiger was instructed about the value of reciprocity with the animals and the earth, as opposed to greed or selfishness. Similarly, generosity was fundamental to Star's upbringing; it was "baked into most ceremonies" and evident in the relationships she witnessed.

But participants who were not necessarily raised with Indigenous teachings also comment on the values they came to learn later in life. For instance, Bear mentions that she took a course during her PhD program, which was focused on the Seven Sacred Teachings that "changed my world":

> That was really foundational and pivotal in just my beginning to spiritually incorporate those ways of knowing, being, and doing. And I always include feeling because feeling is the first thing we have. You have to feel something before you can do it, right? So you have to feel it in order to know it.

As the next section will show, other influences have also played a role in how participants came to shape their worldviews today.

Influence of Non-Indigenous Values

Most participants commented on the influence the Catholic church has had on their lives. Daisy commented:

> I definitely think Christianity has been an influence in my life and also shaping my worldview … because one of the things out of the Christian tradition that I grew up in is that part of our reason for being in the world is to be change agents for good, positive things.

Macaw shared a similar view:

> I grew up in Roman Catholicism. The church was very important in my community and my family, particularly my grandparents. … I would say that it probably influences our understanding of spirituality in many ways. … I think that some of our spiritual practices are definitely modelled after Christianity. I think most people probably don't realize it.

Some participants, on the other hand, did not see a great connection between religious influences on their lives today. Others, like Eagle, observed that the influence has been a negative one, given the mistreatment of Indigenous children as he was growing up. Notwithstanding, Eagle evidenced

the value of courage as he commented on his fighting against the oppressive educational system he was immersed in: "I decided that wasn't going to happen to me. They weren't going to kill my love of learning, right? So I persisted, I just kept on reading and studying and things I didn't have to, I would just read." He continued:

> But when classroom discussions came up … where one of the nuns was talking about Columbus discovering America. So, you know, we were seniors in high school or juniors in high school at the time. So I raised my hand, and I corrected her. I said Columbus did not discover America. Columbus never made it to America. Columbus made it as far as the Caribbean, and Columbus murdered all these Indigenous people, and Indigenous people were here. (Eagle)

A different perspective was shared by Sparrow, who stated that the value of gratitude was taught to him, without necessarily making any religious connection to it: "the way my mom taught us was, 'you be thankful for the food' and you don't necessarily have to formalize your prayers at every meal."

Conversely, because of her negative experiences with the Catholic church, Rainbow states that she has often pushed back against any influence from it, which is something she needs to be attentive to when teaching:

> I have to check myself, especially because so many students are Christian. I want to make sure that I'm not allowing any sort of bias into my teaching or, you know, grade or something. For example, when I'm teaching indigenous education, we often reflect on our own upbringings. And so sometimes it can be hard to read all these Christian stories about, you know, like families coming in and being missionaries and all of these things, like trying to keep trying to not react to those.

As the above quote demonstrates, participants' worldviews are intrinsically intertwined with their professional practices, which is something the next section will explore in further detail.

Values through Professional Practice

When discussing their professional work, participants evidenced how their values are woven into practice. The most recurrent virtue discussed by professors interviewed in this study was that of relationality and the importance of building trust and collaboration, be that in the position of a teacher or as a service provider. For example, as a doctor, Dove observed how she began her career trying to incorporate the 'Western perspectives and ways of thinking' she was taught in medical school and residency. Then, she started noticing that her work in the community was not being well received, and people in the community stopped coming to her. She understood the reason later: "I was engaging with medicine up here [pointing to the head] and I realized where I needed to engage with medicine was down here [pointing to the heart]." She then learned to "honour people and the stories that they had ..., to greet people and love them and meet them where they're at and to not judge people, [and] to bring humility back into medicine." Dove claims this was "one of the most powerful teachings I've ever received as a physician." She concludes:

> And I think that started me down the path of like, this is how you could integrate those two things together … I don't think I'd be a doctor anymore if I hadn't gone back to engaging with my Indigenous ways of knowing. And those teachings, which I feel like are so much more embedded in my heart than anything I learned at Medical school. (Dove)

In a similar vein, in her teaching, Macaw also seeks to communicate to students "the importance of maintaining good relationships":

> Underlying what we're doing with the students is teaching them how to develop and maintain good relationships with whomever they're working with, whether it's patients, their patients in the future or whether it's elders… So, you know, teaching students about how to develop a good and positive relationship, I think, is important because this is kind of like what holds us together.

As Dove pointed out, it is this kind of collaboration that can lead to meaningful reconciliation. Bear complements this understanding when she states:

> And if you're open to working with people in that way, you're closer to being on a path towards healing for yourself. Because we all have had trauma in our lives. We just need to be able to connect to the right person that can help us see the things in our lives and help lift us out of the things that hold us back. And that's what trauma does. It holds a lot of us back.

The importance of relationality seems to go hand in hand with the virtue of humility. In his work as a health service provider in a new institution and different place, Peacock deems of utmost importance to spend time getting to know the people he is working with, "attending ceremony and figuring out how things are done here before I continue with what I was doing when I was in [the other province]."

In their teaching experiences, professors seem to have plenty of opportunities to share their Indigenous worldviews. Some participants, like Snow, expressed how they were acutely aware of how their Indigenous identities were informing their practices: "I understood who I was, as a Michif, as a Métis person, and what that meant. And so then it was learning how to be a teacher." (Snow)

For instance, Star believes in the importance of holistic education, especially in order to protect their identities. She tells her students:

> I want to focus on your whole being. And so we'll try our best to integrate all of these other things … we're going to try and integrate your emotional, your physical, your spiritual health in addition to your intellectual growth... I think that students appreciate that I'm trying to make a relationship with them and that that relationship is just supposed to support them in all of their development, not just one class.

Tiger shared a similar perspective: "I've always tried to bring those things, in terms of not maybe the ceremonial but the idea of the balance into a classroom to talk about what is a medicine wheel or whatever's grounding that knowledge." This was echoed by Daisy who stated that: "the way that I teach and mentor my students is also modeled out of Indigenous ways of knowing, right? Where it's like about storytelling."

For Snow, a major driving force in her scholarly work is to promote a better understanding of the Métis identity:

> One of the things is hoping that by doing some of these research and articulating sort of a more clear understanding of what that means to be and know and how we learn as Métis, that will also help in terms of, sort of like not really solidifying, but like supporting other

> people beyond our own community in understanding that we are distinct, that we're Indigenous, we're not half of anything, we're our own people.

Through their scholarly work, participants also evidence the value of sharing knowledge with others. Tiger, for example, stated that he had just submitted an article whereby he "got a chance to talk about what my dad had taught me about culture and spirituality and Indigenous knowledge that he had gained from his grandfather, my great-grandfather." As such, he could "tell stories that my father gave me, handed down to me and other stories that were actually handed down to me, but maybe handed down to someone else."

In reflecting upon how their practice informed their approach to doing well by their Indigenous background, Bear affirmed the importance of helping others:

> As Indigenous people, we practice ways of helping that are very different from non-Indigenous ways of helping, and that comes from that knowledge that has been around for a long time because it helps us understand that we need to help in a way that's really who we are as Indigenous people. We have to centre those ways of practicing.

Indeed, most interviews revealed ways in which participants hold a sense of responsibility as an Indigenous professional, as the next section will outline.

Responsibility

Whether in the role of a teacher or as any other kind of service provider, participants demonstrated being acutely aware of the responsibility they have, not only as a professional, but as an Indigenous person in their workplace. In the classroom, Daisy observes that she feels a greater responsibility towards those who are marginalized: "I do prioritize connecting with Indigenous students and students of colour. … Those are the students we try to work hard to be available for." As she later explains, this is particularly to help students "see someone who may have some similarities to them, even if it is just the fact [that] we both carry the label of Indigenous." (Daisy)

With regard to the content being taught, participants shared how they put great effort into sharing the values they believe to be necessary for students' professional lives, especially with Indigenous communities:

> The values around care, which are family and connection and work … I do feel like I have an obligation to their future to share the things that I know … when I look at myself and sort of think about what unique things I have maybe to offer. And it's those things that I then try to share and to pass on, you know, and part of that is like navigating higher education, making good career decisions that are maybe unconventional…. I try really hard to make myself available as a mentor (Daisy)

Oak also points out the importance she sees in mentorship, which is something she seeks to offer as an Indigenous scholar to support "Indigenous knowledge in academic settings." Bear observes that in her classes, she may, for example, look at the utility of fire, water, trees, as well as the importance of one's emotional and spiritual well-being, evidencing many values embedded in her lesson: "there is a process for all of these things and it's all about, you know, building humility, respect for the land, respect for the animals, the things that sacrifice their lives because trees are their life, right?"

Macaw adds to the conversation, observing that her job is "to prepare students to be culturally safe physicians." Alluding to the value of building trust, which she had discussed earlier, she proceeds:

> So I guess that is implicit, this responsibility that I do feel that I need to prepare these students to be able to provide that kind of care … I guess my goal is to educate them in such a way that they will understand how to behave respectfully … and when they're practicing physicians, that they're going to understand that people have all kinds of different experiences and that there's, you know, reasons why patients might be saying or not saying things.

Bear also emphasizes the way in which a person's spirituality is not something that can be dismissed by a service provider:

> But morally, like only because of my own experience, I want to help families, and I want to help families get back to healing and reconnecting to who they are, like just spiritually. Just because you need to know who you are. In order to work with our people, you need to have a connection to your own spirit because you can't help people if you are not connected to your spirit. And our people genuinely know when someone cares about them.

But while participants may claim, as Rainbow did, "I feel really strongly about making sure teacher candidates feel comfortable with going out and teaching Métis content," as Oak observes, "bringing Indigenous knowledge into the classroom entails a particular responsibility." Oak elaborated:

> I like to think I deliver my content in a particular way that is not retraumatizing students, but I think it's sort of like all of a sudden having these topics come up that just by nature of the topic would be retraumatizing. I think that it's important to really think carefully, which but for me, like the resistance from students that are pushing back or like presenting like residential school denialism or sort of like our times when I'm really concerned about students in the classroom that might be feeling traumatized by those sorts of negative occurrences.

Institutions' strategic plans and policies were also pointed to by some participants as being a responsibility they embrace. For instance, Lily observed that her university did "its own little internal TRC and task force," which contributed to the development of an Indigenous Learning Center and other supports to help students navigate the system – an effort that she believes also has to come from the faculty members.

Star notes that she "push[es]…colleagues to hire people of color and Indigenous peoples." In a similar vein, Butterfly states that the admission process in her institution has changed for Indigenous applicants:

> That was something pretty important to us, the way that we would engage with the applicants. It just didn't feel right. It didn't feel good. And so we now bring on a knowledge keeper or an elder for all of our interviews.

The same participant also commented that she was working with another colleague "trying to create a personalized land acknowledgment that speaks to the [name of school] so it's not just a check the box kind of thing. I really can't stand that."

Most participants discussed how they seek to make the most out of the opportunities they have when designing their curriculum in order to incorporate Indigenous knowledge. However, they also express great respect and see their responsibility often entailing bringing Indigenous knowledge keepers or Elders to help guide the classroom discussion. And as Bear points out, "when you see [Indigenous knowledge] being incorporated into university education, I think that this knowledge is healing. You know, there are opportunities to heal."

But such responsibility goes beyond the boundaries of one's workplace. Many participants also expressed feeling responsible for giving back to their community. For instance, Snow feels responsible to give back to her Métis community, who have supported her journey becoming a teacher: "I worked hard to get this PhD, now how can I use it to benefit my community?" Therefore, she seeks to focus her time and attention on what her community expressed to be necessary for them, such as Michif language revitalization. Bear shared a similar perspective, declaring that "my only wish is to be able to contribute to a community that invested in me to go to school."

However, as the next section will present, many are the challenges that participants encounter in their daily work, evidencing a tension between their Indigenous values and those of the institutions where they work.

Indigenous vs. Institutional Values

The most common challenge participants seem to experience in their institutions is the feeling of being used merely as a box to be checked. As Oak observes:

> I feel like I am constantly asked to get on different committees, sit on different tables, so that they can sort of like check the reconciliation box. But oftentimes I find that I don't have a voice in those spaces. And I've even been learning to be a little bit more protective of what I agreed to do or what I agree to participate in.

Oak also comments on several tokenistic efforts taking place in her workplace, such as smudging in a faculty meeting:

> I didn't think that was appropriate at all. And it seems like a superficial gesture. And if we are going to like, why do they want to have a smudging ceremony to open our faculty meeting when there are only one or two Indigenous faculty members among the 80 people that will be there, what is their intention? And if they wanted to have a smudging ceremony, and this is my opinion, then they should not have invited an Elder to do that, to introduce faculty members in the room instead of putting that on them to do. It just felt very performative.

Tiger also emphasizes how, in his institution, he frequently witnessed reconciliatory efforts that are empty:

> Part of it is a spectacle as a machine. Even without evoking calculation… Part of it is token. Part of it is like, oh, okay, reconciliation time, let's set up this and that and let's invite an Indigenous faculty every time we have an event for everything and make sure we check the books. In the end, it means nothing, you know?

Peacock also observes that he is often asked to provide a quick and simple guide to traditional Indigenous knowledge to be objectively studied in his field. But as Star observes, Indigenous

knowledges stand in a completely different dimension from Western ones, and are not something that can be simply merged. For instance, she comments with regard to achievement:

> The way indigenous knowledge works is not the way that Western knowledge works. It doesn't work with grades. It's not about that type of achievement … you only get as good as you give, regardless. It has nothing to do with grades. (Star)

As a consequence, participants are often found having to prove themselves to the academic community:

> And I think the Indigenous people themselves, the faculty themselves, have been pushing constantly for that, and you know, making a lot more work for ourselves doing that, but doing the evaluations so people, the non-Indigenous people, can see that this person has done this amount of work. This is what we consider Indigenous work, and it's equivalent to scholarly activities, kind of this idea. So this is what we do. What we do is, you know, you do extra to make it visible to them. (Lily)

Or as Daisy puts it: "We often spend a lot of time having to make the argument of how [something] is evidence-based when it's not like evidence-based in the Western framing of health interventions and evidence." Daisy also observed that although she would seek support from her Elder council to make professional decisions, this is not something she felt comfortable sharing in her workplace at first, for in the Western worldview, a neighbour, brother, uncle, etc., is not deemed a qualified professional:

> I felt like I had to do a lot of justifying and explaining of like Indigenous perspectives and knowledges coming in. Whereas now, because of my different place in life and different place in the institution, etc., I don't feel like I have to justify myself anymore, but so now I can kind of just be more inclusive and incorporating it into the things that I do.

Therefore, besides facing racism and lateral violence, participants daily experience the challenge of having to "walk in two worlds," that is, to be "conversant in Indigenous knowledge and academic knowledge" (Star). Participants want to incorporate their Indigenous worldviews into their work, but feel how incongruent those are in academic framing and thus feel that they are constantly pushed back. For example, Star, for whom generosity is a key value, as mentioned earlier, observed how "[generosity] is incongruent with what the university is, which is the corporation, essentially. So that's frustrating." Or in Tiger's words: "There is quite a misunderstanding about what is meant by Indigenous knowledge in universities, or when we say traditional knowledge … they think it's a kind of pity thing that's not serious." What this participant is citing is a phenomenon in which traditional Indigenous knowledge is not an important part of academic activities or culture, but is accepted for purposes related to the increasing attention paid toward such things as equity, diversity, and inclusion policies.

A prevailing view amongst participants is that, despite bringing a wealth of knowledge and experience with them, academic institutions continue to fall short of being genuinely welcoming to Indigenous scholars and their ways of knowing. Numerous participants cited a lack of involvement and consultation in academic decision-making. Many stated concerns about not being enabled to develop new course programming that focuses on Indigenous topics. Some stated that their respective institutions or colleagues were forthcoming in their disrespect for Indigenous knowledge and its use in scholarly activities. This study points to a need for increased

accountability and initiative on the part of universities in North America to better address Indigenous engagement.

Discussion

One of the perennial needs of academic programs of post-secondary institutions (regardless of discipline) is to host learned scholars with expertise that is relevant to their respective academic programs. Thus, a department of physics would require physicists with sufficient knowledge that support learning and research within the discipline of physics. Although academic disciplines develop over time, such that the specific expertise required of new scholars is subject to change, it is the disciplinary expertise of academics that is considered the most important aspect of their qualifications for their respective academic roles.

The relatively new area of Indigenous engagement has amended the frame through which institutions view the disciplinary qualifications of new scholars, particularly those who study in areas that are germane to Indigenous engagement. As intimated earlier, developing concerns associated with reconciliation have contributed to the emergence of Indigenous engagement in such a way that indigenization has become an important part of institutional change. Gaudry & Lorenz (2018) produced a valuable framework for understanding indigenization in which their conceptualization of decolonial indigenization has become the vision for approaching Indigenous engagement. In this frame of indigenization, decolonial approaches to scholarship, including research and teaching, are centralized in an institution for which the production of knowledge is reoriented within an institutional ethos for which relations of power are made equitable. These sorts of changes are necessary to adequately address some of the realities of the contemporary university, where curriculum is predominantly Eurocentric, approaches to research are frequently grounded in non-indigenous mores and imperatives to which researchers must abide, and Indigenous students find themselves studying in institutional contexts that are at least culturally foreign and at most unsafe. Post-secondary institutions of research and learning must unsettle and dismantle settler colonialism – for this is the approach that decolonization demands (Tuck & Yang, 2012).

What this means for the current discussion on academic expertise is something like this: any discipline that wishes to incorporate Indigenous perspectives into their academic programming will have to confront what many cited here have adduced—that in addition to the disciplinary content knowledge, scholars ought to be prepared to explore the unique manifestations of Indigenous knowledge, heritage, consciousness, and tradition that may be germane to their field. Although this claim may seem controversial for some who have essentialized the features of their respective discipline, the notion that there is an interpretive frame that provides a bridge between facts and values lends support to the notion that Indigenous worldviews have become acknowledged as a valuable frame between academic matters and the efforts of Indigenization. One aspect of Indigenous worldviews that has been employed in service to Indigenous engagement is that of spirituality. As the reconciliatory journey of post-secondary institutions has developed, spirituality resident in learning, research, and student support has grown.

The themes that emerged in the analysis may be understood to reflect the understandings held by participants in two general ways: those themes that reflect traditional approaches toward morality and those that emerged through professional interface. Regarding the former, there appeared to be little controversy amongst participants regarding what constituted traditional Indigenous knowledge in their lives and the sources for it. Regarding the latter, some participants

reported that some understandings of morality were informed by their interaction with other Indigenous faculty and staff.

Although an emergent theme of its own, the topic of responsibility was a prevailing and recurrent feature of the moral frames of participants across the emergent themes. Participants made frequent mention of commitments to such things as community, traditions, and collective values; it was clear that participants felt that they had obligations to go about their academic work while maintaining Indigenous approaches, as well as to support students through their guidance. What ought to be considered by institutions of higher learning that are committed to Indigenous engagement is to consider how Indigenous conceptions of morality (e.g., responsibility) may be resident in the ethos of the institution that will support the academic and personal journeys of Indigenous students, staff, faculty, and community members.

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Exploring and Progressing the Concept of Joyful Teaching in Higher Education

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Abstract

This paper examines the concept of joyful teaching in higher education and discusses common themes associated with it, as well as presents challenges. It is this concept of joyful teaching that we believe should be discussed and explored in greater detail, especially as it is an emerging concept with decolonizing pedagogies. This study uses 29 qualitative interviews with university faculty to examine the following question: How do university faculty define and practice joyful teaching in higher education? Our paper arises from a study focusing on decolonizing teaching praxis at a Canadian, prairie university, in which the focus of 'joyful teaching' arose as a major point of discussion. Our study suggests that restructuring teaching practices around joy can lead to more supportive, creative, and human-centred classrooms. We believe it is critical for higher education to place an emphasis on joyful teaching to promote not only joy but also self-growth for university teachers and students in post-secondary educational institutions.

Keywords: teaching, joy, playful, belonging, decolonization

Exploring and Progressing the Concept of Joyful Teaching in Higher Education

We are in a significant era of higher education; never have we seen so many different ways of teaching and learning within and beyond the classroom. One area of pedagogical inquiry that has risen in recent years is the discussion of *joyful teaching*. What do we mean by this? To begin, joyful teaching has numerous definitions, as it is not the same for every person and subject; it will not always look the same, considering instructors' unique teaching styles. Notwithstanding, joyful teaching is critical in higher education, as it promotes transformational learning among students (see also Miller & Seller, 1990) by infusing (or embodying – see below) the 'joy' of learning (of change, of shifting worldviews) and its transformational qualities, broadly conceived, into the teaching environment. But what does this look like practically? Typically, higher education promotes standardized teaching, which, in certain circumstances, includes curricula put forth by the university administration (Orelus, 2013). Yet, at the same time, our discussion recognizes the ongoing challenges of standardized teaching, including, in part, that it remains deeply rooted in colonialism (Orelus, 2013). While efforts to meaningfully decolonize higher education are important (Henry et al., 2017; Patel, 2016; Patel & Nath, 2022), we supplement this clarion call by focusing here on how university instructors move away from standardized teaching while promoting joyful teaching in their strategic attempts to decolonize their teaching praxis in the process. We contend that the practice of joyful teaching has the potential to foster transformational learning, which gives students a newfound appreciation of the joy of learning while also giving them a new perspective by pushing them to challenge the strongly held assumptions they have about the world and how it works.

Our paper arises from a study focusing on decolonizing teaching praxis at a Canadian, prairie university; the focus of 'joyful teaching' arose as a major point of discussion. It is this concept we believe should be discussed and explored in greater detail. Equally concerning, we contend, is the lack of consideration joyful teaching has received in discussions of higher education decolonization efforts. To our knowledge, no scholarly attempts have been made to specifically examine joyful teaching as it relates to decolonizing efforts in Canadian higher education. We believe further attention to this under-researched area is both timely and warranted. To address this, we explore the concept of joyful teaching at our Canadian, prairie university. To further examine joyful teaching, we outline the following sections in our paper: a literature review, including the definition of joyful teaching and examples; methods used in our current study; findings, including several themes that emerged from the said study; and a discussion and analysis on joyful teaching as it relates to decolonized teaching and standardized teaching. We conclude with a discussion of limitations and areas for future research.

What is Joy?

While we alluded to the joy of learning above, the term 'joy' itself must be understood to better understand joyful teaching. Mag and colleagues (2021) define the concept of joy as "being with others, sharing (experiences, laughter, tears, and food)—a generally vibrant feeling of happiness" (p. 2). This feeling of joy can present itself in schools through the process of joyful teaching. Poetter (2006) discusses the joy in teaching:

> Joy resides in us and comes out as a result of our interactions with others. It would be inaccurate to say that teaching merely makes us and/or others joyful. It would be more accurate to say that teaching is joy, that our predispositions to engage in it are themselves manifestations of the joy of teaching. (p. 276)

As Poetter (2006) argues, joyful teaching is inherently within us and emerges through our connections with others. Yet, it is not entirely correct to say that teaching simply brings joy to us or those we teach. A more fitting perspective is that teaching itself embodies joy, and our natural inclination toward it reflects the inherent joy found in the act of teaching.

Joyful teaching can be linked to the process of transformational learning. Fetherston and Kelly (2007) consider transformative learning to include changes where we view and comprehend the world, knowledge, and ourselves intra- and inter-reflexively over the course of the learning process. These changes occur through joyful teaching, where, for example, educators can be viewed as learning companions with the opportunity to create joyful learning for their students (Cranton & Wright, 2008, p. 46). Both the educator and the learner then enrich the experiences of the other, and they quickly become important to one another.[1]

In our effort to create a closer connection between joyful teaching and decolonizing practices, we acknowledge Indigenous authors who might not use the word joyful, but argue along similar lines of thought. For example, Robin Wall Kimmerer's (2025) thoughts on 'gratitude' can relate to our discussion of joy. To begin, Wall Kimmerer (2025) contends that gratitude is more than thanking someone or being personally thankful:

> It is the thread that connects us in a deep relationship, simultaneously physical and spiritual, as our bodies are fed and spirits nourished by the sense of belonging, which is the most vital of foods. Gratitude creates a sense of abundance, the knowing that you have what you need. In that climate of sufficiency, our hunger for more abates and we take only what we need, *in respect for the generosity of the giver*. (n.p., emphasis in original)

Here, we see the creation of vitality for oneself, but also mutual respect for those who nourish us. The connection between us and our relations creates a co-situated sense of belonging between the parties, which establishes the basis of relationships. It is in this connection that we create not only gratitude, but the response of reciprocity; in other words, "to give a gift in return" (Wall Kimmerer, 2025, n.p.). Rather than relying upon colonial relations of ownership and value of property, we contend the gratitude-reciprocity nexus suggests an alternative form of joy, where a 'gift economy' is formed, understanding wealth not in terms of capital and colonization but in terms of nourished relations (Wall Kimmerer, 2025). Wall Kimmerer (2025) goes on to state the following:

> To name the world as gift is to feel one's membership in the web of reciprocity. *It makes you happy—and it makes you accountable.* Conceiving of something as a gift changes your relationship to it in a profound way, even though the physical makeup of the "thing" has not changed. A woolly knit hat that you purchase at the store will keep you warm regardless of its origin, but if it was hand knit by your favorite auntie, then you are in relationship to that "thing" in a very different way: you are responsible for it, and your gratitude has motive force in the world. You're likely to take much better care of the gift hat than the commodity hat, because it is knit of relationships. This is the power of gift thinking. (n.p., our emphasis)

[1] We recognize that joyful teaching can occur and lead to transformational learning, the latter of which is a topic that has been discussed at length by a range of scholars (Abramsom, 2016; Archer-Kuhn et al., 2021; Gilly, 2004; Merzirow, 1997; Nohl, 2015, among others). Due to page space and brevity, we limit our conversation to the former; while remaining mindful of the impact the latter can have upon instructors and students in higher education.

This power of 'gift thinking' connects well to our pertinent discussion of joy. To frame the joy of teaching and learning is to remind ourselves of the gifts that are teaching and learning. To move beyond colonial methods of teaching and learning, perhaps we need to take cues from Wall Kimmerer (2025) and reshape the joys of teaching and learning through 'knits of relationships,' where what makes you joyful makes you accountable to spread that joy (material, social, political, etc.) to others so that they may *feel and become nourished* through the gift of joy one gives. We will connect this understanding to our discussion in later sections, but for now, let us turn to examples of joyful teaching.

Examples of Joyful Teaching

Acker (2003) identifies the following attributes of teachers who facilitate joyful teaching: emphasizing both active and participatory learning, displaying enthusiasm for both the course material and teaching said materials, holding students accountable while enforcing high academic values, sincerely caring for students and their learning, and having strong organizational and communication skills when working with students. In our view, these are important for understanding how joyful teaching operates. If an educator holds these attributes, they can better facilitate students' learning in a safe and open environment that both values and nourishes critical dialogue. Adamson and Bailie (2012) note that learning involves emotion as much as cognition (p. 146). Learning is no longer solely focused on the acquisition and retention of knowledge; rather, it is also about how knowledge is experienced and remembered. For learning to invoke emotion, it must occur in a safe, honest, and supportive environment, where the educator is seen as not the possessor of knowledge, but the *facilitator* of knowledge. In this situation, everyone is treated as an equal, and needs are thus effectively balanced.

Both experiential learning and critical pedagogy promote joyful teaching, having the ability to transform institutions and relationships (Breunig, 2005). When listening to instructors discuss how they created safe and dynamic teaching spaces, researchers identified five dimensions of instructor authenticity (Groen & Hyland-Russell, 2010, pp. 231-239):

1. Self-engagement as a call
2. Valuing the other – interdependence and seeing student potential
3. Relationship – creating and sustaining a safe space
4. Context – opening new vistas for marginalized non-traditional adult learners
5. Critical reflection

Groen and Hyland-Russell (2010) also focus on the importance of nurturing relationships between students and instructors to facilitate joyful teaching. We believe relationships in higher education should be nurtured, especially as we aim to decolonize the learning experience for students.

Joyful Teaching and Decolonization

Joyful teaching aligns deeply with the principles of decolonization, as it challenges hierarchical and oppressive models of education. By fostering reciprocal relationships and valuing diverse ways of knowing, joyful teaching creates spaces for mutual respect and shared learning. It invites educators to honour the lived experiences and cultural wisdom of students, disrupting Eurocentric frameworks that often dominate educational systems. In this way, and as briefly mentioned above, the joy of teaching becomes not only a personal fulfillment but also a transformative act that seeks to liberate and humanize both educators and learners (Asadullah, 2021; Smith, 1999).

Importantly, joyful teaching can also resonate profoundly with Indigenous ways of knowing; there are parallels between the two, including a greater emphasis on relationality, interconnectedness, and the holistic nature of learning. Indigenous pedagogies often centre on storytelling, community engagement, and experiential learning, fostering an environment where joy arises naturally through shared experiences and collective growth (Cajete, 1994). One can also link joyful teaching to the challenges of colonial, hierarchical education systems insofar as joyful teaching attempts to subvert standardized, top-down models of learning and teaching and, instead, embrace equality, agency, and student empowerment (see, for example, Dei & Asgharzadeh, 2001; Giroux, 2011; Roofe, 2024), which are key to decolonization efforts. Moreover, we recognize the extent to which joy can exist as a form of liberation since acknowledging it is not just an emotionally fulfilling experience, but an act of liberation and resistance (Roofe, 2024). Following on, and taking into consideration Wall Kimmerer (2025), we contend joyful teaching can help 'liberate' both students and educators themselves from oppressive colonial structures, making education an act of mutual, liberatory, and *nourished relations* of and for growth to take place. In sum, and by embracing these approaches, educators can create learning spaces that celebrate the richness of Indigenous knowledge systems, affirm cultural identities, and nurture a sense of belonging. In doing so, joyful teaching becomes a bridge that connects diverse perspectives, fostering harmony and respect in educational practices (Michie et al., 2023).

Current Study

This paper stems from a larger study focusing on decolonizing teaching praxis at University of Regina, Canada.[2] The concept of decolonization has been used in numerous disciplines and settings such as in psychology (McNamara & Naepi, 2018), governance and public policy (Monchalin, 2016; Stewart, 2018), restorative justice (Asadullah, 2021, 2022, 2024) and education (Grafton & Melançon, 2020; Paris & Winn, 2014; Tuck & Yang, 2012). The concept has generated a plethora of definitions. For example, per Monchalin (2016), decolonization is a goal and process to bring about a fundamental shift away from colonial structures, ideologies, and discourses. Both Indigenization and decolonization remain an overarching priority of the University of Regina. The University's policy states that "working with Elders, Traditional Knowledge Keepers […] is essential to the preservation, restoration and revitalization of Indigenous traditional ways of knowing; staff, faculty and others are encouraged to invite, engage with and work alongside Elders, Traditional Knowledge Keepers, and/or Old Ones" (GOV-040-025).

Joyful teaching is one of the major themes that emerged from our study on decolonizing teaching praxis. Through semi-structured qualitative interviews with 29 faculty members, our research project explores teaching praxis in relation to decolonization from the perspectives of university faculty members themselves.[3] The larger study explored the concept of decolonized

[2] We respectfully acknowledge that we work and live on traditional territories of Indigenous peoples on Turtle Island. It is a place where the spirit of treaties signed between Indigenous peoples and settler colonial governments is not honoured; thus, we are committed to conversations and relationships in solidarity with Indigenous peoples for change, justice, and reconciliation. We offer our gratitude to Indigenous peoples for their care for, and teachings about, our earth and our relations. May we honour those teachings.

[3] The ability to explore and digest decolonization efforts in higher education is but one aspect of many similar discussions, all of which merits further study. Our ongoing work endeavours to explore how current decolonizing teaching praxis is implemented at and across Canadian university settings; this includes the benefits, challenges, and improvements for implementing decolonizing teaching praxis. Our research continues to supplement clarion calls by those who question whether decolonization will ever be attainable in academia (Battiste et al., 2002; Mbembe, 2016).

teaching in post-secondary education. Prior work suggests the role of Elders, ceremonies and circles are important elements in helping instructors decolonize their teaching (Gacek & Asadullah, 2024). The following section discusses the methods in detail.

Methods

The authors employed qualitative research methods in this study. Qualitative research, put simply, has no standard definition; it can be defined in various ways by different persons or institutions. Yet, we believe Aspers and Corte's (2019) statement closely aligns with our views. Per Aspers and Corte (2019), qualitative research is:

> An iterative process in which improved understanding to the scientific community is achieved by making new significant distinctions resulting from getting closer to the phenomenon studied. Qualitative research, as defined here, is consequently a combination of two criteria: (i) how to do things – namely, generating and analyzing empirical material, in an iterative process in which one gets closer by making distinctions, and (ii) the outcome –improved understanding novel to the scholarly community. (p. 155)

The key instrument used for this study was in-depth qualitative interviews. We conducted 29 interviews, and each interview lasted an average of 90 minutes. The full research project has been conducted under the guidance and approval of University of Regina's Research Ethics Board.

Research Participants

A total of 29 participants from across different disciplines and demographics participated in this study. At University of Regina, faculty members comprise tenured and tenure-track, lecturers, and sessional instructors. This study included research participants from various disciplines, including social work, engineering, education, mathematics, justice studies, psychology, and kinesiology. We also made sure to have representation from all affiliated colleges at University of Regina. Interviews were structured as face-to-face via Zoom due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. Each participant provided their own response to what makes teaching joyful based on their own individual experiences and perspectives.

Data Analysis

Interviews were transcribed and coded based on several themes that emerged from the study. All participant information was anonymized and identified by a random number (e.g., Participant #1 is identified as P1, Participant #10 is P10, etc.). We had more than 20 themes in the initial stages of coding, which were then sorted into groupings depending on similarities and distinctions of participants' experiences. Finally, ten key themes emerged as the main findings of this study, all of which are discussed below.

Sampling

Both snowball and purposive sampling methods were used to recruit research participants (see Noy, 2008; Yin, 2011; for limitations, see also Geddes et al., 2018). Our sampling method allowed us to have diverse participants from different backgrounds and disciplines.

Findings and Discussion

While this question is beyond the scope of our paper, we continue to pose this question in our research, to ourselves, and our overlapping academic, and community circles. We encourage others to do the same.

This study uncovers several major themes in the concept of joyful teaching. When asked *'what makes teaching joyful,'* research participants shared several salient qualities of joyful teaching. Our 10 key themes and findings are discussed below.

A Supportive Classroom Environment

A number of participants discussed the importance of a supportive classroom environment for joyful teaching. P22 elaborated that a "sense of belonging in the classroom" is instrumental for a supportive classroom environment, which can make teaching joyful. P22 added *that "…among the students, that they can see that I am I belong, I know what I can contribute, and I am here and that's as a teacher, you should be able to, I try my best to be let my students know that I'm there for them. They are capable of what their strengths are, can for both perspectives, that's my, best effort that I tried to put forth*".

It was made apparent that there must be a sense of belonging fostered in the classroom; P6 noted that *"knowledge and subjects become meaningless if students do not feel that they belong."* Furthermore, P22 suggested that teachers should create a safe and welcoming space for students to come together and discuss ideas. Additionally, participants such as P3, P4, P5, and P9 reflected on the need for 'flexibility' in a supportive classroom environment. The need for spaciousness and flexibility became more apparent during the COVID-19 pandemic as students battled illness, technical difficulties, and loneliness (P9). The need for a motivational and supportive environment goes back to the wise qualities of teachers. Within this environment, particular attributes such as empathy (P8), and respect (P24) should be exhibited. In summary, a sense of belonging, flexibility, empathy, and respect contribute to both joyful teaching and learning environments.

Creativity in the Classroom

There is a demonstrated need for creativity in the classroom. Often, classrooms are seen as joyless and boring environments that are plagued by routinized learning. The curriculum and teaching style may appear as a *"one-size-fits-all"* approach (P4). This has proven to be inefficient when it comes to joyful teaching, since every student learns differently, and every subject cannot be taught in the same format (P11). Participants explained the need for teaching that includes having fun with the content and bringing enjoyment to the classroom. One participant explained, "[*if] you're enjoying the day and enjoy the students and tell the students 'I'm so happy to be spending some time with you today' [then] they will be happier*" (P24). With this mindset, it becomes more comfortable to push students from their "*zone of proximal comfort to their zone of proximal development*" (P26). This theme of teaching creatively and paying attention to students' needs is also shared by other researchers. For example, Newman (1991) argues learning does not have to be a dreadful experience. Although teachers do not always have control over the curriculum, they can change their lesson planning and teaching style. For instance, small group discussions can make the course content more interesting and relevant (Newman, 1991, p. 49); however, these discussions can be difficult to pursue in classrooms with heavy enrollment. Newman (1991) also suggests that teachers approach examinations differently and create study guides that increase cognitive work among students. Often, students place more extrinsic value on their learning rather than intrinsic value.

Playfulness in the Classroom

In our study, several participants explained how their students focus on what they can do as well as what they feel. For instance, P22 shared how students in a genetics class had to show

homologous recombination, which is hard to learn in a textbook and even on YouTube. To facilitate learning, this teacher had students create homologous recombination using Play-Doh, which took the students beyond the course content. Although most students would enjoy using Play-Doh in a university classroom, one student argued that they were not being taught appropriately since the teacher was not using lectures, textbooks, and PowerPoints; however, after getting a nearly-perfect score on the homologous recombination using Play-Doh, the student recognized that they were, in fact, being taught—they were just not being taught in a traditional and routinized manner (P22). This respondent explained how teaching students in this way makes learning fun and feels like kindergarten again (P22). P26 also shared the concept of playfulness in their math course. They allowed students to share food and board games to make their classroom joyful and fun. This theme is also shared by researchers. For example, Koeners and Francis (2020) argue that playful learning certainly has its place in higher education:

> Playful learning, therefore, challenges the continued relevance of focusing on a dehumanising and oppressive neoliberal model of performativity-based learning and sheds light on the potential of a joyous, authentic transition to the co-creation of knowledge within higher education. (p. 143)

In order to create a playful, creative environment that caters to students' needs, there must be space for open-minded discussions that have the potential to cause a cognitive shift in worldviews. P22 explained that there needs to be more deliberate inquiries about how playful activities can be culturally responsive education. Morris (2019) argues that faculty should be leaders in the evaluation of their own course effectiveness, and this should not be up to the administration to determine. In sum, teachers at the university level can create joyful classrooms that include fun activities. Joyful teaching can exist and flourish by teaching creatively and paying attention to students' needs.

Relationship Building

Building empathetic, nurturing relationships with students is one of the hallmarks of joyful teaching. Most of the research participants mentioned the importance of building relationships with their students. It is evident from this study that joyful teaching includes collegial exchanges and mutual respect. According to P24, *"developing relationships with students is [the] key"* to joyful teaching. Another participant in this study stated that "*you can have as much knowledge as you want, but if you don't take care of people, it's all and build empathetic relationships*" (P27). This refers to the idea that teachers and students should converse with each other. Perhaps, it is small talk before class begins or a simple question a student asks the professor at the end of class. By engaging in friendly conversation, a "buzz" is created. This buzz is described by a participant to be "*free engagement*" (P27), meaning the student and teacher may discuss topics not directly related to the course content, or even school. Bridging the gap between teachers and students can increase student resilience and build rapport. Additionally, P16 suggested, *"…it's important to develop a rapport with them [students] where they feel respected as adults, rather than, as you know, like minors or younger students."*

According to Newman (1991), teachers and students should be learning from each other. In higher education, it is typical that there is a gap existing between teachers and students. It is important that both teachers and students view each other as real people; although they are situated in the same course, they have lives extending far beyond the physical walls of the classroom. Each

person has a personal life outside of school that involves nurtured hobbies, work, family, and friendships; often included in this are life challenges (Newman, 1991).

Being Available

Several participants suggest being available and present for students is critical to a joyful learning environment. Students want to feel they can reach out to their teacher. If students feel that they cannot contact their teacher, they may feel distanced from the class; this could make learning unenjoyable and dull. Some participants referred to the importance of students being given the opportunity to think critically and question their assumptions about how the world works. During these times, students should be able to contact their teacher to discuss this and promote personal growth (P13, P14, P29). Additionally, P14 suggested to be *"extra available"* for students. P14 explains in detail that "*I feel like the extra availability, if you really want to be an amazing teacher, is helpful to students, I've never had anybody complain that I'm too available to talk.*" In sum, students experience a joyful learning environment if they have access to their teachers. Students feel at ease when they see that their teachers are available to answer their questions on a regular basis.

Practice Self-Care

Being a teacher or a student in higher education can feel, at times, stressful and difficult. It is critical that teachers practice self-care and manage their needs in an effort to teach joyfully. Participants pointed to the importance of knowing their own emotions and attitudes and balancing them suitably. It was recognized that if a teacher is having a bad day and arrives to class in bad spirits, this can negatively impact students' ability to learn; the environment will feel tense and far from joyful. To avoid this, teachers must take care of themselves. A participant explained the practice of mindfulness, which allows them to breathe. This is a method that teachers could also pass on to their students in an effort to help them manage stress (P3). P20 suggested that recognizing, monitoring, and maintaining their own needs allows them to be creative (P20). Accordingly, if teachers do not practice self-care or manage their needs, their ability to teach creatively can be hindered. P24 explicitly describes the importance of self-care in joyful teaching: *"So important for teaching practice as well, you know, in us is to practice a lot of self-care… In order to truly be joyful ourselves or to be as balanced as we can. So, to be happy in our lives as teachers, we need to practice self-care…it feeds into the classroom practice in a balanced way."* Therefore, teachers who are grounded in self-care can positively contribute to a joyful classroom environment.

Qualities of Wise Teachers

Along with 'what makes teaching joyful,' the authors also asked about the wise and harmful qualities of teachers. As we discuss below, wise qualities promote joyful teaching, whereas harmful qualities are detrimental to a joyful classroom environment.

To begin, participants in this study identified numerous qualities that wise teachers embody. One participant discussed, in great detail, the idea that teachers should "*curate knowledge, create knowledge, and disseminate knowledge*" (p. 20). According to this participant, teachers should: (i) curate knowledge by storing knowledge in such a way that it can be sorted and accessed; (ii) create knowledge by researching in order to derive new understandings and new ways of knowing; and (iii) disseminate knowledge by applying it to people who want to learn.

Participants often remarked that teachers should be patient, understanding, and respectful. For example, participant P19 stated that teachers must not forget that they were once students themselves, so it is important to be empathetic and identify with students. To add to these wise qualities, P18 noted that teachers should be forgiving; in their view, teachers should try to relate to students and understand where they are coming from in terms of their knowledge, beliefs, and opinions. Participants also stated teachers should be receptive and good listeners. For example, P20 noted the importance of two-way communication and stated that teachers "*have two ears and one mouth, so they should be listening at least twice as much as they are speaking*." Another participant discussed being readily available and communicative with students by providing their phone numbers and allowing students to contact them (regarding course content) during evenings and weekends (P14). Several participants explained that teachers should be facilitators of knowledge and learning (P4, P14, P11, P16, P24). In other words, teachers should focus on being a guide *"to take students on a journey of development"* (P17). Furthermore, P24 remarked that teachers "*cannot always make students learn, but they can give students tools to enable their skills to develop*." Additionally, it was stated by other participants that teachers should be open-minded (P4, P11, P12, P18, P27). Open-mindedness refers to a teacher's ability to be willing to consider new ideas without any individual biases or prejudice. P25 indicated that every teacher is a human who has their own biases; therefore, the types of information they choose to teach or emphasize will vary. There was a significant number of participants mentioning the need for teachers to embody compassion, empathy, and, overall, a desire to teach. One participant identified the importance of having fun with the course content, and that teachers should tell students how happy they are to be in the classroom with them (P24).

Although university instructors are often regarded as respective field experts, there is a good opportunity presented here to not only teach students, but also to *learn from them* (Newman, 1991, p. 51). Recall Acker's (2003) list of attributes mentioned above; the qualities that the participants listed are parallel to the attributes Acker (2003) puts forth. According to Sherman (2021), teachers "aim to be the kind of teacher they wish they had when they were in school" (p. 29). We contend if teachers foster the qualities of wise teachers, this can create a more joyful teaching and learning environment.

Harmful Qualities of Teachers

Participants identified several harmful qualities that are detrimental to a joyful teaching environment. Four participants acknowledged the reality that sometimes teachers have not received enough training in pedagogy or classroom management (P5, P6, P13, P27). One participant explained that the university can have well-educated teachers who do not know how to teach concepts at a basic level (P13). This is a harmful quality that negatively impacts student learning in the classroom. To echo this remark, P5 believes teachers are not always taught how to manage a classroom or create a safe space for students. Another participant alluded to large classroom sizes negatively impacting students since teachers cannot maintain the capacity to assess students well (P14).

There was a significant number of participants who described rigidity as a harmful quality for teaching and learning. For example, participant P20 explained that some teachers can have a fixed mindset rather than a growth mindset. Participants also noted closed-mindedness and an unwillingness to learn as harmful qualities. Specifically, P7, P10, P12, P15, and P20 identified an unwillingness to learn as a harmful quality. This refers to teachers who are not willing to adapt to new conditions, to move forward together, to learn new skills, or to reflect on teaching practices.

Participants also regarded the lack of course knowledge as a harmful quality. P24 described teachers not wanting to teach or be in the classroom as a harmful quality. There are numerous reasons why a teacher may not want to teach or be in the classroom; however, P24 believes teachers may be driven by external factors, such as money.

It is evident from the interviews how harmful qualities of teachers include an unwillingness to learn and adapt. Newman (1991) underscores how "successful teachers are those who probe into the untested and unknown by challenging not only the students but themselves" (p. 51). This is especially true when considering the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on teachers. In a study by Mag et al. (2021), a teacher from Romania discusses the impact of the pandemic with regard to their teaching:

> As for me, the pandemic did not affect my teaching behaviour. I continued to teach with enthusiasm and the same empathetic attitude towards students. I kept the joy of reunions, even though we had to teach online. Teaching involves continuous learning. As compensation, during this period, we had almost constant access to the specialized literature because our university facilitated our access to international databases. Those who have the joy of teaching and the constant enthusiasm for learning are never overwhelmed by temporary crises. (p. 5)

Therefore, the inability of a teacher to be flexible and adaptable is harmful since it has the potential to negatively impact students' learning.

Joyful Teaching is Decolonizing

In this study, most participants stated that honest, upfront conversations about decolonization must occur in order to create decolonized teaching. One participant stated the institution needs to support teachers in "*developing a kind of decolonization approach to their pedagogy*" (P9); another participant argued that teachers should take the time to learn more about the relationship with Indigenous "*culture locally, issues, ways of being, colonization, effects of colonization, the systems and impacts of colonization within their individual field*" (P11). The consensus was to encourage all faculty members to take an active role in decolonizing course material and to make decolonization part of the strategic plan. Furthermore, it was stated that it must start with recognition and acknowledgement, followed by collaborating with Indigenous Elders and/or knowledge-keepers to discuss teaching methods and objectives.

Participants raised a multitude of concerns and challenges with the notion of decolonizing teaching in higher education. Some participants noted that the university may not be able to restructure its deeply rooted colonial mindset. Furthermore, to authentically implement decolonized teaching, the university must go beyond tokenism. Cooper et al. (2021) define tokenism as symbolic gestures which "might give the appearance of reconciliation in the classroom, but they are inauthentic and do little to create transformative change. Instead, they reinforce or maintain the status quo" (p. 55). Several participants suggested to us that gestures such as land acknowledgements feel more procedural than genuinely meaningful (or rather, more symbolic than substantive). For instance, one participant candidly explained that the Faculty of Arts and Campion College ask for reports on what is being done for decolonization so that they can turn it into the government, expressing that this is uncomfortable as it feels like a "box-ticking exercise" (P1). Moreover, several participants stated that, even when they did try to decolonize their teaching through the use of Elder inclusion, they found the payment process to be difficult and funding from the university to be very minimal. Some instructors at the university feel as

though there are not enough Indigenous Elders available and feel unsure of how to build relationships with Elders who are around. One participant stated:

> *I've noticed that there are faculty members across the university and all different disciplines, who are not Indigenous themselves but, by nature of the research that they do, are very, very connected to Indigenous communities and Elders and Indigenous, sort of the support structure that exists on campus. And I suspect that there are a lot of other people who don't know how to take a step into that, who might be uncertain or hesitant about the right cultural practices, or who to approach or how to approach* (P15).

According to some participants, certain departments in the university do not include any Indigenous faculty members and have not even started thinking about decolonization (P2, P3, P5, P6, P11). Furthermore, two participants explicitly raised the belief that Saskatchewan is a particularly racist province that is not progressing like other provinces and territories in Canada (P2, P6).

We believe joyful teaching can help avoid tokenism through efforts to emphasize authenticity in teaching and learning experiences. Especially when one considers the deeper, ongoing engagement necessary for true decolonization, nourishing relationships for students and educators alike also means nourishing those invited to the classroom setting as well. If we align ourselves with the gratitude-reciprocity nexus as suggested by Wall Kimmerer (2025), then authenticity (in teaching and learning, but also decolonization efforts) becomes the action needed from the joy created and expressed in the classroom itself. Such action builds momentum to not only discard and outright avoid tokenism in the classroom but also sets us up for much-needed systemic and broader institutional change, which we believe is essential to consider. Indeed, the joy in teaching and learning can drive structural changes, motivating us to do more with the gratitude we have received (Wall Kimmerer, 2025) and to create more inclusive and decolonized academic environments in the process.

In summary, our research participants expressed that University of Regina has the potential to learn from other institutions around Canada with regard to decolonizing teaching. If teaching is not decolonized, then joyful teaching cannot occur. It is clear from participant responses that there is a feeling of defeat since the university is a powerful institution that is rooted in colonialism. Rather than being a council of despair, however, we believe joyful teaching helps us to begin to tackle decolonization challenges. By actively confronting and reshaping colonial structures in the classroom, and with gratitude and reciprocity in mind (Wall Kimmerer, 2025), we can begin the liberating process of relinquishing teaching and learning rooted in colonialism; it can help educators derive joy through such liberatory (if not resistant) acts. To create decolonized teaching, the institution itself must be decolonized. Within this debate, it is critical to recognize that decolonized teaching typically starts with the impact of colonization, but joyful teaching does not often start with the impact of colonization.

Standardization is Harmful to Joyful Teaching

Standardized teaching may contribute to both joyless classrooms and learning, and standardized teaching can be a barrier to joyful teaching. As stated by three participants (P22, P23, P27), in different ways, joyful teaching promotes both transformation and critical thinking among students. Therefore, it is imperative for the university administration to explore ways to introduce joyful teaching. According to Sherman (2021):

> The demands of standardization and accountability potentially distract teachers from cultivating a culture of joy… Perennial expected instructional patterns can inhibit creativity and diminish inspiration, qualities that potentially generate joy in teaching and learning. What's more, strict accountability measures make it even more difficult to disrupt these patterns because anxious teachers may be less willing to take instructional risks. In addition, maintaining routines and ensuring predictability provide a security blanket for teachers who may not have skills to manage the complexity of teaching or lack the capacity to make spontaneous decisions that are responsive in particular contexts to particular students. Put differently, although less confident teacher candidates may feel joyful because they have control over the events in their classrooms, the formulaic practices they use are unlikely to inspire students or generate a joyful learning environment for their students or, in the long term, for themselves. (p. 23)

Similarly, Noddings (2014) argues that routinized patterns in standardized teaching do not create joyful teaching. Some participants felt the university focuses heavily on how to assess students using standardized assignments and exams to yield conclusive grades and class averages. An alternative to this could be to assess students differently. For instance, participants felt students are overly preoccupied with their marks and not so much with their learning; they measure their success and worth solely on their grades, which do not always reflect what they know. Moreover, what students learn may seem irrelevant to them, so even if they receive a high grade in a particular course, they will often forget the content as soon as they are removed from the classroom setting. Newman (1991) makes four suggestions to overcome academic cynicism; one of these suggestions is to make learning relevant. Teachers, per Newman (1991), should "provide students with the tools to analyze their lives and the social world they inhabit" (p. 52).

The other three suggestions Newman (1991) proposes include changing faculty attitudes towards students, making learning fun, and removing the competition in learning. To move from standardized teaching to joyful teaching, the notion of learning needs to be revisited and re-evaluated. Participants regarded joyful teaching as giving students the chance to define their own learning. This can be encouraged by the implementation of smaller class sizes and having students sit in chairs in a semi-circle. Koeners and Francis (2020) argue that by "[d]eveloping a 'Playful University,' a place of learning that embraces some form of play, [it] will allow us to promote progressive failing, building resilience and developing individual and collective creativity" (p. 154). This suggestion stems from the recognition that play is a successful teaching practice that is typically only applied in childhood education, but is still highly relevant for higher education (Koeners & Francis, 2020). As the pair go on to state:

> The physiology of play delivers evidence that play can promote intellectual dexterity, individual resilience and adaptability. These important attributes, amongst many others, could help us to adapt in a challenging world and curb the apparent epidemic of stress, anxiety and related mood disorders. (Koeners & Francis, 2020, p. 149)

Implications for Teaching Practices

This study presents several implications for teaching practices. First, this study finds that most participants are willing to take steps to create joyful classroom environments. However, participants experience a lack of training in teaching and other pedagogy skills and resources. Indeed, in our study, participants shared that there are limited resources and training for them. We suggest that universities need to offer regularized workshops and training on teaching pedagogies.

Second, we believe the concept of *decolonized teaching* can complement the process of joyful teaching. Elsewhere, the authors found that decolonized teaching can facilitate the idea of joy alongside other feelings, emotions, mindsets and worldviews in the classroom (Gacek & Asadullah, 2024). Third, participants have numerous opinions on joyful teaching. It is clear there is no one-size-fits-all technique for joyful teaching in practice – and perhaps that is precisely the point.

How instructors choose to implement joyful teaching is entirely up to them, but there are some thought-provoking examples of joyful teaching in higher education which can influence the direction they decide to take. Doing so carves open potential opportunities for instructors to learn and grow as they facilitate student learning and growth. Additionally, participants have varying explanations of what joyful teaching is. Some may choose to focus on the wise qualities of university teachers, while others seem to emphasize avoiding the harmful qualities of professors. They may discuss what the overall classroom environment looks and feels like in terms of creativity, motivation, and support. Many participants suggest joyful teaching, as beneficial as it can be, is not always nurtured and supported due to the current standardization of education. Joy remains an important component in teaching and learning, and therefore must be cultivated and nurtured more so than standardized methods of teaching and learning.

Conclusion

Times are changing in higher educational teaching and learning; there is no doubt about it. As Gacek and McClanahan (2021, p. 510) contend, "Socratic teaching styles and the traditional lecture have been the subject of growing critique" (see also Jochelson & Ireland, 2019). Teaching and learning practices are constantly shifting as new generations of students enter higher education; however, unless students are in the presence of an extremely charismatic lecturer who can persuasively and poignantly perform, "students would rather not sit for hours facing forward while the professor waxes lyrical" (Gacek & McClanahan, 2021, p. 510). Equally important to this change in pedagogy and student composition is recognizing and engaging in decolonization efforts within higher education. We believe joyful teaching can work to progress teaching, learning, and meaningful decolonization on these fronts.

Our paper presents an opportunity for instructors and university administration alike to consider joyful teaching in their respective decolonization efforts. Joyful teaching is about creating a learning space embodying joy, which consistently consists of happiness, laughter, and support. At the same time, joyful teaching is not just an outcome of decolonization; it is an active practice that decolonizes pedagogy itself. By situating joyful teaching as an act of liberation and resistance to colonial structures, it carves open necessary space for diverse voices and knowledge systems to flourish in the classroom. Moreover, joyful teaching becomes a means of reclaiming educational spaces from dominating, historical, and colonial ideologies.

To foster this type of learning environment, higher education should consider transitioning from standardized teaching to joyful teaching. This transition rightly involves the decolonization of teaching; while efforts can be made to begin the decolonization process at an individual level, the change needs to be established by the institution itself. Some institutions in the higher educational landscape may believe that standardized teaching is sufficient; we would encourage those institutions—and the administrators and policymakers therein—to reconsider. Certainly, a transition towards joyful learning requires time, money, resources, and the will to do so, but our findings suggest it is necessary to better equip students with the tools and skills necessary to

meaningfully receive strong and comprehensive learning experiences. Several themes of joyful teaching emerged from our study.

We contend these themes have relevance to joyful teaching and should be considered and expanded upon in further research. Of course, a limitation of this study is the small group of participants chosen to discuss joyful teaching; this concept is arguably abstract in some components and is neither easily quantifiable nor generalizable to the larger Canadian population. Moreover, while this study yielded ten themes, it is possible that another group of participants would not have the same or similar thoughts. Nevertheless, future studies that take into consideration these themes in relation to the experiences of students, faculty, and administrators are beneficial, and we encourage greater scholarly efforts in this area of inquiry. This includes explorations of joyful teaching across diverse contexts, such as different disciplines, institutions, or cultural settings.

Higher education can make a difference in students' learning experiences. Our work suggests the joy of learning can be embodied and nurtured in higher educational learning environments. Joy helps bridge connections between instructors and students and can benefit both as each grows in teaching and learning from one another. Now is the time to reimagine what embodying and nurturing joy can look like in higher education.

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A Review of Glen Y. Bezalel's *Teaching Classroom Controversies: Navigating Complex Teaching Issues in the Age of Fake News and Alternative Facts*

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Teaching Classroom Controversies: Navigating Complex Teaching Issues in the Age of Fake News and Alternative Facts (2024), written by Glenn Y. Bezalel, aims to engage with teachers who find themselves dreading, avoiding, or boldly confronting controversial issues in their classrooms. Tapping into familiar buzzwords such as "post-truth," "woke," and "echo chamber," this book provides a soft landing for teachers as they reflect on the ways they navigate teaching controversial topics, while also attending to broader aims of education, particularly critical thinking skills and character development. Teachers who are curious about teaching controversial topics in their classrooms may be interested in this book.

Author Glenn Y. Bezalel is uniquely positioned, as Deputy Head and a Religion and Philosophy high school teacher in London, UK and a Ph.D. student at Cambridge University, to offer theoretical perspectives underlying teaching controversial issues and to demonstrate how those theories translate into teaching practice. The book's plethora of theoretical concepts, grounded in substantial research, combined with Bezalel's fifteen years of teaching experience, earns him the right to claim this book as a "complete handbook for teaching and learning about controversy" (p. 2). Bezalel unabashedly tackles contemporary controversial topics with rigour and vigour, not shying away from proposing challenging conversations, nor undermining complex issues with over-simplified solutions. While the intended audience is K-12 teachers, I offer that university instructors, particularly those who teach in undergraduate teacher education, might also appreciate Bezalel's approach to learning how to teach controversial topics to potentially improve their own practice, as well as the practice of the teacher candidates they teach.

The book is divided into two distinct sections: Part I elucidates theoretical approaches relevant to pedagogies of controversy, and Part II applies these theories through an analysis of ten controversial questions relevant to K-12 classrooms. Together, Part I and Part II provide an integrated analysis of pathways and pitfalls involved in navigating controversial issues of importance in contemporary classrooms. Bezalel's animated anecdotes, provocative dilemmas, and references to popular culture that he threads throughout the book offer persuasive clarity to what might otherwise be a thoughtful but uninspired approach to understanding philosophical theories associated with teaching controversial topics.

In Part I, the author explores questions related to why teachers are called to teach about controversy, what theoretical concepts underpin teaching controversy, and how teachers might structure learning environments to recognize biases and develop critical thinking skills. Prior to the first chapter, a comprehensive *Introduction* provides a thoughtful overview of each chapter along with a description of the structure of the book, including a section entitled *How to Use This Book*. Here, Bezalel highlights how Part I and Part II stand independently of each other, enabling readers to enter the book through Part II and return later to Part I if they are interested or have more time. This suggestion is a respectful and intentional nod to busy teachers who may be unable to read Part I before they are faced with addressing one of the classroom controversies analyzed in Part II. The *Introduction* concludes with a *Postscript* illuminating Bezalel's concerns related to censorship. Specifically, Bezalel challenges how, during the 2022 Oscars, the media censored Will Smith's language regarding the f-word, but not the violence that occurred against Chris Rock. According to Bezalel, "the book is a protest against" (p. 5) the message that "saying 'fucking' is

somehow worse, more threatening than being physically violent" (p. 5). If the reader has not yet cued in to Bezalel's direct and candid approach, the *Postscript* provides sufficient foreshadowing of how the content forthcoming may be overly provocative for some readers. To Bezalel's credit, he often takes the approach of warning readers of what is to come, cautioning "I apologise in advance if you're a little squeamish" (p. 33) as he presents potentially uncomfortable moral dilemmas. His conversational style of writing, woven consistently throughout the book, creates a respectful dialogue with the reader. Invited into this comfortable reading environment, I grew increasingly curious to learn more about how to teach controversies better, becoming increasingly convinced it is my obligation to do so.

I concur with Bezalel's decision to make this book accessible to busy teachers by making it possible to enter the book mid-way at Part II; arguably, it is better to read part of the book than none of it at all. However, I cannot recommend overlooking Part I. For me, understanding the theory behind pedagogical decisions offered in Part I is central, not only as I develop a rationale for *why* teaching controversial topics is important, but also as I imagine *how* I might implement it into my teaching practice. With regard to Part I, Chapter 1 provides an important foundation for multiple ideas explored in subsequent chapters. Bezalel begins the book by writing a convincing argument for why teaching controversy in contemporary classrooms is necessary. Using classroom anecdotes and references to popular culture, Bezalel effectively demonstrates how "people are simply unwilling to hear the other side of the argument" (p. 1), often lacking diversity in their social groups and valuing opinion over fact. This chapter also provides the foundation for the development of "polarity management" (p. 18), one of the key concepts integrated throughout the book. Polarity management attends to what Bezalel states are the twin aims of education: seeking truth and developing moral character. By providing the reader with these clear aims, there is space for teachers to settle in and contemplate what it means to move "away from either/or thinking to both/and" (p. 18), making it possible to imagine more than one correct answer to a problem. While I found the comprehensive description of polarity management to be informative, I particularly appreciated how this information is augmented with a diagram, which is one of several figures, charts, and text boxes often accompanying Bezalel's descriptions or summaries, highlighting key information.

A strength of this book lies in the multiple ways Bezalel loops back to the concept of polarity management, repeatedly emphasizing how attending to controversial issues in classrooms is not only about the pursuit of epistemic truth but also about attending to moral values. Dwelling in the explanation of polarity management in Chapter 1 is worthwhile as this principle relates to the "pluralist criterion" (p. x), a key concept in Chapter 2. The pluralist criterion refers to "when contrary views can be held without those views being contrary to reason, cultural understanding and identity formation" (p. 37). Polarity management also serves as a foundational idea to the "principle of charity" (p. 41), a concept highlighted in Chapter 3. Using a clever moral dilemma, Bezalel explains the principle of charity as "the ability to articulate the other side" (p. 42) and how two opposing viewpoints can be true when both intellectual and moral virtues are activated. Although not directly claimed by the author, the idea of polarity management also relates to ideas discussed in Chapter 4. Here, Bezalel provides an analysis of various forms of bias, demonstrating how people hold positions, partly grounded in reason and evidence and partly based on beliefs and feelings. I appreciate the way Bezalel reinforces the concept of polarity management throughout Part I, supporting readers as they imagine how they can build opportunities for students to consider alternative points of view and engage with intellectual and moral arguments. I also found it to be

an effective strategy to disrupt a common assumption, mine included, that teaching about controversies is merely about teaching students how to win a debate.

Bezalel describes Part II as a "quick cheat sheet on the major issues students are grappling with" (p. 71), acknowledging "time-starved teachers" (p. 71), who need support in this area but do not have time to delve into the theory positioned in the first half. This section begins with a comprehensive description of how Part II is structured, highlighting the consistent template Bezalel uses to discuss the ten controversial questions that follow. This Part II description presents a thorough introduction for readers who enter the book intentionally mid-way; at the same time, it is surprisingly not particularly repetitive for those who have been reading along to this point. In the remainder of Part II, Bezalel poses ten controversial questions and includes a comprehensive analysis of the pedagogy associated with navigating the controversy in the classroom. He offers a range of controversial questions typically posed by elementary students while arguably leaning into some smoking-hot topics for senior students such as "Are transwomen, women?" and "Who's to blame for the Israeli-Palestinian conflict?" and "Being 'woke' just means being kind to others, especially vulnerable people. How can anyone disagree with that?". This entire second part of the book follows a template-style approach, guided by consistent headings for each of the ten controversies. These headings or titles represent a range of topics, including: *Age group; How explosive is this topic? How should I teach this topic? Key terms and necessary knowledge; Skills: Students' oracy and teachers' Socratic questioning; Some theory; Beware! Sources and resources; Links to other controversies.* I appreciated the uniform structure of this section as it illustrated an efficient way to add both depth and breadth to the analysis of the ten controversies. The structure may also serve as a useful guide for teachers as they explore new or different controversial topics arising in their own contexts.

Recognizing that both teachers and students may feel anxious or be sensitive to some topic areas, Bezalel approaches teaching controversy with professionalism and care. Related to this, I was particularly drawn to three recurring headings in Part II of the book: *Beware!, Some theory,* and *Socratic questioning*. For example, under the *Beware!* Heading in the *Being 'Woke' just means being kind to others, especially vulnerable people* section, Bezalel points out how both sides of this debate ought to look out for the ad hominem. In Part I, ad hominem is defined as "gratuitously offensive sloganeering, and extremist language that promotes violence or goes against school policies and even our legal duties as teachers" (p. 83). In this way, Bezalel shows how teaching controversial issues, and education more broadly, is not just about seeking truth but also about attending to how people feel. In addition, I appreciated the *Some theory* sections where theoretical concepts discussed in Part I are connected with practical elements described in Part II. For example, in the "Surely no one can disagree with the idea that 'love is love'?" section, Bezalel expertly shepherds the reader through an analysis of the epistemic and the pluralistic criteria, citing philosophers such as Michael Hand and Jonathon Haidt alongside quotes from U.S. Supreme Court Justice Anthony Kennedy.

While no less theoretical or thought-provoking, a few of the *Some theory* descriptions, such as *Do I have a 'normal' family?,* are not as explicitly connected to the theory discussed in Part I as some of the others. Having read Part I with great interest, I would have preferred for the information under the *Some theory* headings in Part II to have more explicit links with the theory described in Part I. Despite this minor shortcoming, the book's main strength is the interplay between theoretical concepts and the ways they inform practice. This attention to praxis enticed me to read and re-read the transcript, highlighting the way Bezalel engaged Socratic questioning

in a dialogue designed to promote critical thinking with one of his students. While I might not improve through osmosis, the transcripts provide a catalyst for improving my Socratic questioning skills. In many creative and intentional ways, Bezalel masterfully draws the reader into professional reflection as he shares relevant theoretical principles in the context of his teaching practice.

I appreciated how each chapter boasted long reference lists; however, not all names were cited. Barry Johnson, for example, is credited with the concept of polarity management, but there is no citation accompanying this assertion. Similarly, while the pluralist criterion is explained sufficiently, it was not clear to me whether the pluralist criterion is a new criterion developed by Bezalel or a more widely accepted one that he has repurposed. At the beginning of Chapter 2, Bezalel states he will introduce three approaches to understanding controversy, but four approaches are presented. On careful examination, he refers to the first three approaches as "major" and notes in the introduction to the pluralistic criterion that he intends to "argue for the need to broaden the range of considerations relevant to deciding whether a moral judgement is justified" (p. 34). Even though Bezalel draws on the work of many philosophers including Shweder's (1997) "moral languages" (p. x), Earl's (2016) three "modes of interpretation" (p. 35), and Haidt's (2013) "Moral Foundations Theory" (p. 36) to *explain* the pluralistic criterion, it appears that the pluralistic criterion is, in fact, a unique contribution by Bezalel. It would have been helpful to make this distinction clear and celebrate his contribution to this concept more directly.

Overall, Bezalel has succeeded in creating a unique book for teachers keen to navigate classroom controversies. It is a particularly relevant topic in a time when substantive controversies are highly accessible to youth through social media, yet few books of this nature exist for teachers. I teach Health Education in a Faculty of Education at a university, and although many of the controversies are not health-based per se, the theories underpinning the teaching strategies Bezalel proposes are transferable to pre-service teacher health education. For example, the descriptions of ad hominem, Occam's razor, Occam's broom, false dichotomies, straw men, and iron ladies are just some of the theoretical ideas that could be shared with pre-service teachers, potentially enhancing their confidence and ability to develop reflective and analytical thinking with their students. The wide range of suggested resources would also have great appeal for pre-service teachers looking to advance both their theoretical and practical knowledge. If I had a wish list for the next edition of this book, I would hope for two key additions: a chapter dedicated to addressing controversial health topics and Bezalel's perspective on potential variations to navigating classroom controversies when the students are pre-service teachers. Whether the reader opts to enter the book through Part I or Part II, Bezalel's crafty and thought-provoking anecdotes, moral dilemmas, and thinking activities all serve to enrich the reading experience. More importantly, they bring clarity to the theoretical concepts pertinent to navigating controversial issues in classrooms.

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Muhammad Asadullah is an associate professor in the University of Regina's Department of Justice Studies. A recipient of the 2024 Centre for Teaching and Learning (CTL) Teaching Award, he holds a PhD and a master's degree in criminology from Simon Fraser University. His research focuses on restorative justice, transitional justice, decolonized teaching, and youth justice. Among his many honours are the Neekaneewak Indigenous Leadership Award, the Contemplative Social Justice Scholar Award, and the Law Foundation Scholarships in Restorative Justice. Dr. Asadullah expresses deep gratitude to the Elders in Treaty 4 territory, who have guided his journey with respect and compassion.

Jo Anne Broders completed her MEd from Mount Saint Vincent University with a literacy focus. Currently, she is a secondary English Language Arts and Social Studies teacher at Smallwood Academy in Gambo, Newfoundland and Labrador and has twenty-nine years of teaching experience. She worked as an assistant principal and as an ELA program specialist for grades 7, 8, and 9 with the Department of Education in NL. Jo Anne received the 2023 Premier's Award in Newfoundland and Labrador for Teaching and the 2024 Governor General's History Award for Excellence in Teaching. She continues to focus on civic engagement, critical literacy, and social justice within her teaching and learning.

PhD candidate **Kaja Burt-Davies** is a research fellow in Mathematics Education at the University of South-Eastern Norway (USN). Building on her experience as a mathematics teacher at the lower secondary school level in Norway, her research focuses on the broader context of societal change and migration, with a particular emphasis on how diverse languages and cultures influence classroom learning environments. Her work aims to support strength-based pedagogies in mathematics education by analyzing positive experiences and narratives shared by individuals and groups to identify strategies that foster inclusion and equity in mathematics education.

Ellen Carter earned her PhD from St Francis Xavier University in Nova Scotia and is currently an assistant professor at St. F.X. She previously taught for nearly a decade in Nova Scotia public schools, primarily upper elementary, middle school, and secondary mathematics. Ellen has a great interest in mathematics education, particularly in the areas of trauma-informed practices and decolonization. She is committed to advocacy and support for the education of children and youth in care. Outside of her role in the Faculty of Education, Ellen serves as a foster parent trainer with the Federation of Foster Families of Nova Scotia.

Carolyn Clarke is an Assistant Professor of Education at St. Francis Xavier University, Antigonish, Nova Scotia, Canada. Her previous experiences include working as a primary and elementary school teacher, District Leader in Literacy and Elementary Education, Vice Principal, Principal and Director of Schools. She earned a B.Ed. from Memorial University of

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Frank Deer works in the Faculty of Education of the University of Manitoba. Frank is Kanienkeha'ka from Kahnawake, a community that lies just south of Tiotia'ke in the eastern region of the Rotinonshón:ni Confederacy. Frank earned a PhD in Educational Administration from the University of Saskatchewan. Frank studies Indigenous education and Indigenous religious and spiritual orientations. Frank has previously served as a classroom teacher in Northern Manitoba and in the Inner City of Winnipeg.

Adrian M. Downey is an Associate Professor in the Faculty of Education at Mount Saint Vincent University. He has a PhD in educational studies from the University of New Brunswick. His research and teaching are in the areas of educational foundations, curriculum studies, and Indigenous education.

James Gacek is an Associate Professor in the Department of Justice Studies at the University of Regina. He continues to extensively publish in reviews, journals and international fora, particularly in areas of (1) corrections and community justice; (2) green criminology; and (3) the broader socio-politics of judicial reasoning. His recent publications include his solo-authored book, *Portable Prisons: Electronic Monitoring and the Creation of Carceral Territory* (McGill-Queen's University Press, 2022) and *Justice in the Age of Agnosis* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2024, co-edited with Richard Jochelson).

Rebeca Heringer, PhD, is a freelance researcher at the University of Manitoba. Her main academic teaching and research expertise revolves around (forced) migrations and subsequent exclusions, oppressions, and inequities in education; anti-racism and inclusive education; culturally responsive teaching; education as/for/through well-being; philosophical foundations of education; and research ethics/anti-oppressive research methodologies.

Ashwani Kumar is Professor of Education at Mount Saint Vincent University (Halifax, Canada). He is the author of two scholarly books: *Curriculum as Meditative Inquiry* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2013) and *Curriculum in International Contexts: Understanding Colonial, Ideological, and Neoliberal Influences* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2019). He is the editor of *Engaging with Meditative Inquiry in Teaching, Learning, and Research: Realizing Transformative Potentials in Diverse Contexts* (Routledge, 2022). He is the recipient of the Mount Saint Vincent University President and Vice President's Advanced Career Teaching Award 2022 and the University of British Columbia Faculty of Education's Alumni Educator of the Year Award 2022.

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Susan Legge is currently pursuing a PhD in Curriculum Studies in the Nova Scotia Inter-University Doctoral Program in Educational Studies. She received her Master of Arts in Education at Mount Saint Vincent University, where her research explored the lived experiences of Nova Scotia teachers of Mi'kmaw Studies 11 as they worked to create anticolonial pedagogies of reconciliation for and with their students. Susan's current research is focused on the effects of

working conditions in Nova Scotia for teachers, particularly as those conditions increase the emotional labour expected from teachers.

Tara Poole is a fourth-year doctoral student in the Department of Educational Psychology at the University of Victoria. Her dissertation explores school belonging in early elementary contexts, addressing a gap in current research and highlighting its critical role in long-term educational, mental health, and life outcomes. Tara works as an inclusive learning teacher in elementary schools and as a clinical counsellor, primarily supporting students with disabilities and their families. Outside of her professional life, she is an avid outdoor recreation enthusiast who enjoys climbing, hiking, surfing, and biking.

Twyla Salm, PhD, is a full professor in the Health, Outdoor and Physical Education subject area in the Faculty of Education at the University of Regina. Her research focuses on curriculum studies and teaching and learning in higher education, with specific interests in developing the professional educator and health curriculum change.

Shane Theunissen was born and socialized in the apartheid era South Africa. He believes that knowledge creation and dissemination are often used as political tools that facilitate exploitation, appropriation, and marginalization. Research methodologies have traditionally represented the imposition of a hegemonic normative epistemology and ontology on one's understanding and being in the world. He believes that destabilizing this hegemony is an essential step toward ecological, social, spiritual, and intellectual peace.

Evan Throop-Robinson earned his PhD in 2016 from the University of South Australia. He is a former elementary teacher, instructional leader, and instructor for teacher education with experience in schools and universities in BC, ON and NS. As a curriculum consultant, he supports teacher training and curriculum revisioning in mathematics education outreach activities across the Caribbean. Evan continues to work in classrooms through research activities with children and support for preservice teachers. He collaborates on the Moving Achievement Together Holistically (MATH) project to provide culturally relevant and sustaining learning experiences for children from historically excluded communities.