



# International Journal for Talent Development and Creativity

August 2023; December 2023; August 2024

IJTDC

Volume 11 Number 1

Volume 11 Number 2

Volume 12 Number 1

ISSN: 2291-7179

ISSN: 2563-6871 (Online)



# **International Journal for Talent Development and Creativity**

(Volume 11 (1 & 2) 2023); (Volume 12, Number 1, August, 2024)

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**ISSN: 2291-7179 (Print)**

**ISSN: 2563-6871 (Online)**

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(Volume 11 (1 & 2) 2023); (Volume 12, Number 1, August, 2024)

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**ISSN: 2563-6871 (Online)**

The International Journal for Talent Development and Creativity (IJTDC) is a refereed journal published twice a year by both the International Centre for Innovation in Education (ICIE) & Lost Prizes International (LPI): [www.ijtdc.net](http://www.ijtdc.net)

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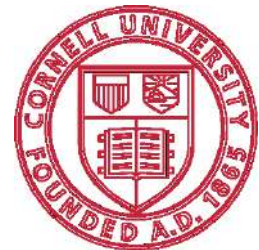
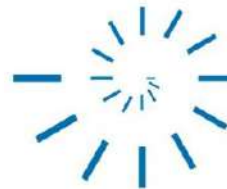


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## Submission Guidelines



**From the Founders:**

# **Towards a New Era of Excellence in Education**

**Taisir Subhi Yamin; Ken W. McCluskey**

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It is with great pleasure that we welcome you to the new volume of the International Journal for Talent Development and Creativity (IJTDC). This marks the beginning of the third decade of an innovative journey aimed at creating an international platform dedicated to fostering global excellence in basic-higher education through original research and critical discourse. We hope to advance future educational planning by sharing of best international practices through peer-reviewed articles, reports, and books. The IJTDC aims to bridge between theory and practice by fostering debate and intellectual dialogue. Our journal offers access to the latest developments in educational innovation and interdisciplinary knowledge mobilization. It plays a major role in global, cross-cultural networking and collaboration among scholars and educators from different parts of a rapidly changing world.

This volume features a diverse array of articles and research papers that reflect the nature of excellence and innovative education. Thanks go to all the authors, reviewers, and contributors who have shared their work with us. We highly appreciate your continuous support and contributions. Special thanks go to **Prof. Dr. Karen Magro** (Editor-in-Chief) whose leadership, valuable work, and continuous contributions have been instrumental in bringing the IJTDC to fruition.

In the year 2024, the ICIE will organise the 26<sup>th</sup> international conference on psychology, gifted education, excellence in education, creativity, and innovation (see: [www.icieconference.net](http://www.icieconference.net)). It will be held from October 3 to October 6, 2024 in Bucharest – Romania. This dynamic and international conference is bringing together scholars, educators, researchers, and participants to network and explore the latest developments. We encourage you to join us at this transformative conference, to submit your proposal, and to share your expertise. The conference is currently accepting submissions for papers, presentations, symposia, and posters. We look forward to welcoming you in Romania.

The conference will provide an opportunity to engage with and learn from internationally renowned keynote speakers. There will be an opportunity to participate in hands-on workshops which are designed to provide tools and strategies for educators across the disciplines. There will be many opportunities to network with international colleagues and further engage in thought provoking discussions with experts and peers on critical issues facing all levels of education. This conference provides participants with valuable professional development opportunities and enables them to gain new insights and horizons.

As a centre for excellence and innovation, empowering individuals and educational institutions lies at the heart of our mission. Both the ICIE and Lost Prizes offer innovative capacity building programmes that encompass a range of strategies and transformative learning approaches. Creative thinking, critical thinking, creative problem solving, future problem solving, communication, and collaboration are global competencies highlighted. The



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capacity building programmes designed and implemented by the ICIE and Lost Prizes aim to empower individuals and organizations to achieve their goals.

As pioneers in gifted education, talent development, and creativity, the ICIE and its international partners have the opportunity to advance knowledge in these areas. It is creativity and educational innovation that can lead to productive solutions to some of the pressing problems of our time: climate change, sustainability, access to education, equity and social justice, and working toward global peace initiatives. Learning initiatives take place within a larger global context and are vital for communication across the disciplines and geographic centres.

The ICIE has led the way in shaping the future of gifted education and nurturing the talents and potential of all learners. We are involved in the development of innovative curricula and instructional design. In addition, we are administering multiple criteria screening and identification processes to identify potentially gifted students from diverse backgrounds. We encourage inquiry-based learning, future problem solving, teaching for productive thinking, integrative activities and programmes, parenting, and counselling services. As a catalyst for collaboration at an international level, the ICIE continues to make a significant impact and inspire the next generation of educational innovators.

The ICIE international network plays a vital role in advancing excellence in basic-higher education worldwide. It facilitates the exchange of ideas, best practices, lifelong learning, and resources among educators, researchers, policymakers, and other stakeholders from around the world. This network fosters cultural understanding, appreciation, and respect among members from different countries and backgrounds. In addition, it amplifies the collective voice of researchers, educators, and advocates for positive change in policy, planning, and practice.

As we look towards the future, we are filled with optimism for what lies ahead. We have no doubt that the best is yet to come. Let us continue, with high commitment and responsibility, to make a better future.

We hope you find this volume thought-provoking and inspiring. Welcome to the IJDC.

From the Editor's Desk:

# Pathways to Transformative Learning: Disrupting Hierarchies of Gender, Class, and Race through Creative Expression and Artistic Imaginings

**Karen Magro**

The University of Winnipeg, Canada

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“To tap into imagination is to become able to break with what is supposedly fixed and finished, objectively and independently real. It is to see beyond what the imaginer has called normal or ‘common-sensible’ and to carve out orders in new experience”(Maxine Greene, 1995, p. 19).

Imagination can be a catalyst to creativity, personal agency and social transformation. The contributions in this special themed double volume explore imaginative and creative potentialities in diverse learning contexts. For Greene (1995), “imagination is what... makes empathy possible” p.3). The arts (drama, visual art, storytelling, poetry, dance, music, and so on) can open multilayered points of entry for dialogue and transformative change. Eisner (2002) explains that the arts can lead to an exploration of “our own interior landscapes,” providing “resources for experiencing a range of responsive capacities” (p. 11). The classroom can be viewed as an artist’s atelier where educators and students are co-researchers, co-learners, designers, artists, and text makers. Art also has a restorative and healing function that can lead to greater understanding, compassion, and a deeper level of learning (Scher, 2007). Collectively, many of the articles in this special volume highlight the way that pedagogies of hope and possibility are rooted in the lived experiences of learners.



Eugene Hamel (1845-1932), *Clementine Picard (Akonessen)*, 1906, Musée national des beaux-arts du Québec, Quebec City, Canada. Public Domain. By Eugène Hamel - Own work / Wilfredor / 2019-01-06, Public Domain. Creative Commons, Share-Alike International, CC BY-SA 4.0, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=75859077>

In her groundbreaking book *Wendat women's arts*, Annette W. de Stecher (2022) explains that Indigenous women artists like Marguerite Vincent Lawinonké helped develop and secure the economy of the Huron-Wendat community in Quebec by teaching the skill of bead and quill work; as a result, a successful local economy developed around moccasin and snowshoe production and by 1879, de Stecher explains that at least sixty of the 76 families in Wendake (Huron Wendake Nation, La Haute-Saint-Charles, Quebec) made a living from local arts and crafts production. The Huron-Wendat and other Indigenous women had the skills and the tools pre-colonial contact to create works of art in pottery and textiles. Post-contact, de Stecher writes that these artisans and artists were able to adapt and integrate new techniques and embroidery stitches from their interactions with the settlers.



Unknown Huron Artist, 1850. *Huron Moccasins* [Native tanned skin, wool, cotton, silk, and glass]. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York City, NY, United States. Public Domain.

<https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/319047>

The Wendat-Huron art reflected Indigenous cultural beliefs and a cosmology where non-human beings had a spirit and importance to life and wellbeing. de Stecher (2022) writes that in the Wendat worldview, “everything is animate and possesses a soul” (p. 35). Through oral traditions and ancestral knowledge, the Huron-Wendat women artists transformed material from the land into beautiful and useful objects. The symbols and motifs evident in the intricate embroidery were visual metaphors that “embodied the spiritual and animate qualities of their animal and plant sources, as well as family relationships and connections to the land” (de Stecher, 2022, p.16). The hourglass was a symbol of the sky world while the spiral symbol represented the underworld. Colours such as white and green were associated with life, vibrancy, knowledge, and cognitive powers while black related to death, mourning, and isolation. Red was associated with intense experience, emotion, and animation. Strawberries or “tichionte” (translated to mean “stars”) were thought to be “heaven sent” and were connected to healing as well as spiritual and physical renewal, transformation, and rebirth. Blue represented the vast skies as well as purity and clarity. The divine and the earthly were interconnected. de Stecher notes that the myths of creation, and the legends passed down through generations all find their way into the symbols and motifs of animals, plants, trees, and the cosmos in the Wendat women’s art:

The Wendat creation story presents a worldview in which women were creators, humankind depended on cosmological forces and on the land, and sentient nonhuman persons—animals, plants, and the physical elements of the land—had souls or spirits and protected humans so that they could survive and thrive. Thus it was critically important to

maintain relations with all categories of beings. Women's arts were intermediaries that helped to achieve this aim. Dress embroidered with moose hair and quills connected the wearer with cosmological forces and with the animate natural world. Aataentsic (Sky Woman) was identified with the moon, and her grandson Tsestah, protector of the warriors, was identified with the sun. A pair of men's moccasins worked with rows of half-moons and circles related the wearer to Aataentsic and the Sky World's dome of heaven, as well as to Tsestah and the sun. Women transmitted the belief system through the motifs of their embroidered bark work..."(de Stecher, 2022, p. 3-4).

Artistic visions that inspire, protect and restore the grandeur of nature are more important than ever when we look at a planet in peril and the silence of wildlife and disappearance of the once- vast natural world (Stonechild, 2023). We can be inspired by many traditions of Indigenous art that reflect a cosmic pattern and deeper spiritual meaning within a planetary context. The articles featured in Part One document the way that artistic pedagogies have the potential to "create and sustain transformative power for social change" (Hayes & Yorks, 2007, p. 89). The landscape of emotions and reflective thought processes can be explored through visual art, poetry, storytelling, and embodied learning. Dirx (2009) describes the emergence of "affective, imaginative, and unconsciously created representations in awareness" in transformative learning processes (Dirx, 2009, p. 18). When educators integrate alternative pedagogies in varied educational contexts, expansive, enriched, and creative learning opportunities are present.

## Part one

Through qualitative interviews and objects- based research, Darlene Clover and Kathy Sanford conceptualize "the feminist imaginary" as "a way of seeing the world that is ignored or devalued. In their article "Imagining the Feminist Imaginary through Object-Based Research," Clover and Sanford assert that feminist imaginings have the potential to disrupt and transform gender hierarchies and inequities that are "embedded in all our institutions and organized structures" (this volume, p. 21). The authors feature vignettes of women's creative expressions that reflect memories, actions, emotions, and critical insights in personal and professional contexts. Clover and Sanford assert that the feminist imaginary is connected to personal agency and collective engagement. Artwork and artifacts can be a catalyst to creative and deeper level thinking. Citing Ricoeur (1979), Clover & Sanford explain that imagination is a critical cognitive power and that objects such as a painting, sculpture, dress, weavings, jewels, toys, and "everyday art" tell a powerful story about women's experiences. Moreover, each woman's visual art and personal story represents a "site of struggle" as well as a site of self-examination, critical insight, and a deeper level of learning. Clover and Sanford explain that too often, women's voices have been negated and that "the challenge, of course, is not that women lack imagination but that they have been excluded in imagining the world" (this volume, p. 22). To this point Jennifer Higgie (2021) writes:

The museums of the world are filled with paintings of women—by men. Ask around and you'll find that most people struggle to name even one female artist from before the twentieth century. Yet women have always made art, even though, over the centuries, every discouragement was—and, as in many ways, still is—placed in their way (p.3).

In "Survivor tales: Feminist graphics bridging consciousness raising into reality," Kimberly Crosswell writes that "to assume that we live in a postfeminist world where patriarchy, sexism and misogyny supposedly no longer apply is to live a lie of privilege" (this volume. p. 60). Misogyny and gender-based violence impacts women psychologically, physically, emotionally, and spiritually. Economic advancement, capacity building, self-realization, and talent development are eroded. Crosswell explores two feminist comic representations of violence against women that are grounded in the lived experiences of artists Sabrina Jones and Rebecca Migdal in the graphic anthology *World War 3*. Vivid illustrations from the comics complement her analysis. Integrating the observations of Susan Sontag, Crosswell highlights the way in which the visual and the written words inspire empowerment and empathy. This article demonstrates the unique potential of radical comics "to engage in their own consciousness-raising journeys, starting from wherever they may find themselves in relation to challenging feminist subjects" (Crossell, this volume, p. 60). Visual storytelling establishes a unique

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relationship between the artist and read; self-directed, collaborative, and potentially transformative learning experiences can emerge.

In “Exploring women’s transformative learning and community building through practicing martial arts to disrupt gendered and hetero-patriarchal norms,” Emily Dobrich explores the connection between women’s martial arts and the development of self-agency, community building, and gender justice. She explains that personal agency and empowerment emerge when women recognize their physical strengths and emotional capabilities. Dobrich integrates the literature on feminist new materialism, martial arts, gender studies, situated cognition, and transformative learning theory. Embodied learning through martial arts activities “establishes a connection between mind, body, and soul, and is conceptualized as a creative process rooted in artistic ways of knowing”(this volume, p. 63). Dobrich asserts that feelings, emotions, and affect can be important sources of knowledge and insight. She emphasizes that participation in martial arts may help some women transform internalized messages and self-narratives of perceived frailty and weakness to self-narratives of personal agency, confidence, and strength. Transforming self-narratives is a crucial step in standing against toxic patriarchal systems. Dobrich’s article extends the lens of transformative learning theory in creative ways within a context of gender justice.

Emotions are also an important source of knowledge and creative inspiration. Emotions, writes Dei (2002), are a “source of human energy, information and influence...When trusted and respected, emotional intelligence provides a deeper, more fully formed understanding of oneself and those around us.” (p.125). In “Sharing lived experiences: Women in academia remembering, reclaiming, and retelling stories of feminist imaginaries,” Bev Hayward exemplifies the way creative writing can be used as a method of inquiry that can lead to social and gender justice. Hayward integrates a variety of artistic ways of knowing that include photobooks, poetry, reflections, embroidery, creative writing, and visual art. This article highlights the importance of active listening, empathy, community building, and creative expression as being vital to significant personal learning. Hayward writes that “it is important to remember, it is essential to search for what future (re) searching might become, as we imagine different ways of writing stories, telling stories, imagining a feminist aesthetic, as talents are developed in creative practices” (this volume, p. 79). New spaces of learning bring creativity, energy, and inspiration as women create their own tapestries of narratives. Hayward’s ideas have implications for innovative teaching across educational levels and disciplines.

In “The feminine outsider: Resistance through the feminist imaginary,” Maxine Chester describes the feminist imaginary as “a hotbed of strangulated voices, fractured body joints, and broken crushed minds.” In her article, Chester explores gender stereotypes, tropes, and representations of older women. Too often gendered and misogynist tropes of older women are uncritically accepted in social spheres—work, mental and physical health care and education. Through visual art, Chester explores three tropes of older women—sick and in a state of decline, sexless and undesirable, and as the outsider being “othered.” Chester demonstrates how creative art practices, and the feminist imaginary can disrupt oppressive stereotypes so that more empowered ways of being can emerge. She writes that “the feminist imaginary has given me a freedom through which to explore ideas and theories manifested in “Reach” and “The Pink Bonnet” (this volume, p. 99). Resistance through transformative visual art can be a catalyst to personal agency and social change.

In “The weaving is us: Decolonizing the tools for the feminist futures,” Claudia Diaz-Diaz, Dorothea Harris, and Thea Harris explore the teachings of Indigenous women thinkers and artists within the context of decolonial pedagogies and gender justice. These researchers frame Coast Salish weaving “as an epistemic tool and aesthetic language for future-making that acts upon us as a mirror of our history and an antidote against the supremacy of rationality” (this volume, p. 103). Their research highlights the importance of artistic weaving as a foundation that can build alliances between Indigenous and settler women. Diaz Diaz, Harris, and Harris explain that an interrogation of the role of settler colonialism in heteropatriarchy is essential if transformative change is to occur. The researchers write that the weavings themselves are animated and are imbued with a spiritual energy that transcends time constraints. The designs and symbols in a weaving include ancestral knowledge and wisdom.

Energy is channeled to imagining a decolonial future. “The art and symbolism in the weaving became a literal metaphor for the weaving together of past, present, and future and the weaving together of a feminist collective” (this volume, p. 108). This article speaks to the power and possibility of imaginative learning and artistic expression.

Elliot Eisner (2002) writes that “all art is in part about the world in which it emerged” (p. 198). In “Conducting arts-based research with rural women in Columbia, South America: A Tool for Community Empowerment and Gender Justice” Lady Johanna Peñaloza-Farfán and Irma A. Flores-Hinojos explore the transformative potential of arts-based research with rural women in Columbia, South America. These researchers envision a dynamic learning climate where women’s voices are heard and where their dreams, capacities, and talents are realized. The potential of the arts as a catalyst for community empowerment and gender justice is reflected in the varied examples provided throughout their article. Personal agency and collective action are expressed in the production of handicrafts, food, theatrical performances, and other community activities. Peñaloza-Farfán and Flores-Hinojos write that “art is used as a tool to highlight reflections around the history of the territory, including environmental care and complex community volumes” (this volume, p. 111). Key themes that emerged through the women’s creative expressions included: conceptions of women, sustainability, forgiveness, peace, and harvest. These themes were connected to the women’s roles and responsibilities in the community. The women’s experiences reflect dimensions of transformative learning processes which include self-awareness, self-examination, dialogue, perspectives taking, creative self-expression, and working individually and collectively to transcend oppressive patriarchal hierarchies. This study echoes the observation from Hayes and Yorks (2007) who write that “the arts seem to create this kind of liberating space by assisting people in seeing past the psychological, social, and culturally imposed boundaries of their life worlds” (p.91). They further note:

The arts promote alternative, and powerful, methods for bridging boundaries and enabling learners to expand their experience by accessing those of highly diverse others. The arts are also a way of bringing into consciousness, and finding expression for, experiences and insights that heretofore a learner has not had the capacity to express (p.96).

In their article “Examining feminist pedagogy from the perspective of transformative learning: Do race and gender matter in feminist classrooms?” Mitsunori Misawa and Juanita Johnson Bailey explore the potential and limits of feminist pedagogies in higher education context. Feminist pedagogies encourage inclusion, diversity, motivation, gender and racial equity. Misawa and Johnson Bailey write that “the classroom is rarely a safe space for People of Color, as students or teachers, because the classroom is merely a microcosm of our larger society and is therefore representative of the hierarchical systems that order the nonacademic world” (this volume, p. 123). Using their own subjective experiences as an Asian male-pre-tenured professor and a Black woman tenured full professor, the researchers used transformative learning theory as an interpretive lens to illuminate teaching and learning interchanges. Teaching logs/journal entries, critical incidents, and other reflective notes were used to track students’ perceptions and experiences of the researchers’ teaching. Misawa and Johnson Bailey found that efforts to encourage democratic discourse, self-examination, and perspectives taking through readings and discussion do not necessarily result in a “paradigm shift in thinking” to more inclusive meaning structures (Mezirow, 2012).

While a climate to work toward transformative learning can be established, it is the *readiness* of the learner to embark on significant personal learning (potential transformative learning) that warrants more careful analysis (Cranton, 2016; Taylor, 2007). For example, learners do not necessarily possess emotional and social intelligence skills such as empathy, awareness, self-regulation, and intrinsic motivation (Goleman, 1995). These skills are often viewed as vital precursors to transformative learning. Misawa and Johnson Bailey found that many adult learners in their classes were not open to diverse and alternative teaching styles, curriculum content, and learning strategies. Some students were openly disrespectful; some strongly objected to the readings and the teaching style of the professors. Their research findings support the assertion that “students who see professors who do not fit the accepted stereotype as inferior and judge professors with different positionalities as ‘liabilities’ (Baker and Copp. 1997, this volume, p. 124). Misawa and Johnson Bailey further discuss

entrenched discriminatory perspectives and existing systemic barriers that impede teaching-learning dynamics. Important insights into the potential and limits of transformative learning theory are highlighted in this timely article.

“Teaching for creativity and fostering creative learning all involve an elevated level of pedagogical sensitivity and skillfulness in being alert to the meld of environment, learner engagement and experience, moment, domain, and so on, as well as adopting appropriate strategies to support creative learning engagement. To be able to do this implies a level of personal artistry, whatever the context (Anna Craft, 2005, p.49).

## Part two

A number of the articles in this volume explore innovative pedagogies and the importance of learning contexts that nurture imagination and creativity. Creativity involves “shaping new knowledge” through multiple points of entry or interdisciplinary approaches where two or more disciplines are brought together to form new knowledge (Craft, 2005, p.37). In “#creativeworkplace: a virtual ethnographic case study of creative climates in an innovative London design agency,” Melanie Smith provides valuable insights into the importance of creating spaces and places where innovative thinking can occur. Her paper explores important questions that include: How inspirational and inviting are the architectural and interior spaces for neurodivergent learners? To what extent are students’ unique individual potential impacted by the physical climates of their classroom? What connection is there between school and classroom architecture and wellbeing? To what extent do our learning places and spaces encourage a sense of inclusion, belonging, and imagination? In reflecting on her own journeys of learning, Smith writes “the climate I found myself in always felt conducive to my creativity and enabled my mind to wander freely enough beyond the conditioned self” (this volume, p. 137). In 2020, Smith conducted a virtual ethnographic case study to understand how four creative professionals responded to their workspaces as a central phenomenon to the creative climate being studied. Smith explores the factors that hindered or enhanced the creative process. Looking at the way that architectural and interior spaces impact mood, emotion, creativity, and motivation have important practical implications for educators and educational program planners. A creative climate refers to “an attribute of the organization, a conglomerate of attitudes, feelings, and behaviors which characterize the organizational life” (Ekvall, 1996, p. 105 cited in Smith, this volume). Smith provides vital insights into key dimensions of creativity, learning, and wellbeing.

In “Artistic, visual thought processes supporting high achievement,” Don Ambrose applies an interdisciplinary lens to highlight the way visual-spatial thinking can enrich critical thinking, creative expression, and transdisciplinary learning. Integrating artistic ways of knowing with science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEAM) can lead to new possibilities for creative design in many professions. Ambrose challenges educators to think of the promise and possibility of visual thinking and creative expression at all levels of education. Visual imagery, metaphor, symbol, juxtaposition, and narrative can be a catalyst to imaginative engagement which, in turn, can lead to self-examination and expansive understandings of experience and knowledge (Egan, 2012; Eisner, 2002). Ambrose presents an intriguing array of visual examples to complement his observations.

In “The experiences of three teachers using body biographies for multimodal literature study,” Cynthia M. Morawski and Jessica Sokolowki highlight written- visual modalities of learning in English language arts education. Using response journals and audio-recorded conversations, these researchers explore the way three secondary English language arts teachers used body biographies to encourage creative learning with texts such as William Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* and *Othello* and John Wyndham’s science fiction novel *The Chrysalids*. After drawing a life-size outline of a body shape, students can draw specific colors, symbols, and quotations that illuminate a character’s personality. “The possibilities for portraying both internal and external factors that shape the ongoing emergence of characterization in a work are endless” (Morawski and Sokolowski, this volume, p. 161). Visual thinking and multimodal literacy development exemplify the potential of creative and imaginative



teaching. The authors conclude that “the three teachers appreciated the multiple means of expression which expanded their students’ capacity to analyze a character in preparation for writing a formal essay” (this volume). Morawski and Sokolowski highlight the creative potential of multimodal literacies and the process of transmediation which supports learners’ opportunities for reflective, imaginative, and critical thinking.

In “Tides that Connect: A Photo Documentary in Haiku about a Writing Teacher conference themed Teaching in a Tidal Space: Navigating the Ebb and Flow of Student Learning,” Helen Lepp Friesen highlights the value of art, poetry, contemplation, and creativity. Lepp Friesen documents her experiences in the form of haiku poetry and photography. Her publication emphasizes the importance of educators’ own professional development as a journey of learning. The conference provided Lepp Friesen with an opportunity to learn new strategies and pedagogical tools that she will implement in her own writing courses.

A close observation into the psychology of teaching and learning highlights that role that emotion and motivation play in learning. Divergent thinking, an openness to new possibilities, intrinsic motivation, curiosity, imaginative thinking, a spirit of play and adventure, and problem finding are components of creativity (Sternberg, 2019). Interdisciplinary thinking and integrating different disciplines to develop greater depth and breadth to theory, research, and practice are also vital. We can apply these ideas to teaching and learning contexts throughout all educational levels. In “Emotions Matter in Learning: The Development of a Training Package for Teachers in Higher Education,” Joanne Irving-Walton, Douglas P. Newton, and Lynn D. Newton weave dimensions of transformative learning theory in developing a professional development training resource for teachers of adult learners in higher education. Their research explores the way in which educators conceptualize and understand the role emotions play in adult learning dynamics.

Theorists like Mezirow (2012) and Taylor and Cranton (2012) assert that educators can create a climate for deeper level learning by encouraging reflective and critical thinking, dialogue, perspectives taking, and authentic and experiential learning opportunities. Dirkx (2002; 2008; 2012) has written extensively about the potential of emotions and creative expression as a way of knowing; embodied learning poetry, music, and visual art are “alternative languages” that can encourage self-examination, critical thinking, dialogue, and collaborative learning. Emotions impact thinking processes, motivation, and memory and engaging emotions through creative expression and imaginative learning can lead to new ways of understanding. The ideas presented by Irving-Walton, Newton, and Newton have important implications for teaching and learning in higher education. Learning involves not only the development of new knowledge or problem -solving skills but rather, learning involves a dramatic paradigm shift in the way individuals feel, think, and ultimately act.

In “Developing Talent Not Privilege: An Exploration of the Vulnerable-resilient Vessel with the Everyday Study Journey at an English Arts University,” Bev Hayward presents a personal narrative that highlights the importance of access, opportunity, and the importance of encouraging talent in all learners. Hayward asserts that talent is often overlooked in pedagogies of neoliberalism that value competition, exclusion, quantifiable outcomes, rigid conception of “success.” The community and context that conceptualize talent is complex in university settings, for example, where study skills support workers help talented students who have been marginalized and disadvantaged. Integrating her own poetry and visual art, Hayward reflects on her own personal journey of healing, creative expression, and transformation. She writes: “I lay bare small pieces of my story to you, the reader, as I weave the intersection of vulnerability and resilience with a neurodiverse (dyslexic), working class learner identity” (this volume, p. 194). Hayward’s life experiences helped her develop deep empathy for the learners she continues to work with as a study skills tutor in a university. Hayward advocates for greater inclusion and communities of support within educational systems (at all levels). Her article explores innovative practices and learning strategies that can build on the creative potentialities of all learners. Mentoring, coaching, creative programs, and individualized educational planning can assist in maximizing learner potential and talent.

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In “The Implementation of the Schoolwide Enrichment Model in Italy: A Three-Year Study,” Lara Milan, Sally M. Reis, Sukru Murad Cebeci, and Paola Maraschi describe the positive outcomes emerging from a three-year implementation of the Joseph Renzulli’s (1976/2021) Schoolwide Enrichment Model (SEM) in the first Italian implementation of the model. The SEM highlights the importance of understanding and building upon learners’ unique interests, learning styles, motivational capacities, talents, and skills. Teaching and learning strategies as well as curricular resources provide rich resources that encourage success for all learners. This article also describes two important assessment tools that can help facilitate learning and creativity: The Renzulli SEM profiler which helps identify individual students’ strengths, interests, learning styles, and preferred modes of expression. (<https://renzullilearning.com>) and the Cebeci Test of Creativity (CTC). The CTC can help learners explore their own creative capacities such as fluency, flexibility, originality and elaboration. Milan, Reis, Cebeci, and Maraschi provides practical applications for supporting, advancing, and enriching learning potential and creativity.

“In Teaching strategies and the role of creativity in gifted education: Perceptions of students, families, and education professionals,” Fernanda Hellen Ribeiro Piske, Kristina Henry Collins, and Tatiana Cassia Nakano present a qualitative study that explores the perspectives on dimensions of a creativity and creative learning spaces from the viewpoint of gifted students, mothers, teachers, and principals. Reflective, authentic, and experiential learning opportunities can tap into learners’ creative and imaginative learning capacities. Drawing from theorists such as Joseph Renzulli, Robert J. Sternberg, and Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, these researchers explore essential characteristics of creativity, giftedness within a context of innovative teaching and learning practices. Piske, Collins, and Nakano write that “projects, robotics, research and challenges, playful and artistic activities” as well as a flexible curriculum can encourage the development of learners’ creative potential (this volume, p. 225). Greater communication between all educational stakeholders is also needed. While the researchers’ focus is on gifted learners, their study has important implications for inclusive education, creative learning strategies, and the success of all learners.

In “Talent Development at the Voice of Holland,” Karin Manuel explores talent identification and talent development in the field of performing arts. Specifically, she explores coaching styles at the Voice of Holland (TVOH). She explains that talent identification and talent development interface and that “transformational coaching” is an essential part of performance coaching and the voice talent development. Manuel explores different perspectives about talent development that involve creative personality traits (e.g. risk taking, intrinsic motivation, persistence, etc.), innate abilities, supportive communities of practice, and skill development. She describes the interpersonal and intrapsychic dynamics of different coaching approaches and their potential impact of coachees. Manuel explains that effective coaching in terms of musical talent development goes beyond “task performance” and focuses more deeply on contextual and psychosocial factors.

In “Understanding stakeholders’ attitudes and views on inclusive education has dominated research,” Kishi Anderson Leachman used a qualitative single case study with an embedded unit of analysis to explore dimensions of inclusive education of non-teaching stakeholders in a private school in Jamaica. Individual interviews and focus group discussions were used to establish recurring themes and overall findings. Anderson Leachman emphasizes the importance of a strong reciprocal communication between parents, students, teachers, principals, teaching assistants, and school board members if an inclusive learning climate is to thrive. She writes that “an inclusive orientation is the most effective means of combating discriminatory attitudes, creating welcoming communities, building a global inclusive society, and achieving education for all” (this volume, p. 253). Her research has important implications for revisioning educational leadership from a transformative “systems” perspective.

In their empirical study that explores the role that public servants play in supporting the emergence of talent environments for young artists, Jacob Nørlem and Nikolaj Stegeager provide important research that will add to the literature about developing strong talent infrastructure across communities. The four organizational markers that Nørlem and Stegeager identified (Organizing,

Strategizing, A license to operate, and creative places) have the potential for the improvement of artistic talent environments. Their study included fieldwork, participant observation, and qualitative interviews with seven public servants from different municipalities in the western part of Jutland (Denmark). The authors write that “across the four organizational markers a new and interesting pattern of interaction emerged in the symmathesies in focus. It was as if the relation between the young artists and the public servants invited a new quality into the relationships. We call this quality the talent steward” (this volume, p. 274). Nølem and Stegeager explore the importance of symmathesy (contextual mutual learning through interaction) and building mutual communities of practice that facilitate creative learning and talent development.

In “The Psychometric Properties of the Torrance Tests of Creative Thinking” Süreyya Yörük presents a quantitative study of the psychometric properties of the TTCT. The Torrance Test of Creative Thinking (TTCT) has been used in education to assess the potentialities of learners. Torrance (1966) developed his test based on J.P. Guilford’s (1967) model of intelligence and in particular, Guilford’s analysis of convergent and divergent thinking. Traits such as curiosity, imaginative thinking, open mindedness, adaptive flexibility, originality, lateral thinking, an analytical experimentation, and the ability to solve problems are traits and capabilities often associated with creative individuals (Sternberg, 2012; Torrance, 1966/2017). Paul Torrance (1966/1998) measured these skills based on four scales: fluence, flexibility, originality, and elaboration. Yörük’s detailed analytical study has important implications for psychologists and educational specialists. The participants in his study included 157 second-grade students from a school in northwestern Turkey. Yörük’s study also challenges educators to think of teaching and learning strategies that can establish a climate for imaginative and creative thinking. Craft (2005) emphasizes that creativity involves learners in “questioning and challenges; making connections, seeing relationships; envisaging what might be; exploring ideas, keeping options open; and, reflecting critically on ideas, actions, and outcomes” (p. 13).

Academic, social, and emotional skills are vital to encourage, particularly for young adolescent learners. In “Between two worlds: Promoting identity development in middle school,” Kenneth J. Reimer interviewed four teachers to better understand the specific strategies they used to engage learners and promote personal and social development. Reimer found that identity development was encouraged with teaching and learning strategies that encouraged introspection and extrospection. Opportunities for students to explore local and global events can help students’ cognitive and emotional development. It is through relationship building that teachers can establish trust and meaningful rapport. “Adolescents’ socio-emotional health and motivation is highly influenced by the relationships they have with their peers; their relationships with adult figures...become secondary in this development stage” (Carlisle, 2011, p.20 cited in Reimer, this volume, p. 300). Learners at this stage are searching for an identity: “Who am I? Where am I going and Who will I become?” The process of individuation and self-actualization is enriched when teachers have empathy and an awareness of learners’ unique life worlds. Building meaningful relationships within a holistic and inclusive learning context takes time and commitment. Reimer’s research also cautions against the proliferation of social media forum which can contribute adversely to students’ personality and social development. Reimer’s article is important in its focus on the psychology of teaching and learning within the context of the middle grades. Implications for creative learning strategies are provided.

It is helpful to situate this kind of “listening” within larger discussions of artistic ways of knowing. Perceptual awareness and the ability to learn from all our senses is vital to creative learning. Thinking like an artist involves close observation and active listening. In “Textiles and Creative Possibilities of Assemblage Thinking in Early Childhood,” Catherine Laura-Dunnington describes the importance of close listening skills in her qualitative research study. Her research provides a critical awareness and insight into textile literacy within the context of sustainability as children are “positioned as saviors of the planet” (this volume, p. 311). In this sociomaterial narrative, Dunnington explores the importance of “assemblage thinking” in early years research that “decenters humans” and foregrounds relationships that children have with everyday objects, nonhuman beings, and

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materialities. Based on the findings of a larger study. Dunnington's paper highlights the way creative expression in young children can be encouraged when adults listen deeply to the way children express their ideas and interpret the world around them. She explains that her research is a project in "textile-listening" and that a central focus was given to "the entire engagement of children" (this volume, p. 312). Vivid illustrations of themes from the children's narratives that include *connect*, *know*, and *perceive* complement Dunnington's analysis.

Federica Liberti's "Dreaming Possibilities: Reshaping Imaginaries with Feminism and Social Change." highlights the potential for educational institutions to be a site of creativity and transformative change. Liberti's own personal journey is complemented with vivid photographs and illustrations.

A tribute to Dr. Joan Freeman and her exceptional life and legacy is written by Sandra Linke.

Collectively, the contributions that form this special volume reflect the potential for creating a more equitable, vibrant, and life affirming future. The embodied arts, visual art, music, dance, and storytelling are forms of knowledge and creative expression that can encourage "pedagogies of hope" (Freire 1992/2021). We need to encourage such innovative pedagogies, particularly in a world that continues to be polarized and fragmented. Creative teaching and mentoring require individual and social imagination. This includes the "continuous creation of new categories, openness to new information, and an implicit awareness of more than one perspective" (Langer, 1997, in Mezirow, 2012, p. 76). The unique contributions in this volume provide many avenues of possibility for re-visioning relationships in teaching and learning across many educational contexts. My appreciation extends to expertise and insight of the peer reviewers who helped with the editorial process. I would like to thank Drs. Darlene Clover and Kathy Sanford from the University of Victoria for their contributions and support with this special volume.

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# Imagining the Feminist Imaginary Through Object-Based Research

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## Abstract

Using objects-based research, feminist adult educators and museum curators shared and described artifacts of personal and professional meaning. These objects enabled participants in this feminist study to articulate ways in which we enact power and change, and ways in which we can imagine and create a more feminist world. Through this study we challenge systems of patriarchal colonial oppression, addressing inequities across gender as it connects with class, race and culture and showing how objects reveal alternative ways of seeing and shaping the world. In this paper we take up feminist object-based research as a way to step outside 'patriarchal logic' to reimagine the world through four themes: corporeal, including the body and objects worn on the body; communicative, which speak and narrative; protect, representing feminist action and power, and disappearing, referring to that which has been lost or made absent. These show recurring patterns and connections that collectively enable us to imagine a more equitable and just feminist world.

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**Keywords:** Feminist; objects-based research; imaginary; arts; collaborative learning

The imagination is critical because control over it is control over the future.  
(Helmore, 2020, n/p)

## Introduction

Historical asymmetries of global hetero-patriarchal power that not only continue to maintain but also mobilize gender injustice and oppression are so deeply embedded in all of our institutional structures and social, cultural, and inter-personal practices that it is often difficult to imagine a way out (Bates, 2018; Clover et al., 2023; Green, 2017; Rajan et al., 2019). Yet, the imagination and the practise of imagining are critical because they are how we come to see more clearly this problematic gendered world and to design it as if it could be otherwise (Haiven & Khasnabish, 2014). Our feminist study asked how we could imagine a way out of what in essence constitutes what Solnit (2014) calls a 'failure of the imagination'. We chose to use objects to elucidate the feminist imaginary because they are important signs of our cultural identity, objects to "act as powerful metaphors, enabling abstract ideas to be communicated and understood" (Barton & Wilcocks, 2017, p. 231). For Gonzalez (1993), objects are important rhetorical devices that hold and convey meaning, despite not necessarily possessing any specific generalized meaning on their own.

Given the importance of objects in our lives as both materialities and symbols, we designed a feminist object-based study as a space for a group of feminist educators and museum scholars and practitioners to consider how objects could help us to articulate a more feminist world, one that could visualise the challenges and speak to ways in which we enact power and change. More specifically, we engaged in a process of imagining what the feminist imaginary meant to us through meaningful, symbolic self-selected objects. This study builds on our work over the past two decades researching how women are imagined in museum and gallery exhibitions and through their objects, whereby we have drawn attention to objectifications, stereotypes, absences, and devaluations (Sanford et al., 2021). As feminist scholars, we continue to challenge systems of oppression, addressing inequities across gender as it connects with class, race and culture. Focus on objects selected by our participants, we have identified key concepts and themes that bring these feminist principles to the fore.

We begin this article with a discussion of the imagination, its different aspects, critical importance and links to objects. Next, we discuss our methodology of object-based research and then share our findings. We conclude with a discussion of the meaning of the feminist imaginary as



imagined through the objects by the participants and a poem which captures the feminist imagination as a challenge to a world that has for too long honoured that which is destructive, individualistic, and competitive.

## The imagination

“The task is to remedy the consequences of gendered oppression [and to] propose new ways to think about our potential” (Olufemi, 2020, p. 5).

Bottici (2019) reminds us that the imagination is a faculty that everyone possesses, and it is perhaps our most powerful faculty because the imagination is how we come to see and to know. Therefore, the imagination is not simply an act of make-believe or fantasy nor is it neutral. The imagination has brought into being beautiful, useful, and valuable things but it has also been wielded as an instrument of power, control, and destruction. One of the primary tools of heteropatriarchal power has been the ability to wield the imagination and to make what has been imagined into reality. In nearly every society across the globe, men have imagined our social structures, organisations and institutions, our inter-personal relations, and they have imagined our understandings and practices of gender (Bates, 2019; Olufemi, 2020).

For Ricoeur (1979), the imagination is a critical cognitive power, a way of thinking. He makes a distinction between what he describes as two types of imagination. One he calls the ‘reproductive’ imagination, which relies on memory and mimesis (representation). Remembering is a critical act because it aids “the organisation of social and cultural life by endowing [it] with meaning, a communicative currency” (Pickering, 2006, p. 176). The second form of imagination is ‘productive’, which Ricoeur (1979) sees as generative. A key component of the productive imagination, as it is configured by Whitton (2018), is the idea of a person having deliberate intentions, interests, and capabilities in shaping reality from their own perspective and experiences. The productive imagination “grasps together and integrates into one whole and complete story multiple and scattered events” (Ricoeur, 1983/84, p. x) and in so doing, schematizes them into intelligible significations. However, neither the reproductive nor the productive imagination operate outside our social contexts, which can provide spaces to expand but also to constrict. Mills (1959) called the spaces for expansion the ‘sociological imagination’, which he positioned as a means to help those who have traditionally been excluded and oppressed, to enable them to understand history in terms of its meaning for their personal lives and work, and for making conscious and informed choices. Taking a feminist approach, Bell (2000) calls for an imagination that is political, an activist imagination that enables women to see the world as it is but also to imagine the world as if it might be otherwise. The challenge is not that women lack imagination but that they have been excluded as players in imagining the world. Olufemi (2020) asserts that as feminists we must find ways to stimulate the power of the imagination if we are to imagine and bring into being a more “a liberated future for all” (p. 6). However, given centuries of exclusion, Olufemi (2020) asks, “How do we begin to imagine?” (p. 6).

## Objects and the imagination

An essential tool of the imagination is the aesthetic – the ability to imagine and/or reimagine and is used by feminist adult educators, curators and practitioners. The aesthetic is related to art and beauty but also to our creative practices which, as Greene (1995) suggests, is what, at the very least, “enables us to see more in our experience, to hear more on normally unheard frequencies” (p.123) and “to become more conscious of what common sense, habit, tradition and convention have actually suppressed” (Clover et al., 2022, p. 3). For Clover et al. (2022), the aesthetic is a highly political process because it “encompasses broader dimensions and understandings of experience, knowledge...and the overall conditions in which we live, love, work and play” (p. 3).

Whitton (2018) places an emphasis on using cultural resources such as images, artworks, artefacts, objects, novels, and other texts to encourage the imagination. These stimulate metaphorical meanings by representing memories, events, and sensations, evoking, and creating other possible meanings and interpretations. Cultural and material resources have no meaning in and of themselves

until we bestow upon them with meaning, use them as rhetorical devices to unleash the power to ‘redescribe’ reality, and to envision new realities. Barton and Willcocks (2017) refer to this redescribing as a practice of configuring, reconfiguring, and (re)inventing material items with a specific feminist goal in mind. Material objects, as the production and reproduction of imaginations, introduce cognitive and semantic innovation able to disrupt and dislodge the existing logic of the world, the dynamics that govern our lives, and to bolster what Gramsci once called the ‘optimism of the will’, defined by Olufemi (2020) as “the courage to believe that a more dignified world is possible” (p. 6).

## **Object-based research**

Sandahl (1995) reminds us that objects are important because they are imagined, envisioned, fantasized, talked about -- seen sometimes as mental shapes and constructs long before they find material expression.... Objects fill needs. Objects are projections of our needs and desires. They are material externalizations of our needs and desires. They tie together the material and the immaterial world (p. 97).

Given the importance of objects in our lives to help us to imagine and envision, a number of feminist cultural theorists have taken objects as a form of research. Hooper-Greenhill (2002) argued, “Objects in and as research are powerful...because they can both be and become ‘inscribed signs of cultural identity’” (p. 11). Gough (2020) adds that “objects can be literal or they can be representational of an idea, place, or time” (p. 185). Feminists Barton and Willcocks (2017) have used objects as powerful metaphors that enabled complex abstract ideas “to be communicated and understood” (p. 231). Object-based research combines the identification of objects with biography or storytelling. Stories are told about and through the objects as a means to make sense and meaning of the world. Objects, representing stories and memories forgotten or unspoken, i.e., the reproductive imagination, bring to the fore ideas and elusive feelings through touching, sharing, and describing items of significance – the productive imagination. In object-based research, objects become recognized as signs of both self and social realization and of self and social differentiation. Objects in research also have a way of enabling participants to hold competing ideas and complexities in one space and this was certainly the case in our study (Gough, 2020).

Bartlett and Henderson (2016a) focus on the activist role of objects, specifically in the feminist movement. They found social agency to be a general attribute of objects used in feminist activism, objects that manifested intentionality, but they also found power in how feminists made or remade objects. While their focus is on object-based research as stepping outside ‘capitalist production’, we take up feminist object-based research in our work as stepping outside ‘patriarchal logic’.

## **Our object-based research method**

In 2021 and 2022 we brought together two groups of feminist arts-based adult educators and museum scholars and practitioners who had been working diverse and collaborative ways with community organizations, museums, and galleries, to explore their understandings of the ‘feminist imaginary’ through self-selected meaningful objects. These feminists had been working in museums, galleries, community and academic institutions throughout their careers and were invited to participate in conference focusing on the feminist imaginary. The coming together was online in 2021 due to the pandemic and in person in 2022 in the United Kingdom. The question to which the participants responded was: What is the feminist imaginary? More specifically, we asked: What does this term mean to you? We had thought about the term and were using it as an expression of our feminist collective of arts-based adult educators and museum curators, educators, and practitioners that we have named the Feminist Imaginary Research Network (FIRN). We had no specific definition of the feminist imaginary nor any real intent of developing something concrete. Rather, we wanted both ourselves and the rest of our network to explore its diverse dimensions in their different contexts and lives. In other words, we provided a space to imagine the ‘the feminist imaginary’ into being, giving voice to those owning and selecting objects and enabling heteropatriarchy’s inequities to be addressed through the stories they told through their chosen objects to represent their deep gendered consciousnesses.

We asked the study participants to bring an object from their past, something they had made or found that held meaning to them and could, albeit complexly, describe for them the meaning of the feminist imaginary. We left the description open beyond that invitation and therefore, the objects they selected had been made or found and took many of the following forms: 1) publications (books, magazines, pamphlets), 2) fabrics (scarves, blankets, weavings,), 3) artworks (paintings, poetry, glass objects), and 4) symbolic objects (rocks, tarot cards, hair elastics). The common factor across all selected objects was how they all symbolized the feminist imaginary to the participant, depicting what they saw as central to their vision of the feminist imaginary. It was evident that the objects were chosen by participants because they held meaning and feeling, collectively shaping the feminist imaginary into powerful being. These objects were significant to the owners – they were new, or touched, or felt, or worn. The activity worked powerfully to connect the individual women to each other, both in person and online, and it stimulated our thinking about the role that objects could play in engaging in deeper thinking.

Each of the women shared the object they had selected for this event, some of them ‘vulgar’ or ‘intimate’ and all of them personal and alive with meaning and memory. The feminist meaning of their objects came as much from the selection and purposes for sharing as it did for their historical significance. The meaning was made clear through their descriptions, stories they told, and memories that were evoked. As they shared their objects, the emotion attached to each of these was observable in the ways the women held the objects in their hands, as unfurled pieces of cloth, and how these objects were introduced with love and attention. As we listened to each of the stories that accompanied the objects, we all brought to mind our own stories, connecting fragments of memory and emotion - stories of protest marches, of time spent with caring parents, family stories evoked, books read, and materials created. As the women told their stories, the personal was intertwined with the historical and political, inseparable as details were shared. Weaving between the lines of the stories were meanings ascribed to each object by both the sharer and the listeners, evoking deepened meanings and forgotten memories connecting to each others’ lives and experiences. In the images and descriptions shared below, we could feel the intensity of facial expressions, the pride, confusion or sadness evoked, and the hands that respectfully cradled the objects. Additionally, the telling of the stories, with objects in hand, interwove with the voices of the individuals softening, raising, enunciating, and stumbling over words was shared as the meanings of each object was revealed. The power of voice, rough and unscripted, revealed diverse women’s experiences, their identities, knowledge and strengths, and created a uniquely feminist space through which all voices and all objects were equally valued, seen, heard, respected, and connected. One story became everyone’s story and sharing objects enabled a collective object-sharing circle.

## Findings

We turn here to the findings of our object-based study about how this group of feminist adult educators and museum practitioners took up the feminist imaginary. As Bartlett and Henderson (2016a) argue, “there is indeed a system of feminist objects – an underlying logic that defines them as feminist material culture” (p. 162). These feminists recognized patterns and recurrent themes, motifs, and shapes through their analysis of feminist objects, finding that “in place of randomness there is an order, and a set of relations among feminist things that signify the movement’s reach, scope, and foci, as well as the specific qualities of activist objects” (p. 162). Building on Bartlett and Henderson’s work (2016a) we developed key themes that arose from sharing and analyzing the objects. The objects shared by the participants in our study were not random, but represented four key themes. The first we call Corporeal Objects, which includes body parts as well as objects worn on the body. The second is Communicative Objects, which includes things that speak or narrate. The third category is Protest Objects and represent feminist action and power. Our final theme is Disappearing Objects and refer to things that have been lost or made absent. These objects enabled the passion of the sharer, the intensity of their descriptions and explanations, the importance of the sharing and the shared object, and the personal and societal meaning of the objects. The objects are all symbolic and are representative of activism, family connections, work, historical events, naming, and relationships. The collected objects represent “memories and material objects that many will find unacceptable (inferior, too personal, too

intimate)” (Sandahl, 1995, p. 102), that is, “‘improper’ objects: objects that are not part of the ‘official’ identity, either of the individual or of society in general” (p. 102). However, these ‘improper objects’ are part of our beings, our wisdom, our actions, and our communities. The examples of feminist objects included in this paper were shared in a virtual exhibition and an in-person conference in 2022. All the names are the actual women’s names and many of the stories can be viewed at <https://onlineacademiccommunity.uvic.ca/comarts/>.

## Corporal objects

Bartlett and Henderson (2016) remind us that women’s bodies have always been central to feminist politics and struggle, and therefore by necessity we must think about issues of control such as how women reclaim the body “as a women’s jurisdiction” (p.163). This idea of the body as presented through corporeal objects was central to how some of the participants imagined the feminist imaginary.

Sandra, from Spain, took this up through an artistic depiction of women’s genitals, specifically the vulva, that she had brought from her museum (Figure 1). She noted that although women have been taught to ignore this part of the body or worse, to feel shame when describing or depicting it, this ‘object’ for her and her museum is used as an expression of women’s creativity, power and right to sexual pleasure. Sandra talked about how the museum she manages uses these types of corporal objects to fight back against the appropriation of women’s bodies by patriarchal norms and as a symbol of freedom from the domination of men by showing women that they have the right to power, firstly over their own bodies, and secondly, to their circumstances in the world.



**Figure 1:** Knitted Vulva

Coming from Canada, Shauna also chose the body, but in her case she selected an object that depicts another central part of the body. What she selected to bring was a stitched heart as symbolic of the feminist imaginary. For Shauna, it is through the heart --- through love and feelings -- that she imagines a different world. Her small fabric heart (Figure 2) fits into the palm of her hand and is one of the many heart-shaped objects she collects. Shauna describes these heart-shaped objects as both a symbol of caring as well as politics. She contends that the heart, “is a kind of bloodline for not just imagining but, through imagination, acting” on new ways of living in the world.



**Figure 2:** Heart-shaped Objects

Moving away from body parts, to items worn on the body, were those chosen by Nabila from India and Gaby from Germany. Clothing varies across time and space and has different meanings “depending on who regulates them and fears them and of course, the women who wear them” (Franger & Clover, 2021, p. 285). Figure 3 below is the chosen image by Nabila. She told the story through this object of how her mother raced to put on her headscarf whenever anyone came to the door of her home. The narrative she shared is that ‘covering up’ their bodies with headscarves is a sign of a women’s respect. However, Nabila argues that in fact, this is a socio-political determinant and an intimate story of power. These woven pieces of cloth can be at once beautiful and comforting and they can also represent a women’s choice. In Nabila’s context, scarves are about restricting women, about upholding patriarchal control over womens’ bodies and determining whether they are seen or not seen.



**Figure 3:** Covering Up

Similarly, the object that represented the feminist imaginary for Gaby was a headscarf, a yellow fabric with colourful flowers around the edges and adorned with hand-made bobbles. Women spend hours and hours using needles to create and attach the flowers to the headscarf. As she was discussing her headscarf, Gaby ran the bobbles through her fingers, sharing that the feel of these fabrics was a significant part of the object. “Why”, she queried, “does such a hatred arise towards the women who just want to wear a headscarf? What is behind it?” Gaby spoke through this object and it became what Barton (2017) called “the focus point for exploring cultural, social [and] disciplinary viewpoints” (p. 232). Gaby, like Nabila, also spoke to the contradictions inherent in these corporeal objects, of notions of religion, but more importantly the power of what women can and cannot do,

what they must and must not do, what they can do, and also what they cannot do (Figure 4). Gaby's object symbolizes both oppression of women and also women's strategies for countering this oppression, hatred, and discrimination.



**Figure 4:** Beaded Headscarf

Although also using a head covering, Dorothea from Canada shared a very different idea of the feminist imaginary from her upbringing. She brought with her a regalia headpiece (Figure 5) woven by her daughter and carved by her father to wear at a public ceremonial event. This headpiece, woven in the style of Coast Salish peoples and representing artistic works of Indigenous women, is for Dorothea a disruption to the colonial forces that attempted to destroy Indigenous cultures on her island and across Canada. The headpiece symbolizes the feminist imaginary as a form of matriarchy and of thousands of years of Indigenous women's knowledge and wisdom, reminding her of her own responsibility to revitalize and share those teachings with future generations of women.



**Figure 5:** Indigenous Regalia Headpiece



## Communicative objects

The second set of objects, and by far the most prevalent, we call Communicative Objects. These are objects written, embroidered, and stitched. Beverley, a poet and embroiderer from England, brought a needlework artefact embroidered with poppies. To her, this represented her mother, a woman she felt did not have a voice. The needlework for Beverley is symbolic of both the careful embodied cultural work of women and of their voices that were not heard or valued, and in her case made invisible by both gender and class. In addition, Beverley created poetry into her needlework. Poetry is a powerful mode of expressing emotions, connecting with our inner thoughts and with others, reminding us of what we know but have forgotten, and reframing experiences in new ways. Poetry is both world-making and communicative, creating and capturing what we might have otherwise missed. For Leggo (2012), poetry is powerful because it “invites us to experiment with language, to create, to know, to engage creativity and imaginatively with experience” (p. 165). During the workshop, Beverley created an object, a ‘found’ poem, which she later stitched and framed (Figure 6). The piece is made of ideas and words by all the women participants in the 2022 workshop and captures our collective journey with feminist imaginary.



**Figure 6:** Wandering Women Embroidery

Building on this, Thea's object, a Coast Salish weaving, was also created over the days we met in 2022 and was completed at the gathering. Like Beverley, her object wove together the stories of our work as feminist educators, curators, and researchers that we shared during the workshop. Her weaving also symbolizes material and immaterial feminist ideas (Figure 7), and like Dorothea, thousands of years of Indigenous knowledge and wisdom that has been passed down through matrilineal lines. To weave in her culture is to slow down, to listen, and learn but also to challenge colonial patriarchal control over women's thoughts, actions, and bodies. Through this object, the participants' voices were woven with the voices of the ancestors and living women who kept culture alive.





**Figure 7:** *Weaving Stories*

Other objects of value to these women took the form of different types of publications. Sinead, an Irish art historian, uses old historical documents to “better understand” where we, as women, have come from and where we need to go. She has created materials that point to the absence of women, and the relegation of women to small private spaces. Information she used in her publication came from, among other sources, a ‘minute book’, found in the toilet of the venue the ‘Ladies Room’. Like Gaby and Shauna, Sinead holds her objects lovingly and close to her heart.

Nicola shared a publication she had created as her chosen object. This publication is a guide to a women’s charity where she works and is a full-sized fold-out guide that has been written and illustrated by many contributors (Figure 8). The guide is intended to support young women survivors of sexual abuse and homelessness, and it is these women who have shaped the guide as a public information comic. This object represents the many hands, including staff from the organization, who use this guide to show women coming together and imagining a better future together.



**Figure 8:** Publication for Women’s Charity

Emilia’s contribution as an artist, writer, and art curator was a novel she had authored entitled *Arte da Guerra* (Figure 9). It retells the story of Judith, a young Jewish woman portrayed in the Bible who freed the people of Israel from the siege by Nebuchadnezzar’s army. This character captured Emilia’s feminist imagination through artistic portrayals. Emilia is an ordinary woman who was both determined and powerful and this prompted her to write this book.



**Figure 9:** Arte da Guerra

These created and inherited texts communicate, by women to women, ways in which women's history is written and re-written, capturing previously unknown history and passing knowledge from generation to generation, reframing women's experiences, and knowledges. These texts, created and shared, help us all to read in order to imagine possibilities, recognize subversive potential, and the capacity we all have to 'read against the grain'. Cherished texts, created and collected, help us to pass knowledge from generation to generation, preserving wisdom in many forms and shapes.

Building on these feminist texts was another publication that spoke to the power of women. Dorothea shared a book written by her mentor/role model Robina Thomas (*Protecting the Sacred Circle*). This book describes the need to reintroduce matriarchal ideas and goals through Indigenous ways of understanding women's roles and to empower women from the past to recreate a better future for their grandchildren. Dorothea holds the book up to share the title with the other women (Figure 10). This book describes ways to bring back ways of knowing that existed on the land and she sees it as a way to empower and decolonize all women.



**Figure 10:** Protecting the Sacred Circle

Two other types of communicative objects by Kathy and Tracey, from Canada, represent the feminist imaginary in complex ways. This feminist imagery symbolizes cherished childhood memories and family relationships, and harkens back to family stories and connections, but also activates thoughts of patriarchal normativity. In the former context, Tracey shared a strand of pearls with the group and using this, created a poem which she titled *Actually, pearls are a girl's best friend* (Figure 11). The meaning of the pearls for Tracey, and why she described them as 'her friend', is that they

were given to her by her grandmother who shared stories with her that were pearls of wisdom. Like Gaby, Tracey warmed the pearls in her hands as she spoke before placing them around her neck.



**Figure 11:** Actually, pearls are A Girl's Best Friend

Kathy's object of feminist imaginary is represented through two rings that also evoked memories of great-grandmothers, but from two very different worlds (Figure 12). The Eastern Star was her great-grandmother's ring and represents a mid-1800s Masonic-style organization that was uniquely open to women. The star is a symbol representing five different biblical heroines, depicting feminine religious virtues, many of which Kathy resists. The other ring was passed down through her other great-grandmother who did not have time to be devout as she was worked into an early grave through child-bearing and neglect. Kathy wears these rings for courage and remind her of a feminist imaginary that must continually stare down patriarchal barriers and resistance. These patriarchal barriers and resistance also include the struggle of female ancestors who showed immense courage in the face of society that tried to erase them, but their memories and accomplishments have prevailed.



**Figure 12:** The Eastern Star







**Figure 14:** The Bear Hunter

Objects chosen by some participants were actual pieces from feminist activism that are significant to them. Claudia, from Costa Rica, brought to the workshop a bright green scarf that was worn and was also used as a banner, emblazoned with the words “Campana Nacional Por el Derecho al Aborto Legal, Seguro y Gratuito” (Figure 15). The scarf was created for a demonstration where women in the streets called for legal abortion that promoted abortion in a safe and free way. All of the women who participated in these debates about abortion in Argentina held this ‘pañuelo’ as an emblem as they called for reproductive rights and health, for all women around the world.



**Figure 15:** The Abortion Rights Campaign

The final protest object was shared by Sarah from England in the form of ArtActivistBarbie (AAB) (Figure 16). AAB is Barbie reimaged and represents a recreated trickster figure that is fearless in her quest to root out patriarchy in museums. AAB turns a cultural icon on its head and becomes a subversive marauding character. Ken and Action Man are often in tow with AAB and aim to educate and activate a critical feminist consciousness. Wearing 'haute couture' or nothing at all, AAB challenges the status quo of art in museums, highlights the absence of women in museums, and identifies the disproportionate representation of males in museums, galleries, and public spaces. Through the use of placards, Sarah uses Barbie to highlight that the National Gallery in London exhibits 2300 works by men but only 21 works by women. Sarah also enters into the 'sacredness' of art by rendering visible the acts of sexualized violence against women and the blatant stereotyping of women.



**Figure 16:** ArtActivistBarbie

## Disappearing objects

In 2021, feminist Criado-Perez spoke to something she calls the absent presence, a liminal space where women exit yet do not exist. Darlene's object takes this up both physically and metaphorically. She brought a painting (Figure 17) by a Mexican artist called Rosy which she photographed in the home of a friend and colleague in Mexico. For Darlene, this representation is complex and brought to mind different questions, which pertain to the feminist imaginary. A number of questions come to mind: 1) Is this woman disappearing of her own volition?, 2) Is it under her own power that melts into the shadows?, 3) Is this woman being disappeared?, and 4) Is she one of the disposable people, like the hundreds of murdered and missing Indigenous women and prostitutes in Canada who simply 'disappeared'? These questions have significance because women do not simply 'disappear', their disappearance is about power.





**Figure 17:** The (dis)appearing Woman

Building on the idea of disappearing, Nicola, a feminist visual artist, researcher, and community activist from Scotland works with young women survivors of abuse, sexual violence and homelessness. These women are all too often unseen and unheard in society and as a result, disappear from sight, from mind, and from policy. The aim of Nicola's work (Figure 18) is to give these women opportunities to create artworks in celebration and recognition of their identities as survivors and to make them visible through public art exhibitions. Curated at a feminist imaginary space in the Glasgow Women's library, these forgotten women reappeared as not just survivors of violence, but as artists with the kinds of imaginations that contribute meaningfully to the world.



**Figure 18:** Multiple Identities



The final disappearing object, a rusty old cog, came from Laura from Italy. She found this object hidden in the ruins of a windmill and serves as a mute witness to her grand-grandmother Cati's life (Figure 19). Cati was disappeared from her family history and was therefore a mystery to Laura for most of her life. She was disappeared as the result of a liaison with a Catholic priest resulting in an illegitimate child and her being labelled as 'a sinner' because a "woman should not have children out of marriage", and "a woman should not have sex with a Catholic priest."



**Figure 19:** Rusty old cog

Like Darlene, Laura questioned issues power. Specifically, she asked: Was it love between the two of them? Or was Cati abused? The priest would have been wealthy and powerful whereas Cati was not. Many questions still persist about her grandmother's story but through her object, Laura brought Cati back into existence.

## Discussion and conclusion

Our study asked participants to delve into their imaginations and to share through an object their understandings of the term 'the feminist imaginary'. As previously noted, we had no definition of 'the feminist imagery' and we were not looking for one. The following is what we discovered about the meaning of 'the feminist imaginary' from a group of feminist adult educators and museums practitioners?

Throughout our process of collecting women's significant objects and the stories they shared, we recognized 'the feminist imaginary' as a site of struggle for so many women. As Ahmed (2017) noted, "the struggle can be exhausting, the task is learning to stay with the difficulty, to keep exploring and exposing this difficulty" (p. x). The caring of the women's object selections, and the intensity of the ways they shared stories about their objects, revealed the challenges they have faced. In addition, the objects revealed the ways in which these women made sense of their lives through seeking to find meaning in the mundane. Through exploration of the feminist imaginary, we created community, a common understanding, and a value for everyday objects that revealed connection and depth. Wilson (2010) contended that

Exposure to aesthetic experiences can inspire individuals and instill a sense of wonder, encouraging a deeper outlook on life, and the energy and inventiveness to create alternative ways of being and spaces where one can feel at home, a sense of community.

Feminist aesthetic and creative practices actively engage with the complexities of identity, power, and societal structures. By embracing experimentation and unknowability, these practices contribute to a dynamic and inclusive creative space that encourages critical thinking and challenges established norms. What we experience, as we gathered objects and stories, was a complex understanding based in notions of production and reproduction, challenge, and possibility. We conclude this article with a discussion of the four categories of objects and the implications of this type of research as a pedagogical project.

The feminist objects shared in this paper symbolize an imaginary of feminist possibility that we represented through the following four categories: 1) corporal objects (focused on the body and objects worn on the body), 2) communicative objects (narrating or speaking experiences), 3) protest objects (used as activist and disruptive pieces), and 4), disappearing objects (those lost or absent). Objects in each of these categories value the lives, creations, and voices of women and demonstrate them as worthy of recognition and representative of their significant contributions to the world. The world is only partially represented without the inclusion of women's stories, creations, and lives. The valuing of patriarchal objects representing heroic deeds, battles won and discoveries made, and the exclusion of objects representing emotion, connection, and imagination, have created a world that is incomplete and one-sided.

We return to our question, "What is the feminist imaginary?", as we recognize the significance of the objects shared by these women. Both individually and collectively, the objects represent a way of seeing the world that is ignored or devalued. Feminist objects, these mundane, everyday objects, weave together women's stories of past reminiscences, actions, emotions, and memories with imagination, of futures desired and possible. Objects evoke both individual and collective power that draws from historic disruptions and challenges the ways that women have been valued, treated, and ignored. Women's bodies have been systematically denigrated and shamed because they have been represented as symbols of weakness and fragility. Their heads are described as empty, their hearts scorned, and their genitals to be mocked and shamed. However, objects survive to tell their own stories, through needlework, poetry, story, and slogans. Women's art is not hidden away behind glass, in revered gallery halls or libraries, but survives through use. This art survives through marching in the streets, through the reminders of family, through the exhortations to lead good lives, through being worn on heads and hands, and through being read in evenings and in meetings. Feminist objects remind us of our power and capacity for action, to seek equal treatment, voice, and access. Feminist objects are selected by their owners who bestow meaning and evoke memories onto these objects that are both unique and shared. These feminist objects reveal complexities of the world that must complement the patriarchal world that continues to override even as it destroys.

Women's everyday objects continue to create feminist imagination. Our objects are representative of "useful art", which as artist Bruguera (2008) describes, as "useful art [that] is about transforming people's lives, even on a small scale. It is art as activism and activism as art" (n.p.). Viewers are users, users are viewers and admirers, as stories intermingle and create further stories. Power comes in the everyday as well as the glorious and revered, and objects representing women's power deserve attention.

This research project has led us to understand more fully the power of objects to challenge normative patriarchal and colonial stories, to re-view exhibitions and collections of objects to guide future work that is inclusive, representative, and offers engaging stories of everyone. Memory is evoked through objects, more powerfully through those that audiences can engage with, sparking their own remembering and understanding the value of local feminist objects in a way that have not previously been recognized. The past can be reshaped and re-remembered through objects that evoke everyone's experiences, connecting to present and future stories. We connect to people, places, and events that connect to our own realities; if there is no connection, we come to see the world through distorted lenses that neither matter or disrupt normative stories of male heroism and conquest. We come to devalue ourselves and our own stories and contributions, which are natural, evolving and continually producing new memories and new life, preparing for ever-evolving futures. Instead we look to others (men) to lead the way and create objects that glorify past feats of conquest and subjugation. Our future must be informed by memories and actions of relationship, growth and nurturing created by a feminist imaginary.

Offering a broader perspective of 'objects' helps include diverse voices, both public and private views of the way the world is, has been, and should be. Through objects, memories are called up, connected, and the feminist imaginary can be created and recognized. In this paper we recognize and share the cultural and pedagogical possibilities that are enabled using object-based investigation,

broadening research possibilities and stories told. These create a shared feminist imaginary that can bring about fundamental change to the gender imbalance, the skewed understandings of what is to be valued, that can bring about fundamental change to the world in which we inhabit.

Hayward (2022), in her found poem (Figure 20) created through needlepoint, captures ways in which the shared feminist objects individually and collectively represent the feminist imagination and offer ways to challenge a world that has for too long honoured that which is destructive, individualistic and competitive. By re-viewing what objects are valued and re-valuing objects that represent sustainable life, by considering how they are recognized and evoke powerful memories, we create a living feminist imaginary, one that cherishes objects that have been touched, held, and worn. Through a feminist imaginary evoked by these objects we can work to bring balance to a world that is in need of hope, connection, safety, and feminist imagining.

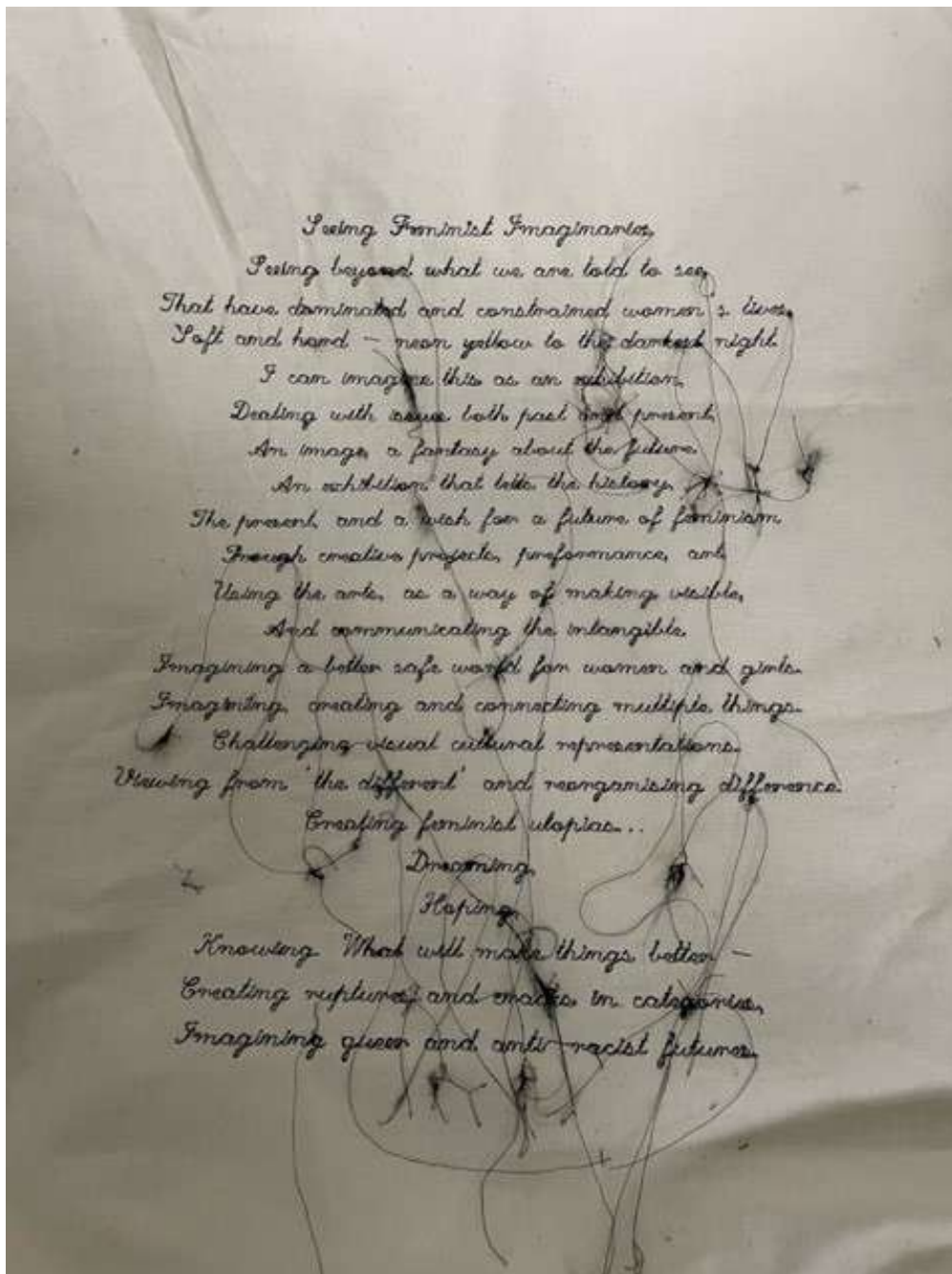


Figure 20: Feminist Imaginary Poem: Seeing Feminist Imagination

**Seeing Feminist Imagination  
Beverly Hayward**

Seeing beyond what we are told to see  
That have dominated and constrained women's lives  
Soft and hard – neon yellow to the darkened night  
I can imagine this as an exhibition  
Dealing with issues both past and present  
An image, a fantasy about the future  
An exhibition that tells the history  
The present and a wish for a future of feminism  
Through creative projection, performance, art  
Using the arts as a way of making visible  
And communicating the intangible  
Imagining a better safe world for women and girls  
Imagining, creating and connecting multiple things  
Challenging visual cultural representations.  
Viewing from 'the different' and reorganizing difference  
Creating feminist utopias  
Dreaming  
Hoping  
Knowing what will make things better  
Creating ruptures and cracks in categories  
Imagining queer and anti-racist futures.

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# Survivor Tales: Feminist Graphics Bridging Consciousness Raising into Reality

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## Abstract

This article examines two feminist comic representations of violence against women founded in the lived experiences of artists Sabrina Jones, and Rebecca Migdal, editors with the annual graphic anthology *World War 3 Illustrated*. In these visual narratives, the reader is introduced to the impact violence, visible and invisible, has on these women's lives as they recollect events, and move on from their painful experiences. Far from offering a commiseration of pain, a function which Susan Sontag attributes to disaster and war photography in *Regarding the pain of others*, these graphics (or comics) project empathy, while also empowering readers by providing a sense of 'what's next?' Also embedded in this analysis is an examination of the cultural roots of misogyny, through which violence against women and gendered 'others' is operationalised. Through their multimodal visual and narrative retelling of the harmful impact violence and the threat of violence had on their lives, Jones' and Migdal's graphics offer resolution and an opportunity for consciousness raising about the issues facing survivors of male violence. Their resistance gives voice to the experience of threats and abuse, and shares wisdom throughout it all.

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**Keywords:** Feminist graphic narratives; misogyny; sexualised violence; intimate partner abuse; survivorship.

## Frame one: Introducing feminist graphics in opposition to violence

In *Regarding the pain of others*, theorist Susan Sontag (2003) is concerned with meaning derived from being a spectator of pain. Her position, addressing primarily photography, separates the viewer from the subject experiencing pain. Regardless, the viewer is meant to commiserate, to empathise with the subject. Sontag is most actively concerned with public spectacles of disaster. But what of the horrors faced in the private lives of some women? What form may public recollections of intimate transgressions take? And to what end? Is it enough to use images to raise awareness of these issues, or can they serve as a catalyst for consciousness raising?

This article unpacks the power of the visual and visual-narrative in two feminist serial graphics that appeared in the fiftieth issue of *World War 3 Illustrated* (WW3I), an issue dedicated to *Shameless Feminists* (Jones et al., 2019). The two serial graphics, or comics, both composed by editorial members of WW3I, illustrate tales of intimate patriarchal violence and its aftermath in the lives of survivors. The first, "Whose body?," is an autobiographical narrative by Sabrina Jones (2019) that recounts the impact the threat of sexual violence had on the artist. The second story is a polyvocal illustrated narrative by Rebecca Migdal (2019) titled, "Intimate partner violence escape room: From abuse to freedom, survivors tell their stories." In this graphic tale, Migdal symbolically represents abuse through predator/prey dynamics while interweaving social statistics with stories of survivorship on the part of herself, and interview participants Sadie Rose, Jennie Chi, Jasmine Delude and V.

Violence, when recognised as harm done against another, is both visible and invisible. When it is visible, it often takes the form of evidence, discussed in terms of effects and outcomes; when invisible, violence is the context 'before' consequences become apparent (Kappeler, 1995). 'Invisible' violence is thus relationally potential, socially activated, and culturally exchanged. As such, throughout this article, I assert that the intent to harm, to threaten violence, *is violence*. Threats may be overt, involving weapons, or physically menacing; they may be subtle, utilising language or manipulating social relationships with intent to cause someone to feel isolated and unsafe. Following Kappeler (1995), the choice to violate is a decision made by agents in situations where they are able to



abuse their power, specifically in situations stemming treating others as unequals. The underlying socio-cultural factor informing the very personal, experiential visual-narratives of Jones and Migdal is misogyny. Often conflated with sexism, misogyny is frequently defined as an attitude of contempt, or a feeling of hatred towards women indicating a bias towards violence (whereas sexism is considered a more subtle form of gender discrimination) (Kendall, 2023). Often assumed to be a ‘feeling’ or an ‘attitude’ of male hatred, Bratich (2022) instead defines misogyny as “a set of cultural operations rooted in a normalised system. [It] is a subjective orientation towards action, not a psychological trait” (p. 67). Thus, misogyny is not the ‘property’ of an actor, but “a series of formal and informal practices that seek to undermine and unsettle women’s subjectivity – a pervasive continuous effort at elimination” (Bratich, 2022, p.67). Elimination refers to the second of two socio-cultural features of a microfascist transformation of (male) subjectivity. Microfascism (micro, meaning molecular) refers to the cultural dimension of fascism where a politics embedded within cultural values frames power relations, subjectivity, interrelationships, and views on freedom (Bratich, 2022). According to Bratich (2022), gender is the key battleground where microfascist ‘sovereign subjectivities’ are ‘reborn’ (the first element of subjective transformation) and pit themselves against the ‘other’ (i.e., enact eliminationism, the second element of subjective transformation). Features of eliminationism – a dehumanising imagination, normalising vile actions, valorising mythic violence, reducing women to objects, to instruments of use-value – all feed into a growing systemic misogyny weaving its way through a microfascist social fabric that normalises these visible and invisible forms of gender violence.

Violence, according to Kappeler (1995), cannot be measured as ‘more or less,’ but rather, whether it exists or not: it either *is or isn’t*. It is the logical extension of principles of culture founded on subjugation and exploitation. Thus, structures of cultural logic, rooted in dominant ideology, make decisions to exercise violent behaviour seem rational. These structures include objectification, exploitation, violation of dignity and personhood, suppression of freedom of choice and self determination, and the violation of rights (Kappeler, 1995). There are two fronts from which to stop this violence: 1) broad, systemic social change targeting the locus of violence within patriarchal power relations that provide the conditions for abusers to commit violent acts, and 2) take the adage ‘the personal is political’ to heart, and emphasise the politics of personal behaviour is the central issue at stake: violence will stop when perpetrators decide to stop acting violent (Kappeler, 1995). Localising the phenomenon of violence against women, Kappeler (1995) refers to “a war on a small scale and against our nearest if not our dearest” (p. 7), however, by doing so, she isolates her definition of violence, making it exceptional in character, as something that only happens to some women. In fact, what we learn from the graphics we are about to investigate is that misogyny can target any feminine person at anytime. It encompasses the extreme measure of femicide (Driver, 2015), where, the world over, women who refuse to submit to male expectations are targeted and killed. It also encompasses a lower intensity violence: ‘popular misogynistic’ outcomes such as those that attempt to enforce domination over women’s bodies, police their behaviour, inflict ‘punishment,’ and generally degrade women by instrumentalising, objectifying, and exploiting them as a resource (Bratich, 2022). All these aspects of misogyny are forms of violence. The gender war and the war against women, through its operationalisation of misogyny, far from functioning on a ‘small scale,’ is in fact part of an ongoing and persistent microfascist “war of attrition” (Bratich, 2022).

However, there is one sure-fire weapon in the arsenal combatting microfascist misogyny: as Virginia Woolf (1939/1966) well knew, the way forward necessitates feminism:

The daughters of educated men who were called, to their resentment, ‘feminists’ were, in fact, the advance guard of your own movement. [i.e., those fighting for Justice, Equality, and Liberty] They were fighting the same enemy that you are fighting and for the same reasons. They were fighting the tyranny of the patriarchal state as you are fighting the tyranny of the Fascist state. Thus we are merely carrying on the same fight that our mothers and grandmothers fought (Woolf, 1939/1966, p.102).

Woolf (1939/1966) connected feminist struggles for equality with antifascist organising in England on the eve of WW2. Writing during an era that is now called the first wave of feminism, Woolf’s familiarity with fascism was visceral and immediate. The microfascism of today’s cultural

landscape looks nothing like the State and party structure of Woolf's era. It is a networked composition of 'sovereign subjectivities' self mutating towards greater and greater depths of toxic masculinity, vying for affirmation and operationalising misogynistic cultural norms to undermine and ultimately eliminate the gendered 'other.' Within this cultural environment, it has been theorized we have reached the fourth wave of feminism, an 'era' some even label 'postfeminist' (Blevins, 2018). This label is meant to imply that society no longer needs feminism, that we are 'beyond' feminism, but I argue microfascist misogyny underlines the need for feminism's critical compass towards equality, autonomy, and self-determination.

## **Frame two: Regarding the emergence of feminist subjectivities**

So, what I do propose feminists do? There is need for renewed consciousness raising. By consciousness raising, I am not limiting the concept to the 2<sup>nd</sup> wave method of meeting in women's 'rap groups,' but expanding the term to include a variety of feminist media that specifically engage in producing critical feminist awareness. For feminists, especially artists, it is necessary to elevate women's subjective experiences of oppression into narratives that not only express outrage, but empower through the telling. This empowerment unfolds in the storyline, the aesthetic devices of expression, and psychic engagement with a real or imagined reader. In so doing, communicating survivor realities through word and image may inspire empathy and admiration in the reader who absorbs the courage that it takes for women to live out gender justice in the aftermath of violence. Through graphic storytelling, the 'private' sphere of experiencing assault is rendered public in ways that are simultaneously representational and symbolic, expressing both the objective reality of misogynistic violence as well as the subjective impacts it has on survivors. In this manner, narrative representation produces multimodal social meaning on the levels of the textual, the visual, and the temporal. Together, text and image are combined to create a related, cohesive whole.

Methodologically, this analysis incorporates the visual method of compositional interpretation—guided by the content of artist interviews—to establish contextual, social, and temporal evidence outlining both singular and sequential visual narratives (Cohn, 2016; Rose, 2016). This approach offers a more sociological framework for interpreting aesthetically art and media intent on generating critical social consciousness. Thus, in the context of experiences of sexualised and intimate violence, questions of representing memory, the invisible violence of threat, and possibilities to engage with suffering (acknowledge impact, then empower knowledge to action), are foregrounded in my discussion of these two comics. Additionally, communicating an effective literacy concerning the visual-narratives is understood to be a sort of grammar connecting cultural conventions of compositions (Kress, 2005).

Fundamentally, this visual-narrative context is structured by the multimodal interrelationship between the written text and visual language of the drawn images associated with it. To some degree, it is vital to be able to codify how the visual and textual elements interact within a system, and to this end, I have ever so lightly assumed a semiotic approach to indicate signifiers under discussion. In semiotics, a 'sign' is the basic 'unit,' and is comprised of a 'signified' concept, and a 'signifier,' the sense impression, which may be visual or audio (Saussure, 1916). An equation describing the relationship may be written as:  $\text{sign} = (\text{signified}) + (\text{signifier})$ . In this article, I have assumed various visual-narrative aspects are signs in terms of the parts of their modalities (textual or visual). Derrida's (1978) contribution to semiotics is to analyze the process of 'signification,' whereby meaning is ascribed to signs. He argues signs have no transcendent meaning and only exist "outside a system of differences" (p. 280). Hence, signs, and signification operate on the level of the symbolic. Through signification, signs are continuously reinscribed with meaning in a perpetually contested interplay. Thus, in this article, I have ascribed signifiers' meanings to the various visual-narrative modalities in the comics under discussion. However, taking my cue from Bateman (2017), in my treatment of semiotics I approach language, textual and visual, as a "*resource for making meanings* rather than as a formal system of rules" (p. 49; emphasis original). Together, lived contexts and compositional multimodalities impact upon the veracity of the comics' ability to transmit critical feminist subjectivities through aesthetic and values-based cultural experiences.

From Sontag's subject position, acknowledging or protesting suffering is only possible for an 'outside observer' (who is privileged, and 'safe'). Those experiencing the suffering survive and that is the sum total of their 'being.' She asks if there is a hypothetical 'shared experience' in the viewing of photographs of suffering, and concludes, in fact, that photography creates an illusion of consensus by seemingly eliciting a slice of 'reality' that is both objective and personal (Sontag, 2003). Thus, taking my cue from Sontag, I must also ask whether graphic representations of experiences of suffering are different from photography? Does the portal of the graphic narrative, the hand-drawn, personally mediated sequence of text and image, provide an outlet for victims of violence and their readers that photography never could? Firstly, compared to the photographs Sontag (2003) references, the comic narratives under study in this article are not the products of observation, but reflect acutely personal/autobiographical knowledge. In this way the visual-narratives are intimate and direct. The artists are not a 'roving eye' at a scene but innovative visual storytellers sharing their own experiences, and those that were entrusted to them. These artists are courageous: by deciding to relate such realities they expose their vulnerability and risk judgement and exposure. Out of this risk, they may or may not feel empowered, but at the very least, by putting these stories to paper, they are taking action. As witnesses, readers may glimpse the impact these experiences had on the artists, find empathy with the stories, and gain insight into difficult situations through the portal of graphic comic illustration. As such, these visual-narratives are vehicles of feminist consciousness raising to counteract misogyny by not only commiserating with the narrator(s), but also by educating a gender justice-oriented readership about survivors' lived experiences of intimate violence.

This begs the question that many feminists ask, a question this article addresses: "who is this 'we' we are referring to when 'we' frame this particular discussion?" Writing from an inclusive perspective with an eye on intersectional values, I acknowledge my position as a cis-white heterosexual female. I must be attentive to the choices that I have made during every step of my research, and consider who else may be impacted by those choices. Thus, I acknowledge that readers of these stories of intimate violence survivorship may be both sympathisers and survivors themselves. Currently, worldwide, it is estimated that 31% of women aged 15-49 have experienced some form of violence in their relationships, or violence with a non-partner, or a combination of both (World Health Organisation, 2018). American sexual assault statistics similarly report one in five women experience completed or attempted rape in their lifetime, with one in three between the ages of 11 and 17 (Smith et al., 2018). The same source, The National Sexual Violence Resource Centre, states nearly a quarter of men experience contact sexual violence in their lifetimes, with one in four such experiences occurring between the ages of 11 and 17 (Smith et al., 2018). This source does not note non-binary or trans genders in its statistics. The topic of sexual assault and violence against women is seemingly all pervasive, an epidemic of global proportions.

Additionally, readers will also identify with a number of differing social perspectives based in a variety of race, class, sexuality and gender orientations, and as a result, may respond to these dimensions of social power with further questions and insights to reflect upon. What is offered here is an 'open' analysis in which the work of two comic artists, Sabrina Jones and Rebecca Migdal, is contextualised and brought into consideration. Migdal and Jones, the creators of the comic strips under discussion, came of age at different times during feminism's evolution: Jones during latter part of the 'second' wave of the late 1970s/ early 1980s and Migdal during the early/mid 1980s; both have been active feminists since then. They are also white heterosexual North American cis-women: while Jones' comic is purely autobiographical, Migdal's features contributions from anonymized interview participants of unknown social positionalities. Furthermore, the subjects of domination and submission are gendered by a male perpetrator and female victim.

This is by far the dominant pattern in rape and intimate partner violence, but is by no means the only one. As such, this analysis does not preclude the possibility that readers may have experienced and sympathise with other violent dominance/ submission dynamics with different gender and sexual relations. With this in mind, this investigation conforms to Sontag's (2003) assertion that "no 'we' should be taken for granted when the subject is looking at other people's pain" (p. 6).

### **Frame Three: Two *Shameless Feminists* Draw the Body Politic**

Contributing to *Shameless Feminists* issue #50 (Jones et al., 2019) of *World War 3 Illustrated* (WW3I), artists Sabrina Jones and Rebecca Migdal utilise the comic medium to visually narrate the feminist adage of the ‘personal is political.’ Both women are longstanding editorial collective members of *World War 3 Illustrated* (WW3I), a radical/activist serial graphic/comic co-founded by Seth Tobocman and Peter Kuper in 1979/80 in New York City. Initially drawing its name from a spirit of political resistance to President Regan’s Cold War nuclear threats, WW3I redefined ‘war’ to reference the systems of oppression imbedded in social and political life. Jones has participated in WW3I since the anthology’s third issue, and was explicitly recruited for her feminist politics. Migdal was brought on board for her knowledge of Middle Eastern cultural perspectives and she joined during the onslaught of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Gulf War in 2003. WW3I is a vital conduit connecting artists interested in producing political and socially conscious graphics; what was originally a magazine has grown into a book-length annual anthology produced by an association of rotating volunteer editors who both contribute to the publication, and facilitate the participation of an additional tier of contributors from around the world. Co-editing the *Shameless Feminists* volume was conducted by a mixed-gendered roster, which included Isabella Bannerman, Sandy Jimenez, Sabrina Jones, and Rebecca Migdal. The selection of comics under discussion in this article from issue #50 was taken in response to an interview question in which WW3I editors were asked to describe the graphics that represented their best intentions. Both Migdal and Jones shared intimate stories of survivorship and what it meant for them to publish personal stories in a very public forum, two themes in the subject of feminist visual-narratives.

Jones’ and Migdal’s contributions to the volume both highlight the politicisation of the female body and women’s lives through the price that is paid in the aftermath of personal violent domination by men. The impact of violence recounted in these stories is gendered by the threat men have had on the lived experience of women and children. As such, the subtext in these tales is as much about misogyny as the storylines are about overcoming its challenges from a feminist standpoint. Both serial graphics are autobiographical, but Jones’ (2019) voice in “Whose body?” is singular, while Migdal’s (2019) “Intimate partner violence escape room: From abuse to freedom, survivors tell their stories” is polyvocal. Both artists represent memories of violence and what the threat of violence has entailed for them (and others). This tactic offers possibilities for the reader to engage with the suffering recalled on its own terms, thus empowering potential action; in Jones’ case, co-identification with herself as protagonist is sought, while Migdal provides a direct line of communication to anyone in need of support from abuse. In these two sequences of analysis, I offer the reader a selective view of the visual-narratives rather than reproduce the two comics in full. The images were carefully chosen to best exemplify the multimodal quality that combines narrative sequences while highlighting different compositional techniques used in the text. I now turn to an in-depth analysis of each comic’s visual-narrative.

#### **Frame Three, Part One: Sabrina Jones’ “Whose body?” – From the Personal to the Political**

Pictures drawn from memory are a synthesis of very personal tellings and retellings of a narrative tied up with accumulated emotions. In “Whose body?” Jones (2019) displays the sequence of events leading up to and immediately following an attempted sexual assault at knifepoint she experienced at age 13, when she was physically undeveloped. Compared to her friend, whose body evidenced greater maturity, Jones’ surprise at being the target of attack reveals, in her memory, an unassuming attitude of childlike innocence. In this story and follow-up interview, there are things left unsaid, the first being the questioning “why me?” the second, the attacker’s racial characteristics. Selected to feature for its representation of a memory, of the action of being aggressively pulled away from a friend, Figure 1: Frame Four sets the stage of the story. Significantly, throughout the sequence leading up to the attack, the visual-narration is represented through the third-person perspective: we see a tableau of figures engaged in actions from a distance – a black man grabs and forces a white girl into a derelict building. In Figure 1: Frame Four, the text is written in the ‘sky’ of the image, framing the scene. In it, we see that the word ‘surprised’ is visually signified in the drawing by the girl’s off-kilter, imbalanced stance of being pulled aside while standing on her toes of one foot. A combination of heavy motion lines and eraser lines around her body reinforce the sudden nature of the forced movement the girl is literally drawn into.

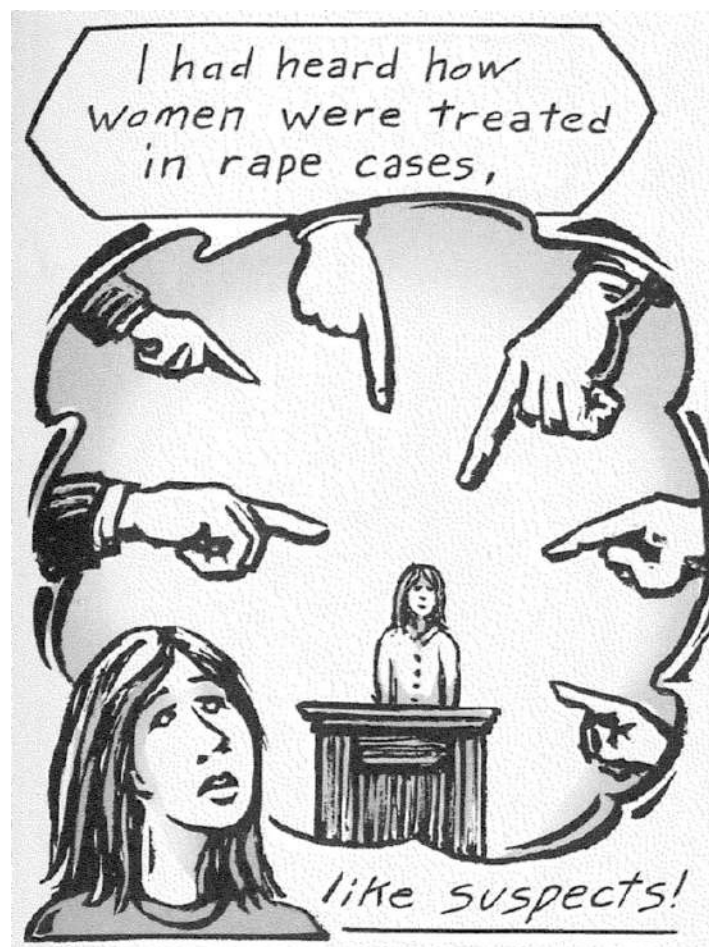


**Figure 1:** Sabrina Jones, "Whose body?" Frame Four

In many other comic contexts, such lines might signify sound, but taking cues from the lines' placement next to the girl's body, combined with her imbalanced stance, they suggest movement. They indicate her body is floppy, elastic, compared to the stiff strength of the man who holds her arm in a firm clasp, the man whose presence is the source of the unwanted pull. In later panels, we see him threatening her at knifepoint, forcing her to disrobe. Later still, by random happenstance, the man sees police outside, drops the knife and flees: this is drawn as a cinematic display. We do not view the scenes directly from the eyes of the girl, the protagonist, in first-person perspective. According to Jones, "the remembered self is no longer perceived as the self, but as some other variant of the self. This shift allows reflection and making sense of the act and aftermath, and hopefully, wisdom" (personal correspondence, November 12, 2023). The man's face, now unremembered, is omitted, like most of his racial features, likely due to trauma and the passage of time. He remains anonymous. Recounting the trauma from the third person undoubtedly provides emotional and psychological distance from the memory of the events, but at no point in the story (or the accompanying interview) do the attacker's racial characteristics find entry as a significant feature of the tale: it is not until implications of the event's deeper impact upon her personhood that we see the perspective shift into a first-person symbolic narrative.

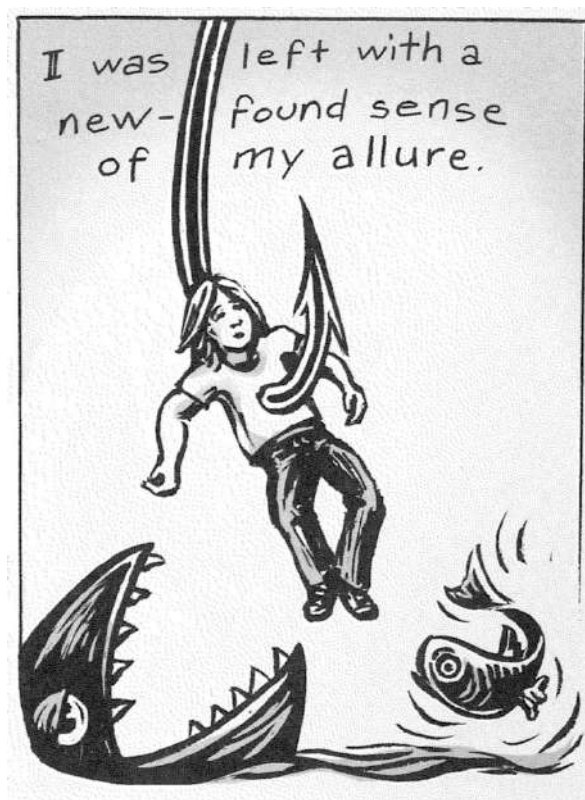
Fearing revictimization, Jones decided to remain silent about the attempted rape, known only to the friend who was with her that fateful day (nor did she tell her parents). She recounts in one of her panels that she and her friend attempted to get help from police officers out on the beat in the neighbourhood, but they demanded she file a complaint before they would do anything. Their procedurally driven, lackadaisical attitude reinforced her decision to not report the incident. In Figure 2: Frame Thirteen, Jones contemplates from her first-person perspective the consequences she would likely face, based on her knowledge of the additional trauma many rape victims undergo when they agree to take matters through the justice system. Within the visual-narrative, this frame was selected because it marks the change from the representation of the third person perspective, to a definitive

first-person perspective wherein the protagonist takes agency over her situation – even if that agency is to decide to remain silent. In this image, the main text is contained within a lozenge-shaped frame, while a ‘thought cloud’ with heavy movement lines surrounding it, hovers above and behind the protagonist’s head. In this case the indication of movement lines, in terms of visual literacy, signify the intensity of thought that is represented. Jones is contemplating an image of herself on the stand (at trial). A series of six disembodied hands pointing their index fingers at Jones’ imagined self on trial encircle the thought cloud. In Western culture, this gesture is a strong directive with accusative undertones. Furthermore, at least half of the gesturing hands are obviously cuffed with a man’s shirt and suit, signifying expectations of male judgement against her. The pervasiveness of misogyny throughout dominant culture includes the halls of so-called justice. Founded on meting out punishment, they frequently turn to the victim and assign blame for the crime that was committed against them. It is also well known that many victims of sexual assault have to ‘prove’ they are not complicit with their own victimisation. In fact, on some level, Jones might have even blamed herself for being in a ‘dangerous neighbourhood’ to begin with, as she imagined her parents would; so the story of self-silencing goes.



**Figure 2:** Sabrina Jones, “Whose body?” Frame Thirteen

The next immediate first-person framing, as depicted in Figure 3: Frame Sixteen, signifies Jones’ resulting sense of sexuality that she grew to associate with her experience being victimised. Selected for inclusion in this article for its symbolic meaning, the drawing features an image of the artist in her youth gored in the midsection, hanging like bait on a hook, waiting to be eaten by a large fish below. The text is written across the top, with the thick lines of the fishhook jabbing between the words as much as it punctures the girl’s body. Punctuating the text, the first word, ‘I,’ is drawn with two lines, compositionally echoing the thickness of the hook and creating an echo between textual and image modalities in the visual-narrative. This visual cue emphasises solidity in character formation and self-awareness.



**Figure 3:** Sabrina Jones, "Whose body?" Frame Sixteen

In her interview, Jones recalled her memory of this emotion: "I felt like I was prey, that I was being hunted in the streets. And I especially felt that way because I had been hunted in the streets and nearly taken down" (Sabrina Jones, Interview March 20, 2021). Significantly, Jones is still a child in this scene, sexualised as a 'tasty morsel,' but with no secondary sexual attributes, and without agency. The trauma of an unpredictable man forcing her actions at knifepoint marked Jones deeply.

It is from a place of retrospective wisdom that Jones discusses the behavioural impact the experience of attempted rape had on her during her young adulthood and into her thirties. It affected her sexual behaviour and relations with men by instilling her with a sense of wariness, and competitiveness, and, completely in line with the growing movement of women's liberation and 70s sexual liberation, the need to feel in control of sexual situations.

When we want to get over them [traumatic experiences] so we push them out of our minds and say 'that's not gonna get me down' and the fact of even saying 'I refuse to be afraid in a dangerous neighbourhood' you're still marked by fear. When you resist fear, you're still marked by it; it's a struggle you engage in. (Sabrina Jones, Interview, March 20, 2021)

After the drawing of feeling like sexual bait, the comic narrative represents a sequence of feminine strength, sexual liberation, and empowerment. Jones rides a rearing stallion. She is in an embrace. She can lift the world. She walks above the crowd, and she has a string of men lusting after her... In her story, Jones overcame the fear and shame associated with experiences of rape, but notes that at the time, she had a very aggressive attitude towards sex in order to avoid feeling vulnerable. Furthermore, Jones' anger at what happened to her as a child deeply influenced her to take what she experienced and turn her passion towards contributing in the battle for women's rights in her artistic creations, at street protests, and in defense of abortion clinics.

Thus, Figure 4: Frame Twenty-Two, the key panel highlighting Jones' path to empowerment, is featured in this article to demonstrate how both feminist intellectual and social engagement combines to produce radical political action in the face of an experience of disempowerment and misogyny. Its paneling is perhaps the most complex in the sequence. It is divided into two parts and features a number of signs, including speech balloons, placards, and a book. The first part, read as in



the English language starting from the left, features a self portrait of the artist reading. This panel cites the author Susan Brownmiller, and her key thesis on rape as an expression of power. Its inclusion provides the intellectual conceptual framework underlying Jones' feminism. The second part, on the right, taking up two thirds of the space, is of a larger crowd scene with the artist's self portrait on the lower left section. She is holding a sex-positive sign of a female torso inscribed with 'Our Lives' in front of her and she appears to be in the front of the crowd, which includes both outwardly appearing feminine and unfeminine bodies. Being inclusive of both femme and non-femme identities in the composition signifies an assertion by the artist that fighting for women's bodily autonomy is a fight that ideally encompasses all genders. The crowd behind Jones chants "Our Bodies" in one speech bubble, and "Our Right to Decide" in another. A uterus-shaped placard bobbles (with movement lines near the ovaries) in the right side of the scene. Unpacking this image's significations, it is clear that the modality of textuality represents both visual and aural conventions to be imagined in the comic's two-dimensional space. In this instance, they can be read separately, but also combined as a gestalt. Therefore, had this event occurred in real-time, (and many like it have) the crowd's imagined chants would be part of a cacophony of sounds, but audible as a collective expression: 'Our Bodies – Our Right to Decide.' Yet, read in the visual-narrative of the comic, the drawing 'flattens' the aural (verbal) with the visual (protest text) to produce a unified signifier phrase that draws attention to the placard as the unique visual signifier: 'Our Bodies – *Our Lives* – Our Right to Decide.'



**Figure 4:** Sabrina Jones, "Whose body?" Frame Twenty-Two

Thus, in this entire panel, we see the passionate expression of the artist as she develops her feminist knowledge and puts it into collective practice in pursuit of the "Body Politic." However, there came a point in Jones' life where she realised allowing anger and passion to shape her impulses was no longer sustainable. Jones made a turning point in her thirties, which continued through her mid-life: "Yelling at guys on the street who harassed you is actually just as damaging to yourself – who knows what it does to them, but I could feel what it was doing to me and it wasn't healthy" (Sabrina Jones, Interview, March 20, 2021).

Thus, Jones turned to "finding ways to live in strength in her own body, and ultimately awakening to the fragility and preciousness of the body as we approach its decline with age" (Sabrina



Jones, personal correspondence, Nov 11, 2023). Selecting the final piece of the visual-narrative puzzle to represent Jones's work in this article was difficult, as there were two options I could conclude this sequence with. I wavered between an image representing finding repose and strength in aging, or an image finding humour doing battle with aging. As seen in Figure 5: Frame Twenty-Six, I selected the image of equanimity and strength, partially because it is represented Jones from a first-person perspective. In this self-portrait, Jones speaks directly to the viewer about yoga. The word balloon leaves the message open ended, with the closure statement printed underneath her body. Placing the second part of the text under her body frames the visual-narrative between a statement that is spoken out loud and one that is silent, but 'grounded.' Thus, the statement "to live in my body" is underlining the key point of the whole image.



**Figure 5:** Sabrina Jones, "Whose body?" Frame Twenty-Six

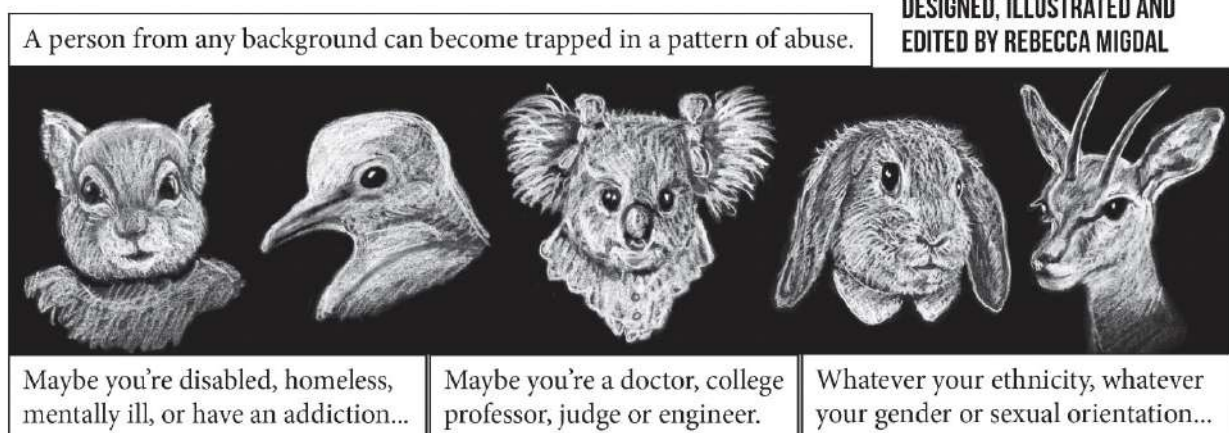
Today, Sabrina Jones continues to draw the 'Body Politic,' fighting for women's reproductive rights in the United States. When *Roe vs. Wade* (legislation guaranteeing the right to abortion) was overturned by the American supreme court in June of 2022, members of WW3I produced the 53<sup>rd</sup> edition of the comic themed on "My Body, Our Rights" with Sabrina Jones' art featured on the cover. Her vision represents a personal cry for justice amplified to the broader public of women, concerning reproductive rights issues, because she believes women can only be free if they are free from potential male assault, its possible consequences (i.e., free from an obligation to carry a rapists' baby to term). According to Jones, freedom to stroll down any street did not exist before abortion and birth control because "women weren't protected; women could get pregnant at the drop of a hat; women had less social mobility" (Sabrina Jones, Interview, March 20, 2021).

Though not originally conceived in zine format (a form of pamphlet), parts of "Whose body?" appeared in an experimental intimate four-page folding zine produced for the 2018 annual New York City Feminist Zine Fest at Barnard College where Jones and other WW3I editorial members were tabling their comics. This is when editorial members Jones and Bannerman hatched their plans to produce a women-led feminist WW3I anthology #50 together (contributing member, Katherine Arnoldi, was also involved in the conversation). This small edition was considered a trial-run, 'safe' zine of the sort the younger women would trade with their close friends. Later, "Whose body?" expanded into a full-length nine-page comic spread, and a slideshow presentation. Slideshows are the

most common format WW3I contributors use to publicly discuss their comics, especially when they debut the publication of the annual anthology. Hence, Jones created a slideshow of “Whose body?” just as she has done for previous anthology-related works. In the context of WW3I, featuring their work in slideshows is an opportunity for the artists to engage with the general public about the ideas they are presenting. It is much akin to classical 2<sup>nd</sup> wave feminist ‘consciousness raising’ rap sessions. Jones faced a moment of courage during one of her slide presentations. After narrating her assault, a younger female art student asked her why she would depict such a horrible experience? Jones recalls she was taken aback by the question, and did not have an answer. She stopped presenting “Whose body?” for a while because she, like many victims of assault, did not want to grapple with lived trauma so publicly.

There is no way to accurately interpret the intent behind the art student’s question, but undoubtedly, it reminded Jones of the vulnerability she associated with being a survivor of sexual assault. Perhaps, and I speculate, the issue is cultural or generational and the student was considering the issue from a ‘postfeminist’ perspective, in which focusing on women’s oppression is less readily accepted. Blevins (2018) notes postfeminism in America leaves young women lacking the critical knowledge with which to deal with experiences of oppression. Such a question could thus bespeak to having little experience emotionally processing accounts of misogyny. Possibly, believing that feminism is a relic of history, this student did not have the feminist ‘tool-kit’ required to critically engage with the truth of sexualised violence. In such a vacuum, reading feminist comics matters, because one never knows what will spark identification between the creator, reader, and critical awareness. In this way, comics are strong contenders in the feminist tradition of consciousness raising, a factor I will return to later.

**Frame Three, Part Two: Rebecca Migdal’s “Intimate partner violence escape room: From abuse to freedom, survivors tell their stories” – Tales Emerging from the Dark**



**Figure 6:** Rebecca Migdal, “Intimate partner violence escape room,” Frame One

Accounts from five survivors of intimate partner violence share the pages of the comic, “Intimate partner violence escape room: From abuse to freedom, survivors tell their stories.” Designed, illustrated, and edited by Rebecca Migdal (2019), these accounts are drawn from a series of interviews Migdal conducted with female survivors of intimate partner violence. Taking these discussions into consideration, Migdal assigned each woman’s story to a different pair of animals through which the predator/prey dynamic (aggressor/victim) emerged to both symbolise and make real situations in which actual violence and threats of violence took place. Migdal’s purpose underlying the representation of animals has specific qualities she outlines directly:

It was my hope that by using animal characters I would be able to explore the predator/prey relationship dynamic without being specific about gender identity, sexual orientation, religion or ethnicity.

I am well aware that while domestic violence largely affects women, it is far from being exclusive to female-bodied women. Trans women and members of same sex couples also experience abuse, as do some men in relationships with abusive women. All these forms of partner abuse are equally unhealthy and all of them are, I think, subject to similar dynamics.

One of the things I've noticed is how invariably abusers see themselves as the victim, even while they are harming another person, an act which they often think of as pre-emptive self-defense.

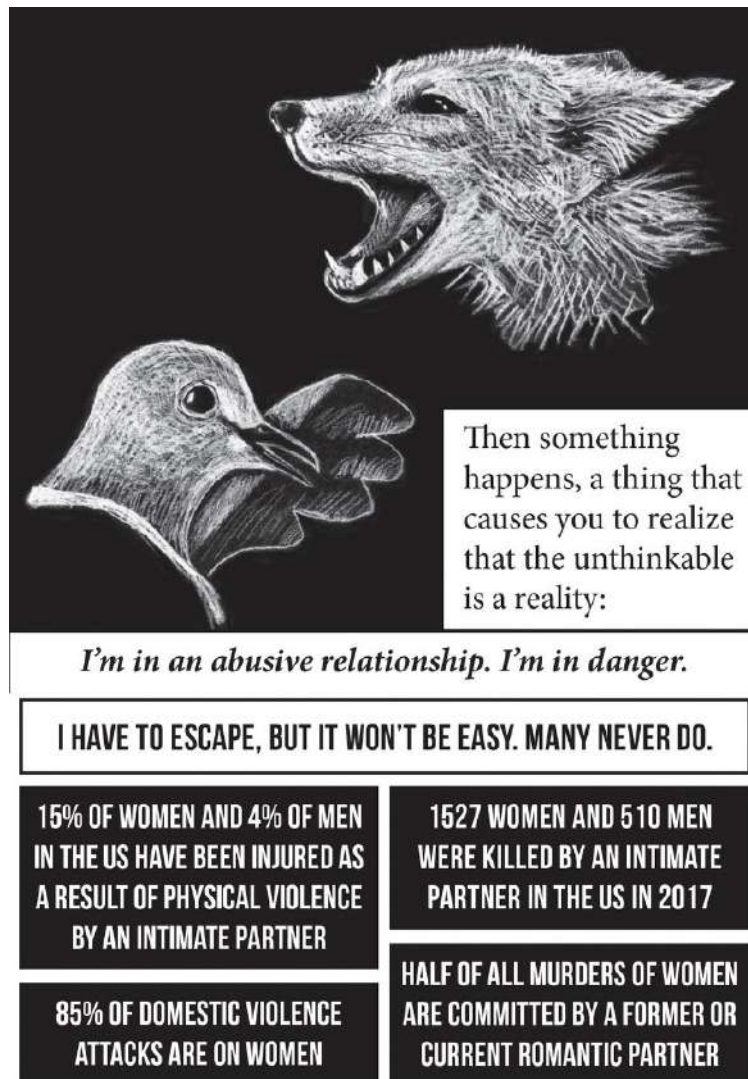
Anyway, I tried to tread that line carefully; on the one hand, women are by far the most frequent targets of domestic abuse, and that makes it an aspect of misogyny; yet on the other, that doesn't invalidate the experiences that male-bodied people or trans men may have of intimate partner violence.

I think if there is a gendered aspect of the predator-prey relationship it is due to the ways in which we gender power—strong vs weak, dominant vs. submissive, etc. This in itself is a reversal of the primary relationship with the all-powerful mother which colors our psychology and predisposes all of us to misogyny. And the fact is that we all have multiple genders within.

A heterosexual couple might have a gender reversal dynamic, or a same sex couple might enact roles that correspond to classic gender roles. If I were to clarify how the predator-prey relationship corresponds to gender it would be in terms of these roles, to which we are socialized as an expression of a patriarchal power dynamic. Perhaps domestic abuse can be seen as a form of enforcement to keep the gender roles patriarchal. It's also important to note that these roles objectify the "man" as much as they do the "woman." (Rebecca Migdal, personal correspondence, November 7, 2023)

Throughout the comic, Migdal depicts her subjects coming to awareness of their situations by responding to threatening animalistic gestures. The primary advantage of Migdal's representational tactic is to not only make visible but to make obvious to the reader through cues provided by animal behaviour just how threatening and oppressively fierce these women experienced their abusive partners. As noted earlier, threats of violence *are* violence, and deeply rooted in misogynistic actions and social operations. Although these women were named in the title credits – Rebecca M, Sadie Rose, Jennie Chi, Jasmin Delude, and V – their depictions as anthropomorphised animals render their stories somewhat anonymous and abstract, subtly emphasising their gendered quality, and undoubtedly offering a sense of psychological distance and security in the retelling of their struggles. In Figure 6: Frame One, selected for analysis for its position as the frame that sets the stage for the entire comic, we are introduced to the first set of animal characters in the story. The visual-narrative throughout this comic is strongly rooted in an English-language textual modality, with the words and much of the sequential imagery being 'read' from left to right. Each animal is slightly gendered female, but some with more obvious clothing cues than others, and we are provided with an explanation that *a pattern* of intimate partner violence *can trap* anyone from any socio-economic background. The text intersperses a narrator's voice, which provides general knowledge of abuse, including statistics, with the survivors' stories, rendered in first person accounts. Overall, the narration provides both psychological distance and an overarching synthesis between personal tales and social facts.

Further psychological distance is signified through Migdal's fine art technique of drawing in white on a black background. This approach is one that Migdal favours, and is often requested by other WW3I members who appreciate it as her signature style. Its stylistic intensity requires more work than most other graphic productions. Migdal's white on black technique projects a memorialising quality to the stories, allowing the action to float almost abstractly in the darkness as the survivors' voices narrate their experiences. Bridging these stories, Migdal inserts statistics, objective facts listing the dire, and often fatal consequences of living in situations of intimate partner violence, as seen in Figure 7: Frames Three & Five. Weaving national statistics between the personal accounts of abuse reinforces the fact that the scale of violence is not localised; misogyny extends across society. Choosing to include her own story of intimate partner violence in the array, Migdal represented her tale through the fox and dove predator/prey dynamic. In this particular image the placement of the fox in a compositionally higher spatial arrangement signifies a looming, overbearing quality, with the dove depicted lower in the picture plane. Reading what could be interpreted as a hieratic relationship, the menacing expression on the fox, which is situated in the upper position, exudes intimidating power down towards the dove, which offers a submissive wing-outstretched gesture



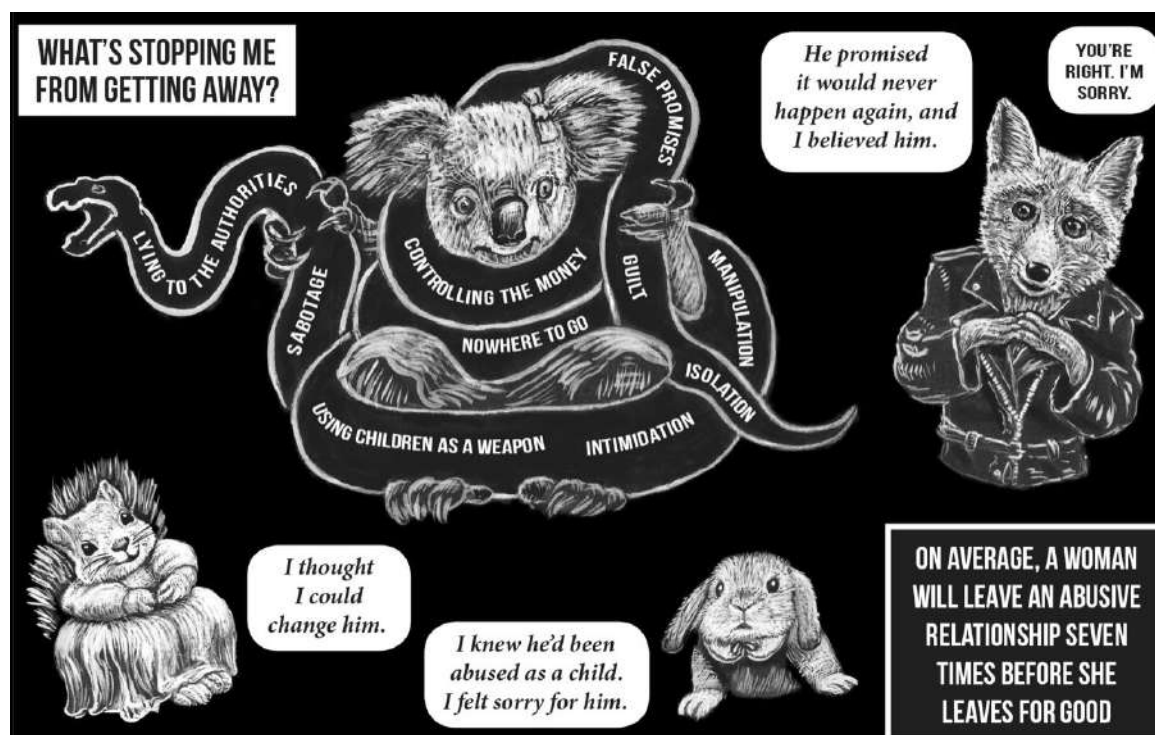
**Figure 7:** Rebecca Migdal, “Intimate partner violence escape room,” Frames 3 & 5

Over the course of the narrative, this dynamic is reinforced when the fox pounces upon the dove as Migdal describes being kicked; the fox is shown insincerely apologising, and later stalking the dove (a menacing figure in the dove’s window). As a survivor herself, Migdal remarks she was surprised when she realised her own challenges facing an abusive situation, as she had studied gender and women’s issues for much of her adult life. She pursues further insights on the matter drawing from Jungian psychology:

Our society has never consciously tried to compensate for the psychological process of separation from the Feminine. The Feminine is the ground of our humanity but we don’t have a simple relationship to it. Our culture, instead of compensating for the psychological issue that we have to work out in our relationship to the Feminine has turned it into a predatory relationship that’s not good for anyone male, or female, or androgens. We all have to relate to our inner gender construction. We have male and female inside of us as human beings and when we take one of the genders and turn it into the ‘this is the area where you can, you know, poop and exploit and just take advantage of and never have any consequences...’ I mean that’s exactly how we’re living in relationship to the Earth and its because of our relationship to the Feminine. (Rebecca Migdal, Interview March 31, 2021)

Migdal was lucky – she was able to escape from her abuser before the situation got really bad. One thing she asserts is that becoming enmeshed in a relational pattern of abuse can happen to anyone; in her case, she never thought it could happen to her, an educated, self-determined feminist. She recalls it was difficult to extricate herself from the relationship. She had to leave the state where she lived and lost her teaching job. Her experience motivated her to help others because she had a real understanding

of what they were going through. As such, “Intimate partner violence escape room” is primarily educational. It was designed to both guide people in the community, as well as for anyone finding themselves in an abusive relationship.



**Figure 8:** Rebecca Migdal “Intimate partner violence escape room,” Frame Eleven

Migdal’s process began with a questionnaire that she sent to an undisclosed number of participants, with the results structuring the format of the comic presentation. The questions include answers that reveal how the protagonists came to their realisation of the danger they were in, and how they found themselves in that situation. They also reveal the structures of misogyny that construct abuse as a set systemic and informal social processes (Bratich, 2022). Asking the question, “How did I get into this trap?” leads to stories of how many of these women were socialised as girls (by a mother in one instance) into normalising violent and abusive behaviour on the part of males. The prompt, “I knew I was in an abusive relationship when...” sparks stories of their realisation of how sadistic their male partners were towards them and their children. The question, “What’s stopping me from getting away?” opens the door for the reader to gain insight that abusive situations are controlling situations, and attempting to leave can exacerbate cycles of violence that might erupt any minute underneath the ‘relationship pyre.’

As a polyvocal narrative, choosing images from the comic to analyse forced a tight selection from the storylines. Though each of the stories have unique aspects to their tales, I concentrated somewhat on the dove and fox predator/prey dynamic, and more on the dynamic involving the koala and python. I did so because of some koala/python panels locate imagery closely interlaced with text, as seen in Figure 8: Frame Eleven. Titled in the top left corner, “What’s Stopping Me From Getting Away?” this panel is largely encompassed by the entwined figure of the koala tightly encircled by the python. Whereas the koala is naturalistically rendered in great detail, the python’s body is like a chalkboard’s: his body is an outline with words, a memory, listing the aspects of the relationship he had weaponised to trap his partner: children as a weapon; false promises; controlling the money, and so on. Both the python’s body-memory and the words representing all manner of abusive behaviours constrict the survivor in a non-linear (i.e., a-textual) manner signifying how these experiences were accumulative, unpredictable, and literally constricting.

Additionally, when viewed in sequence, from Figure 9: Frame Fifteen to Figure 10: Frame Twenty-One, the koala’s attempts to cry for help are obviously escalating as need arises, and her



feelings of not being heard or understood frustrate and endanger her. These aspects of the narrative are represented in the facial expressions of the koala and the fierce predatory instinctual actions of the python.

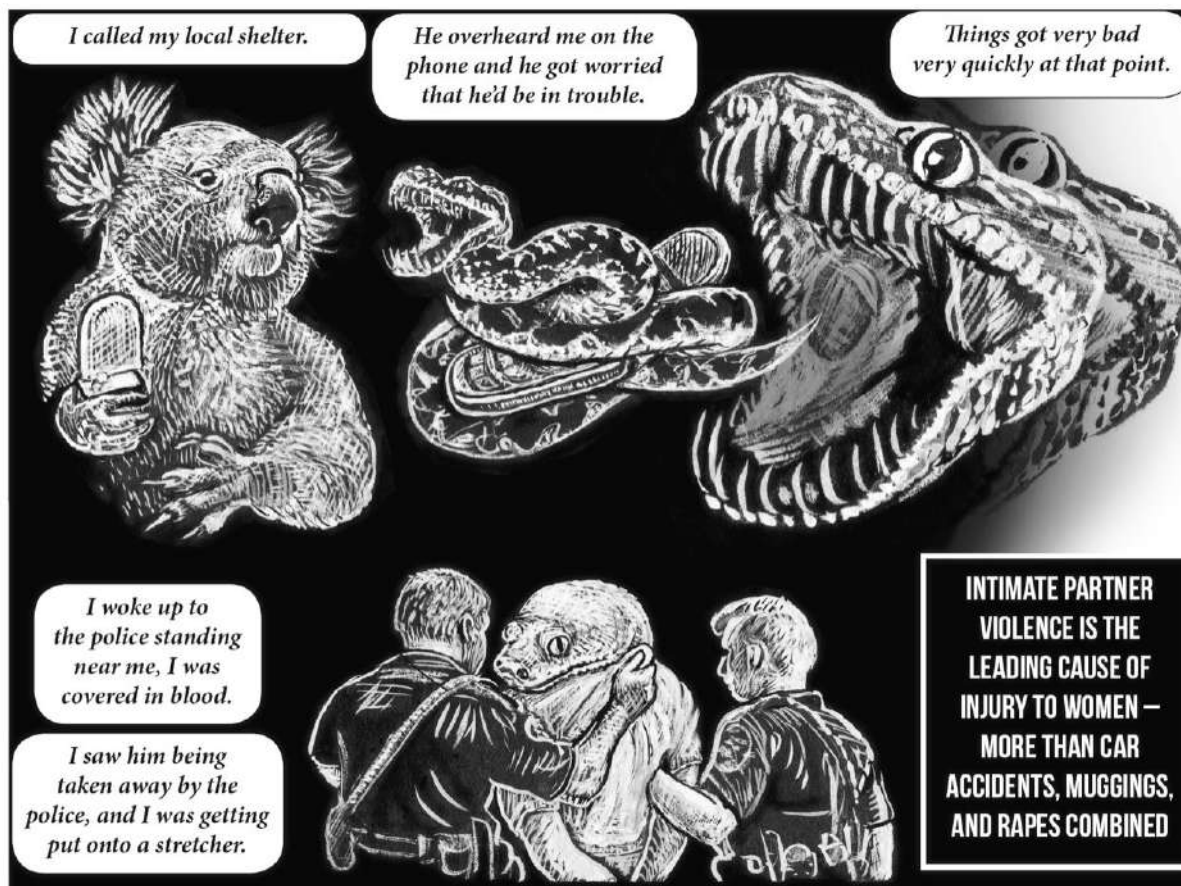


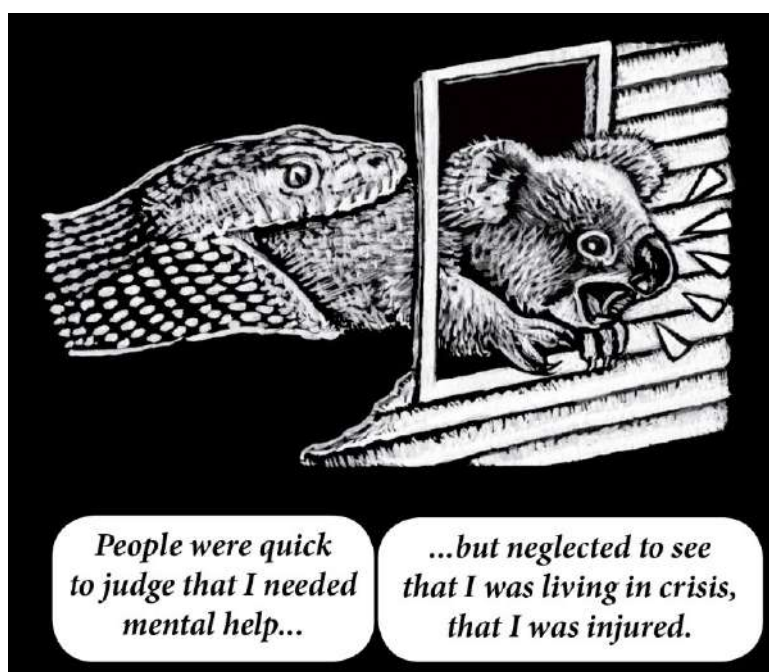
Figure 9: Rebecca Migdal “Intimate partner violence escape room,” Frame Fifteen

In answer to the question, “What happens when I try to leave” a series of very disturbing tales are recalled, each with varying outcomes. The male abuser turning into a stalker intent on destroying the woman’s independent life; a man harming the woman in front of her son and then manipulating the legal system by claiming she ‘fell;’ the system, in collusion with the battering husband, then forced her to stay with him another 3 months, threatening she would lose custody of her child if she left; another man claiming the scratches an abuse victim made while fighting back were ‘signs’ he, the perpetrator, was actually the ‘victim;’ and a woman (represented by the koala) receiving a grievous injury requiring medical attention after attempting to call a women’s shelter seeking safety from her abusive male partner, as shown in Figure 9: Frame Fifteen.

Unlike previous frames, the text in the upper left corner starting the narrative in Figure 9: Frame Fifteen represents the voice of the survivor telling her story, signified through the use of italicised font. The visual-narrative in this instance is divided between upper and lower sequences, with the upper section containing most of the action. The upper left shows the koala calling the women’s shelter, the upper right the python’s threat of violence, signified by the powerful open jaws of the snake. In the centre, the python captures the cell phone (presumably violently, as the text indicates). Below, in the lower portion, the python, now anthropomorphised, is arrested. These, and other stories of violence in the pages of this comic bear witness to the suffering these women faced at the hands of individuals who, for all intents and purposes, chose to inflict harm on those who are closest to them in their lives, often without any social accountability for their actions.

Throughout Migdal’s comic narrative, we are presented with the argument that the threat of violence is an act of violence. Through the baring of fangs and the displaying of claws, threatening

animalistic behaviours stand in for the ongoing and insidious nature of intimate partner attacks, fostered by domination through fear and coercion. The stories' primary audiences are victims of intimate partner violence and bystanders/potential supporters. As such, "Intimate partner violence escape room" opens a window on an often-invisible aspect of domestic violence: what may never be 'revealed' to the outside world, as depicted in Figure 10: Frame Twenty-One. This particular image is originally shown on the bottom right corner of a full-page sequence that begins with the question, "What Kind of Intervention Isn't Helping? I selected it to focus deeper on the koala/python dynamic. Reading this visual image as the page's conclusion, the representation clearly identifies the secretive aspect to which much harm is conducted. This fact not only invisibilises the harm to outsiders, but, as the text underlines, causes them to pathologise or blame the victim of the abuse. In this graphic, we see the koala emphatically calling for help, as signified by the thick sound-indicating marks radiating from outside its wide, open mouth. Paradoxically, despite this image directly expressing trauma, the comic also narrates how there is a real fear of loss that also blocks victims from reaching out: whether they fear the potential loss of home, fear of arrest, or loss of children, the secretive nature of many victims' experiences can lead would-be supporters away from fully engaging due to lack of understanding. Leaving an abusive partner may certainly have consequences: for example, one interviewee in this comic did experience jailtime as a consequence of being forced under the threat of violence to write bad cheques.



**Figure 10:** Rebecca Migdal "Intimate partner violence escape room," Frame Twenty-One

After disclosing the types of 'supports' that were not helpful to survivors – in one instance Migdal even represents the police and court representatives as the same aggressor species as the abuser, just to reinforce the systemic nature of misogyny experience by the victim – the comic concludes with a series of constructive measures. The first most important support is having a safe place to stay. Second, one needs people to talk to who believe the survivor, whether among friends or in a community setting. Finally, survivors are advised to take care of their bodies because this is how to regain a sense of control over themselves. The last page lists statistics of how many millions of people intimate partner violence affects in the United States, noting the things communities can do to help, including helping survivors and their children find housing, hosting survivors' support groups, and building community awareness about intimate partner violence. Finally toll-free hotlines are listed at the bottom. As a survivor herself, Migdal is passionate about educating more people on the issue of intimate partner violence. To be supportive in her own community, she is also connected with a local shelter where she has appeared (and at related events) as an author, puppeteer and advocate. For Migdal, this comic is designed to be "a real map for what is going on underneath" as she believes there is much that is misunderstood in the popular conception of abusive situations – many people don't

understand why some women can't or won't leave the situation. In the end, the dove flies free from an overturned opened cage, representing hope, and escape from the confines of her previous life. Sharing this comic, a consciousness raising device to educate and raising awareness about the complexity of intimate partner violence, is an important way to respectfully and safely communicate to survivors and those sympathetic to their plight.

#### **Frame Four: Using comics as vehicles for feminist consciousness-raising**

In contemporary North American popular culture, feminism is both vibrant and reviled, elevated and attacked, taken for granted, yet turned to when injustices arise against women in society. This is because for much of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, while feminist ideas have become commonplace and mainstream, 'Feminism' itself has been repudiated (Gill, 2007). Gill (2007) explains this trajectory as part of a 'backlash' (a term coined by Susan Faludi in 1992; see (Faludi et al., 2020)). In an era of 'enlightened-sexism,' sexist stereotypes of men and women are both elevated and made humorous, thus mystifying real cultural change in women's lives. The change is such that fewer women may be represented in subservient roles such as the traditional housewife, but they remain in subject positions that reinforce the privilege of the heterosexual male gaze (i.e, the woman warrior in a thong, or the one-dimensional sexcapade gossip program known as *Sex in the City*) (Douglas, 2010). Whereas mainstream media persists in recasting 'the' feminine (but not feminist) gender into celebratory celebrity shots inflected with 'porn chic' or, alternatively, 'girl boss' vibes, or attempts to intervene in female subjectivities with consumerist appeals towards a self-indulgent manufacturing of desires, other constructions of femininity do exist. Many such alternatives can be found in breakaway radical cultural productions that have circulated throughout feminist circles since the 1970s, productions such as riot grrl zines and comics, which, with the growth of online and social technologies, are now supplemented by feminist blogs, vlogs, podcasts, and infographics. Whereas Gill (2007) argues feminist subcultural activities don't have any mainstream influence, with the rise of social media, the impact of feminist content creators, especially those utilising the medium of comics and graphic novels, has steadily grown. (See for example, Noomin's (2019) *Drawing Power Women's Stories of Sexual Violence, Harassment, and Survival*, which appeared the same year as *Shameless Feminists*.) Within this paradigm, clearly, *World War 3 Illustrated*, Issue #50, *Shameless Feminists* (Jones et al., 2019) constructs a mixed-gender, though woman-lead, nodal point of comic production as a foundation for feminist consciousness raising. This article argues for the important contribution the comics "Whose body?" and "Intimate partner violence escape room" make to raise awareness of misogynist violence and threats of violence. Following bell hooks' (2014) adage "Feminists are made, not born" (p.7), these stories demonstrates the systemic nature of patriarchal oppression through reflective, situated personal accounts and recollections.

Thus, in "Whose body?" the reader learns about attempted sexual assault, but also has the opportunity to question the systemic poverty and racism at the root of a 'bad neighbourhood.' The protagonist's refusal to let the experience of assault be transformed into fear of downtrodden people and urban areas, while at the same time fighting misogyny, first through speaking out and then through self awareness and courage, offers an alternative narrative concerning female safety, one that is different from the common approach that posits authoritarian securitisation and policing as the solution to social ills. Through Jones' story, she refuses to turn feminism into a hammer to attack other oppressed identities. Instead, in "Whose body?," consciousness raising starts from the personal, demonstrating through the story-line elements of everyday feminism as a passionate anger against injustices that is transmuted into the mass consciousness of large-scale protests for bodily autonomy. In "Intimate partner violence escape room" patriarchy is visually systemised through the construction of a symbolic association with predator/aggressive species and misogynistic social behaviours. In this manner the relentless, uncaring, and uncompromising quality of male partner abuse is communicated through representations of stalking and hunting drives in animals (somewhat anthropomorphised). Moreover, by representing each of the stories through animal characters, relative anonymity is retained. This allows for a measure of protection not only from the men who originally abused the women, but also from so-called 'trolls' who, instead of finding empathy with survivors of abuse, seek opportunities to harass them. Unfortunately, what is lost is an indication of other intersecting factors, such as race or class, that may be mitigating their circumstances. However, the strength in this format



is that through the use of the predator/prey dynamic, and the inclusion of statistics on violence against women, Migdal raises consciousness of the perpetual nature of the cycle of misogynistic abuse and the structures of patriarchy underlying it. Finally at the end, with the cage door open, we see the dove flying free, alone.

Consciousness raising can take many avenues, and be embodied in many mediums, whether online, visually, textually, or as bell hooks (2014) would have it, as a reprisal of 1970s consciousness raising groups. Although social media may be changing the landscape of the emerging 4<sup>th</sup> wave of feminism (Blevins, 2018), I argue comics, graphic novels and zines are enduring mediums of social potentiality. As feminist and radical graphic artists, Jones and Migdal have been mobilising their art and comics for social change consciousness raising for decades. Their aesthetic and visual-narrative tactics engage the reader not only stylistically, but also content-wise to educate and (hopefully) evoke empathy in readers regarding the experiences shared. Furthermore, they suggest effective actions to aid the abused, whether by co-identification with Jones' political activism, or Migdal's direction to act by calling a crisis hotline.

One significant social forum that assists in the production of cultural consciousness raising is the field of education, and in the context of raising a feminist awareness of misogyny, sexual assault and intimate partner violence, educators may be engaged with adult learners both young and older. Individually, comics offer a unique opportunity for self-guided learners to engage in their own consciousness-raising journeys, starting from wherever they may find themselves in relation to challenging feminist subjects. Thus, through radical graphics, readers inevitably become learners through the storylines unfolding through the visual-narrative. If these topics are then taken up formally in a classroom, or informally in a reading group, readers in these learning groups sharing their encounters with visual-narrative texts have an opportunity to interactively raise awareness through dialogue and exchange. However, there are many kinds of learners; it is important to remember that some learners struggle, especially if they identify their own experiences with oppression reproduced in the texts. Reading comics such as those created by Jones and Migdal may become an accessible outlet for learning to heal from trauma, but expressing knowledge gained from the comics depends on many other external factors, for example, having trust in the learning group's interpersonal dynamics. For those who are brave enough to tell their stories of survival, they are contributing to the collective creation of a feminist 'tool-kit,' required by many others to critically engage with the truth of sexualised and gendered violence. Ultimately, learning has many steps, and may be difficult. Whether reading comics alone or in groups, it is important to remember that learning happens beyond the page – it requires a broader vision to strive for, a story to latch onto, and the desire to take the information one receives and make it a part of one's own 'tool-kit.'

To assume that we live in a 'postfeminist' world where patriarchy, sexism, and misogyny supposedly no longer apply is to live a lie of privilege. Feminist comics such as "Whose body?" and "Intimate partner violence escape room" bring a dose of reality back into the discourse surrounding feminism by demonstrating both women's resistance and acts of survival in the face of misogynistic domination. In this way, hand-drawn reality, mediated by first-hand experiential accounts, is far more powerful than a photograph could ever be, because it constitutes a relationship between the artist and the reader through the direct line of visual storytelling.

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# Exploring Women’s Transformative Learning and Community Building through Practicing Martial Arts to Disrupt Gendered and Hetero-Patriarchal Norms

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## Abstract

This article explores the potential for martial arts to support transformation and community building for women. Findings indicate women can derive many individual benefits from learning martial arts. Yet, the benefits must extend beyond the individual level to create social change. Based on an evaluation of literature on women’s experiences learning martial arts, I use my perspective as an adult education researcher and a feminist lens to propose creative approaches to supporting women in learning martial arts. Supporting women in learning martial arts requires promoting creativity and invention in practice. Feminist new materialism, transformative learning theory, and communities of practice are the theories that guide the direction of this article. The major contribution of this article is to offer creative approaches for imagining a feminist praxis through martial arts that could foster learning environments that encourage self-determination and build social support and resistance to hetero-patriarchal power and gender inequity, which has relevance to broader educational settings and communities.

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## Keywords:

**Martial arts** are defined as “a myriad of systems of embodied movements and underlying philosophy and pedagogies” (Pedrini & Jennings, 2021, p. 2) which have a foundation in self-defense training and an attention to health-promoting and self-cultivation practices (Moore et al., 2020). The term covers a wide range of combat-style activities and practices under the broader concept of *body pedagogics* (Shilling, 2017). Another term, commonly used to broaden the definition of martial arts, is the term Martial Arts and Combat Sports (MACS), which encompasses, both traditional movement systems and practices along with modern inventions like Mixed Martial Arts, referred known by the acronym MMA (Bowman, 2019; Channon & Jennings, 2014; Pedrini & Jennings, 2021). Cultural and societal assumptions between martial arts and combat have led to the dominance of masculine ideals within martial arts spaces, which is also an issue in the larger context of sport and particularly significant for the **topic of women in sports** (Magnusson, 2018; Maor, 2019; Mizwierski & Phipps, 2015; **Rasmussen** et al., 2021). Women’s participation in martial arts, therefore, has required some ingenuity and resulted in substantial debates by challenging traditional gendered expectations of femininity (Davies & Deckert, 2019). There is a growing body of scholarship investigating the potential impacts of women’s participation in martial arts to support challenging gender norms and expectations (Lindsay et al., 2023).

Research into women’s participation in martial arts has grown substantially in the last two decades, producing some compelling findings concerning self-transformation and the ability to alter mainstream perspectives and normative assumptions about gender and femininity (Channon & Matthews, 2015; Channon & Phipps, 2017; Nichols et al., 2023). For instance, practicing martial arts has been seen to contribute to embodied identity development, shifting self-narratives and creating spaces where women can physically, mentally, and emotionally challenge and break free of traditional gender narratives (Guthrie, 1995; De Welde, 2003; Nichols et al., 2023). Research into martial arts seeking to challenge hetero-normative ideals and expectations may identify ways to transmute gender

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narratives, disrupt gender hierarchies, and combat systemic gender inequities (Noel, 2009). More research is needed into the pedagogical implications of learning martial arts for supporting women in disrupting gendered and hetero-patriarchal norms, violence, and oppression, because pedagogy is pivotal in shaping women's martial arts learning outcomes (Channon, 2018).

This article focuses on strategies to improve women's learning and participation in martial arts to address gender and social justice issues in martial arts. This is of significant because as Griffith (2023) identifies in the martial art of capoeira, discussions on the ways capoeira have the potential to promote social justice remain incomplete without attention to the ways gender injustice and potentially sexual harassment remain unaddressed within capoeira learning contexts. Gender justice concerns addressing the multitude of injustices and inequalities persisting in society that are based on gender, such as violence against women, unequal distribution of power and labour and lack of recognition of women's abilities and achievements (Clavero & Galligan, 2021; Cin, 2017; Gheus, 2011; Young, 1990).

Gender norms are learned through social interactions and embedded within institutions and determine what are socially acceptable activities for women and men to engage in (Cislaghi & Heise, 2020). Gender norms must be challenged owing to a need for more diverse ways of representing gender, and because the long-standing association between masculinity and martial arts, and sports in general has produced a plethora of societal problem of gender segregation and the ways gendered systems are responsible for unequal distribution of resources, roles and power (Cislaghi & Heise, 2020; Magnusson, 2018; McDonagh & Pappano, 2008; Pape, 2020; Rasmussen et al., 2021).

The gender-segregated nature of sports participation based on traditional forms of masculinity and femininity, may discourage those who do not align with the gendered behavior from participating in certain sports, which is how women are inhibited from participating in certain sports (Pape, 2020; Rasmussen et al., 2021). Gender is important to understand because it influences certain attitudes and behaviours and can determine whether women will begin, remain, and succeed in a sport (Clavero & Galligan, 2021; Lindqvist et al., 2021). Women have been unjustly excluded from participating in sports that do not align with heteronormative femininity, and there is a systemic perception of female athletes being inferior to male athletes in terms of power, strength, and ability which needs to be challenged (McDonough; Pape, 2020). This is more than an individual issue, change is needed at the institutional level, and sustained action and attention to institutional transformation relating to gender-power relations are required to improve women's participation in sport overall and martial arts in particular (Clavero & Galligan, 2021; Pape, 2020).

I employ adult education and feminist theories to explore the transformative potential and unique community-building aspects available through practicing martial arts. From this exploration, I discuss implications of viewing martial arts as a creative practice and teaching methods to promote gender justice in martial arts learning settings. The questions driving this research are: How are women able to re-imagine and re-create their self-concept through martial arts? What pedagogical approaches can promote the establishment of inclusive communities in martial arts, aiming to subvert gender norms, expectations, and hierarchies?

I begin by sharing my conceptualization of martial arts as a creative practice included within the broader category of artistic ways of knowing (Blackburn Miller, 2020). I then explain the theoretical frameworks that inform my approach. These theories include feminist new materialism (Barad, 2007; Haraway, 2016), transformative learning theory (Dirkx, 2008; 2012; English & Irving, 2012; Mezirow, 1991); and communities of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 2016). I use these theories, to evaluate my findings and offer new directions and creative approaches to support women in learning martial arts. The significance of these pedagogical innovations in martial arts concerns fostering learning environments that encourage self-determination and build social support and resistance to hetero-patriarchal power and gender inequity. Although the recommendations provided are based on martial arts learning contexts, they could theoretically be applied to other sports and educational settings.

## Martial arts as a creative practice and artistic way of knowing

Martial arts, briefly introduced in the beginning of this article, have been conceptualized in many ways (Bowman, 2017; Judkins, 2016). To elaborate upon what was presented in the introduction, martial arts are holistic movement-based pedagogies that “unite aesthetic and philosophical aspects” and in doing result in improved “breath control and relaxation, discipline, respect, self-esteem, and mind-body coordination” (Ciaccioni et al., 2024, p. 2). Due to the stylized and creative movement sequences, discipline, and body awareness inherent to martial arts practices, it is little wonder that have earned respect from general society (Farrer & Whalen-Bridge, 2011). Beyond the physical dimensions, the mental health benefits from practicing are gaining interest in research studies, although these benefits must be tempered with other research noting the potential for injury and adverse health affects (Messauod, 2016; Pedrini & Jennings, 2021). Essentially, teaching martial arts offers ample opportunities for interpretation, innovation, and creative influence on the learner's body and mind (Wetzler, 2015).

There are many martial arts styles that have been diversely described as hard, soft, traditional, and modern movement (Ciaccioni et al., 2024). Some examples are provided to give context to martial arts mentioned later in this article. Originating in Japan, Karate is widely recognized around the world for its focus on self-defense without the use of weapons, using empty-handed combat movement techniques, that dynamically engage the entire body (Messauod, 2016). Taekwondo, which also originated in Japan, is a modern martial art that emphasizes fluid hand movements (Cholet, 2020). Muay Thai, translated to “the art of eight limbs”, is referred to as both the martial art and national sport of Thailand (Davies & Deckert, 2019; 2020; Muller-Junior & Capraro, 2022). Muay Thai presents a particularly intriguing example for creative development and innovation given that the exact origins of lineage of the martial art are unknown, and the martial art has been adopted into Thai sporting culture and nation-building (Muller-Junior & Capraro, 2022).

Despite popular misperception, not all martial arts come from Asian origins (Bowman, 2021). Capoeira, an Afro-Brazilian martial art, combines fluid fight-like movements with music in a circle, known as a *roda*, and includes elements of dance and play (Griffith, 2023). Boxing, although it may not seem like a “traditional” martial art, is one of the oldest forms of combat and is included in the category of MACS (Jennings, 2014). There is no singular way to conceptualize or define a martial art and it will depend on practitioner’s style and experiences and even culture (Bowman, 2017; Judkins, 2016).

Although primarily conceptualized as physical practices, martial arts present a multi-modal learning context that involves complex interactions between practitioners, for instance through the practice of sparring drills, and even between an individual and themselves, through self-cultivation and self-transcendence (Maor, 2019; Messaoud, 2016). Learning martial arts takes place in a communal setting which involves social and cultural dimensions and embodied knowledge transmission – knowledge transference from one body to another (Brown & Jennings, 2011).

From the perspective of transformative learning, Blackburn Miller (2020) includes martial arts in a category of artistic ways of knowing. Drama and theatre are also in this category and have been sites for transformative learning theory research. Artistic ways of knowing collectively correspond to the category of expressive, embodied, and performing arts, which can spark potent learning through a “deeper awareness and widened possibility” (Dawson, 2017, p. 383), particularly on emotional levels. Artistic ways of knowing, emerge from theories on multiple ways of knowing, and Blackburn Miller (2020) concludes that “due to the aesthetic, emotive, and extrarational nature of the arts” (p. 349) personal transformation results through greater self-expression, perspective transformation, and better understanding of the “other”, in addition to dealing with difficult or complicated emotions. Martial arts, when approached as a creative practice, offer potential insights into navigating complex issues like gender justice and transformative learning, which I discuss through the theoretical perspectives I introduce next.

## Theoretical frameworks

I use the following three theoretical perspectives to evaluate my findings in the literature and in my discussion of opportunities for advancing gender justice using feminist praxis in martial arts learning contexts.

### Feminist new materialism and situated and embodied knowledge

Feminist new materialism is a theoretical direction in feminist scholarship following the affective turn, which was an early 20th-century shift for many disciplines that connected social, cultural, and political with emotional, embodied and unconscious power and politics (Clough, 2008; Zembylas, 2021). The affective turn acknowledges “feeling, emotion, and affect are forms of knowledge” (Williams, 2019, p. 37). Feminist new materialisms take this direction of thought further by paying attention to how the material processes of the world impact sensory dimensions of human experience, making connections between human experience, nature and culture (Thorpe et al., 2020; Truman, 2019). This connection pertains to gendered dimensions of power relations and the relationship between moving bodies, the bodies of the environment, and the social and political structures that impact experiences and the environment (Thorpe et al., 2020). I employ three concepts from scholars who have contributed to the development of feminist new materialism to explore women’s experiences in martial arts: agential realism, situated and embodied knowledges, and speculative fabulation.

**Agential realism** is a feminist new materialism concept developed by Barad (2007) which indicates how agency does not exist within a single body but is dispersed through the relationships and bodies and intra-actions in their networks. Feminist new materialisms, specifically Hickey-Moody’s (2013) affective pedagogies, were employed in the research of Nichols et al. (2023) to study the embodied experiences of a group of women in a fight camp guided by a feminist philosophy and affective coaching approach.

Haraway’s theorization of situated embodied knowledges and speculative fabulation have been instrumental in highlighting materiality and fostering the development of feminist new materialism (Truman, 2019). Situated and embodied knowledges emphasize the importance of women’s experiences in generating valuable and specific knowledge (Haraway, 1988). Situated knowledges and feminist embodiment challenge disembodied objectivity that potentially incites irresponsible knowledge claims about lived reality (Haraway, 1988). According to Haraway (1988), relying on interpretations from insiders and the subjugated provides a stronger perspective for critiquing hierarchical power relations and providing insight for transforming knowledge systems to address gender justice issues in educational context.

*Speculative fabulation* is a method that supports imagining flourishing, which Haraway (2016) defines as a “mode of attention, a theory of history, and a practice of worlding” (p. 230). By drawing on sociological imagination, speculative fabulation challenges conventional and hegemonic notions of time and relationships in learning by incorporating aesthetics and affect (Cartens, 2020; Preda & Matei, 2023). This process involves creating narratives and rethinking the world. It is useful as a pedagogical endeavour because it offers “novel territories for thinking, feeling and doing differently” (Cartens, 2020, p. 75). Re-imagining gender roles and norms requires us to actively engage in practices that foster new ways of thinking to challenge gendered expectations which is why speculative fabulation has relevance for gender justice and implications as a pedagogical resource to support new directions for women learning martial arts.

### Transformative learning in adult education

Transformative learning is an adult education theory with many themes and variations (Mezirow, 1991; Tisdell, 2012). Since Mezirow’s (1978) early work, several writers, particularly in women’s learning contexts, have theorized the role of the body in transformative learning (English & Irving, 2012). Discussing the significance of emotion from women’s transformative learning experiences, English and Irving (2012) emphasize the significance of “the arts in supporting



creativity” (p. 253). They specifically acknowledge Clover (2006) whose research into participatory photography and the arts improved learners’ agency and empowerment in learning.

The emotional dimension informed the direction of Dirkx’s (2008; 2012) work and much of his contributions to transformative learning theory. Although he did not focus specifically on women’s experiences, his research into transformative learning and the affective dimension and how it supports transformation is still supportive (English & Irving, 2012). This embodied perspective on transformative learning affords a different way of understanding transformation and making sense of experience by integrating thought, emotion, and behaviour for a more holistic way of knowing (Dirkx, 2008). Dirkx’s (2012) view on fostering transformative learning involves the imaginal method that uses emotion-laden images to help individuals develop deeper insights and connect with “aspects of the self of which [they] were previously unaware” (p. 125). My use of transformative learning theory is focused on embodied and emotional perspectives and imaginative engagement to support women’s learning of martial arts.

## **Communities of practice**

Learning martial arts is both an individual and collective endeavour. Community is a significant component of learning martial arts and has profound effects on individuals who practise. Engagement in martial arts contexts deserves appreciation not only for the knowledge and skills that help improve personal skill and abilities but also for the socio-cultural practices and traditions connected to learning (Bowman; 2017; 2021). Appreciation for these dimensions aligns with Lave and Wenger’s (1991) perspective on situated learning and communities of practice (Wenger, 2016).

Lave and Wenger (1991) view learning as a “situated activity” for which they consider the central defining characteristic to be a process termed “**legitimate peripheral participation**” (p. 29). Legitimate peripheral participation refers to the way a newcomer becomes part of a community of practice and progresses towards full community participation. Irrespective of the martial art, there is a natural progression and steps for a beginner or novice learner to become a master/expert learner. This matches Lave and Wenger’s (1991) description of legitimate peripheral participation associated with becoming a full member of a community of practice. Moreover, Wenger (2016) recognizes the inextricability of experience of being in the world and negotiation of meaning. *Engagement*, *imagination*, and *alignment* are the three modes of belonging within a community of practice which contribute to identity formation (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Combining these dimensions of communities of practice support the aspects of feminist new materialism and transformative learning theory already presented and are relevant to explore women’s participation and learning in martial arts in greater detail.

## **Findings from the literature**

Making sense of the literature on women’s learning experiences in martial arts is exceedingly complex, due to the diverse nature of the learning environment and style of martial arts which is situationally and contextually shaped (Lindsay et al., 2023). The predominance of research presented in this review came from mixed-sex learning environments, but there were several from women’s only learning contexts. To appreciate the educational significance of women practicing martial arts, Channon (2018) asserts the need to establish a connection between martial arts and gender studies and incorporate self-defense literature. Accordingly, the methodological approach for this review of the literature draws from these three areas of scholarship. For this literature review, my findings indicate both the benefits women derive from engaging in martial arts and challenges that women may encounter in learning martial arts and may impede their progress toward gender justice. Recognizing the successes as well as where the challenges reside is important for planning future directions in pedagogy and practice. This recognition is where the lens of adult education and feminist theory is warranted, as I will discuss in this paper’s final section.

## **Opportunities/ advantages**

The fact that women can learn martial arts and that there is a diverse and expanding body of literature and scholarship on their experiences is encouraging (Channon & Matthews, 2015). The themes on the advantages derived from learning martial arts for women which I present in this section are: learning self-defense and physical feminism, empowerment, care and self-healing, embodied identity formation, transforming self-narratives, and the subversion of gender norms through strategic enactments of femininity.

## **Self-defense and physical feminism**

Self-defense for women means learning to protect oneself, developing a greater sense of self-worth, and ultimately being “disruptive of the embodied ethos of rape culture” (McCaughey, 1997, p. 18), and is one of the most established reasons women learn martial arts (Channon & Phipps, 2017; Zhou, 2023). From a self-defense perspective, learning martial arts is transformative not only through recognition that a woman is physically powerful enough to defend herself and that women “have the right to self defense” (Guthrie, 2014, p. 112).

McCaughey’s (1997) ethnographic research connected self-defense training with the development of physical feminism. Since then, this concept has been used in the sports sociology literature on the benefits of women’s participation in martial arts. Physical feminism relates to the benefits that women obtain from engaging in physical activity and, particularly, the strength and confidence they develop to stand up for themselves and challenge patriarchal societal perceptions of men’s physical superiority (Aiba, 2014; McCaughey, 1997; Noel, 2009). The physical benefits of martial arts training are well recognized, but other benefits, such as the social and emotional benefits of martial arts, also deserve attention.

## ***Women’s empowerment***

Both in the self-defense literature and studies on women’s martial arts, learning can produce a sense of empowerment which is a prominent motive for how women can challenge hetero-patriarchal norms (Guthrie, 1995; Hamilton, 2022; Velija et al., 2013). Empowerment is conceptualized as the transformation in perspective women have of themselves by realizing that they are physically strong and physically and emotionally capable. For instance, Castelnuovo and Guthrie (1998) propose that in learning Karate, women experience empowerment in mind and body which improves perceptions of their bodies and their perception of other women. However, Hamilton (2022) makes the critique that often, her case with MMA, “any such empowerment is individualized rather than extended to women as a group, and those who benefit most from such empowerment – white, hetero-feminine women – are those who already benefit from the interlocking systems of privilege provided by white supremacy and hetero-patriarchy” (p. 655).

Neoliberal and post-feminist discourses complicate women’s empowerment with the concept that empowerment is individualized (Hamilton, 2022; Velija et al., 2013). Individualized empowerment does not connect with broader systems changes necessary to counteract systemic marginalization and enact real transformation for true gender justice. As such, collective resistance, which can be developed through feminist praxis and goes beyond individual physical empowerment, deserves attention (Velija et al., 2013).

## ***Care of the self and healing***

Another benefit from practicing martial arts, is a feminist “care of the self” (Guthrie, 1995, p. 108) which supports healing from gender-based violence and resistance to gender oppression. Maor (2019) notes how an ethics of care shaped her experience and helped her to become aware of herself and her training partner and become “reflective of unnecessary uses of authority and power” (p. 42) when practicing martial arts.

Cultivation is a concept associated with the transformative aspect of learning martial arts, more so in those martial arts of Eastern origin which have a foundation in Confucius thought (Jennings

et al., 2020). Pedrini and Jennings (2021) build a theoretical framework upon the notion of “care of the self” connected to the concept of cultivation. This framework presents four kinds of cultivation: self-cultivation, which relates to an individual’s personal development through martial arts mind-body activities; shared cultivation, which refers to the collective development experienced by a group learning martial arts; social cultivation, is referred to human transformation and transcendence as related “the transmission of cultural values and symbolic meanings” (p. 6) which happens through martial arts; and ecological cultivation, which is referred to as a kind of environmental sensitivity or awareness developed in learning martial arts. This framework is helpful as an assessment tool to identify health-promoting as well as unhealthy pedagogical practices and shows the multiple dimensions martial arts may support health and healing through individual and social change promoted in learning.

### ***Embodied identity formation***

Transformation in martial arts is associated with an embodied learning experience whereby martial arts present a creative way to embody a stronger and more resilient identity which has potential for challenging gendered norms imposed on the female body (Karoura et al. 2014). Cholet (2020) investigates personal transformation for women who earned a black belt in Taekwondo. These women experienced transformation through their bodies which influenced how they carried themselves in the world (Cholet, 2020). They expressed knowing themselves “through a significantly different perspective” (Cholet, 2020, p. 3) after Taekwondo training. Channon and Jennings (2014) support these findings with how “practitioners’ embodied experiences affect their own lives as well as the wider cultural settings and structures within which they are situated” (p. 1).

Participating in “hard” martial arts, sparring, and training for competition challenges normative expectations of femininity (Maor, 2019). Some female fighters and athletes, specifically in Muay Thai and MMA, find this exciting (Mierzwinski & Phipps, 2015). For instance, Nichols et al. (2023) conclude that “kinetically excessive movement life can generate moments of (un)learning habitual movement patterns and postures that have materialized through normative gender ideals” (p. 142). This counters historical performative patterns of gender in traditional Western contexts wherein women have been socialized to embody less confidence and less space (McDonough & Pappano, 2008; Nash, 2017). This transformation speaks to a novel type of embodied identity formation that breaks with normative gender patterns and ideals that have restricted women’s agency and self-determination. The body is a place to begin, but women’s embodied learning in martial arts does more than transform the way in which women think about and talk about themselves, in other words, their self-narratives.

### ***Transforming self-narratives***

Transformations in self-narratives have been observed relate to changes from being “fragile and fearful of harm” to “break out of traditional feminine training and to recreate [themselves]” (Guthrie, 1995, p. 113). These thoughts and feelings are evidence of the transformation of self-narratives. DeWelde (2003) who studied women’s self-defense courses, argues that in learning self-defense women develop “agency in constructing self-narratives is interpreted as resistance to dominant narratives” (p. 248). Transforming self-narratives, through greater self-esteem and self-acceptance is significant for shifting stories women tell about themselves is an important step for re-imagining and transforming their self-concept and the influence of gendered expectations and stereotyping.

As another example, Nash (2017) describes how she “developed a new self-image and a reformulated conception of what [her] body could do” (p. 743) through boxing. The change in her self-narrative shows an increased sense of self-confidence which is connected to her trusting her situated knowledge and interpretation of her learning for personal transformation (Harraway, 1988). This example also relates to the power of emotionally-laden images and the imaginal method in transformative learning theory through which a learner connects with a part of themselves with which they were previously unaware (Dirkx, 2012).

### *Subversive potentials and strategic use of femininity*

The subversive potential for disrupting gender hierarchies through strategic uses of femininity, which goes by several names, shows creativity and has been studied in different martial arts (Channon & Phipps, 2017; Hamilton, 2022). The concept connects to **agential realism** (Barad, 2007) in that “performativity provides a critical counterpoint to representationalism in emphasizing the practices and actions through which means, boundaries and bodies are produced and substantiated” (Hinton, 2013, p. 174). In other words, by choosing how they enact femininity in particular contexts, women can use their bodies and the practice of martial arts to challenge the hegemony of heteropatriarchy by occupying spaces where male representation is unquestioned.

Channon and Phipps (2017) use the term “alternative femininity” which they suggest is the method in which women specifically and purposefully choose how to enact femininity and resistance against patriarchy and male hegemony. These ways in which women in martial spaces learn how to embody and perform femininity in particular ways are seen “to destabilise normative sexual hierarchies rather than uncritically reproduce them” (Channon & Phipps, 2017, p. 29). This observation speaks to the entanglements of Barad’s (2007) **agential realism with the intra-action between matter and meaning and how shifting configurations of power and** “bodily specificities are materialisations of political significance and value” (Hinton, 2013, p. 184).

Davies and Deckert (2019) use the term “ingenious agency” to explore women’s strategic use of femininity which may appear to confirm to dominant stereotypical gender norms, but in fact is “reshaping the face ... of fighting and inspiring a younger generation of women to take up martial arts and combat sports” (p. 220). Using ingenious agency may support legitimate peripheral participation by providing a means for women to exercise more self-determination which contributes to stronger engagement in martial arts.

Women learning martial arts demonstrate creativity in their uses of femininity for the purpose of advancing their position. This approach to challenging normative gender and power dynamics could be typified as “covert resistance” (Ganoë, 2019, p. 593), which is a kind of social resistance often obscured from overt observation. However, there remain obstacles and misconceptions that women encounter in learning martial arts which need to be addressed to develop effective pedagogies to bring about more gender-positive learning experiences which could be important for encouraging women’s participation in martial arts.

## **Challenges and limitations**

Although there are findings to support the transformative benefits and community-building aspects that are possible for women in learning martial arts, the literature indicates significant controversy and ambivalence towards women’s engagement in martial arts (Nichols et al., 2023). Women continue to be under-recognized and marginalized in martial arts contexts, as in many other sporting contexts (Maor, 2019; McDonough & Pappano, 2008, Tjønndal, 2019). Challenges identified in the literature, that may undermine the potential of women learning martial arts advancing gender justice relate to hegemonic masculinity associated with sport culture and martial arts, particularly in the MMA context, and the female athlete paradox. These challenges are entrenched in culture and society, which makes them complex to barrier to the potential learning martial arts has for disrupting hegemonic gender norms and structures.

### *Hegemonic masculinity in sporting culture and contexts*

Sports, in general, have long been typified as perpetuating masculine norms and expectations (Hamilton, 2022; McDonough & Pappano, 2008). Martial arts, particularly when defined as MACS, are more readily associated with masculinity and frequently militarized contexts (Lindsay et al., 2023; Magnusson, 2018; Moar, 2019). Fewer women participating in martial arts than men has been attributed to this masculinist environment (Mierzwinski & Phipps, 2015). Martial arts spaces can be

exceptionally hierarchical, excluding women and preventing them from advancement (Lindsay et al., 2023; McDonough & Pappano, 2008). This presents an issue and detrimental to *engagement* as a mode of belonging which is why women in learning martial arts may encounter issues of belonging and social isolation which prevents women from reaching *full participation* in the community of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991).

Nash (2017) documents her struggles as a woman in a boxing gym in Tasmania through autoethnography where hegemonic masculinity and performances of masculinity of the other boxers proved problematic at times negatively affecting and even deterring her from training. Tjønndal (2019) also explores social inclusion and exclusion in the context of women in elite boxing, finding that while women's boxing is now included in the Olympics, recognition, sports coverage, and engagement of female athletes is still far less than for male boxers at the same competitive level, indicating gendered power relations. Tjønndal (2019) argues that structural, organizational, and cultural changes are necessary, but that female athletes have minimal control over these changes. These experiences are not unexpected when evaluated from a feminist new materialist perspective which understands how the body and mind are not separate and there is human and environmental intra-action and inseparability (Barad, 2007). Consequences of hegemonic masculinity and how environments can undermine the potential of learning martial arts to challenge gender injustices become more apparent in the specific example of MMA.

### ***The case of mixed martial arts***

The case of MMA offers a counter discourse to the transformative potential of martial arts for addressing gender injustice and community development. The issue with MMA relates to the previous point of the hegemony of masculinity in sporting culture. Hamilton's (2022) research into women's experiences in MMA illustrates that the neoliberalism, post-feminist, and hegemonic masculinity of MMA culture and training environments diminishes the empowerment that women might gain from learning martial arts. The Ultimate Fighting Championship (UFC) is a contemporary media outlet that overtly sexualizes women fighters, perpetuating a culture that further reifies gender categories, violence, and hetero-normative patriarchal control (Maor, 2019). As Channon and Mathews (2015) note, "sexualisation re-imposes an objectified, subordinating image of femininity" (p. 14) which is why the "women warrior" images in the media, when out of women's control, can further objectify women's bodies and impede gender justice, being at odds with the struggles of female athletes to gain respect and recognition.

### ***The female-athlete paradox***

The female-athlete paradox implies that being "athletic" is not "feminine" or "womanly" (Hamilton, 2022; Velija et al., 2013). Becoming muscular and strong is perceived as contradictory to hetero-normative femininity and therefore discouraged by gender expectations in dominant society (Channon & Phipps, 2017; Hamilton, 2022).

Some women are motivated to practice martial arts to lose weight or achieve a "toned" body which is a motivation that can perpetuate Western hetero-normative ideal of thinness and body dissatisfaction (Thompson et al., 2001; Velija et al., 2013). Not only does this intention for practice detract from the potential for transformative learning, community building and the gender subversive potential of martial arts, but these discourses also perpetuate the white hetero-normative ideals of conformity and a disciplined physique that have been a source of oppression to women (Velija et al., 2013). These ideologies challenge the *alignment* with practices to disrupt gendered norms and hierarchies. The individualized focus on personal fitness and individually working on one's body shatters the potential alliances and *alignment* important for developing community.

## **Discussion: Directions for pedagogy and practice**

As evidenced by the literature, there are ways learning martial arts can support transformation towards gender justice, and there are ways martial arts systems reify ongoing gender inequities. The new direction research and scholarship should take is to evaluate the diverse findings through a pedagogical lens with recommendations for practice. In this final section, I reflect upon my findings

from the literature and suggest potential innovations for pedagogy and practice. These suggestions are informed by the theoretical perspectives I presented and my assertion that martial arts are discursive entities and a creative practice. I use Lave and Wenger's (1991) three modes of belonging – *engagement*, *imagination*, and *alignment* – to organize my thoughts and specific recommendations for pedagogical approaches to support women learning martial arts.

## Engagement

Identifying the barriers that exist is the first step to improving women's participation and engagement in martial arts (Lindsay et al., 2023). Yet, the wider issues for women participating in professional sports and martial arts are beyond their control in society (Pape, 2020). It is beyond the scope of this article to fully interrogate the societal issues that must be addressed to improve engagement and respect for women in MACS including but not limited to training conditions, compensation, and education to encourage transformation in public perception. These are important topics which still require attention. My focus lies in strategies for creating relevant and engaging learning experiences for women currently involved in martial arts, especially those who are new or considering joining (i.e. in the peripheral participation stage). More positive learning experiences and engagement I argue will lead to greater female participation in martial arts, may eventually reshape public perception of what participating in combat sports does.

Promoting the self-defense benefits of learning martial arts is one way generate interest and engagement (Channon & Phipps, 2017). However, as was identified in the literature on self-defense and empowerment to better support engagement, the focus of feminist praxis in martial arts must move beyond individual narratives and personal agency, incorporating insights from third-wave feminist sports literature (Velija et al., 2013).

Even if gender parity exists in martial arts and sports, it does not necessarily imply and equate to equal learning experiences or full participation as Lave and Wenger (1991) conceptualize it. Women may still be marginalized and oppressed without attention to the quality of learning experiences (Maor, 2019). Based on feminist new materialist thought, it becomes evident that the environment and the social and political structures impact experiences within a context (Thorpe et al., 2020). Coaches and trainers should be aware of these effects so that they are not uncritically assimilating and perpetuating heteronormative behaviours and values. This applies to both female and male trainers because gender justice has erroneously been considered achieving gender justice is considered the priority for women only (Clavero & Galligan, 2021).

Mixed-gender training spaces may not be comfortable for some women, so a question for pedagogy and practice is how to make mixed-gender spaces more comfortable for women or create women-only learning spaces (Guthrie, 1995; Lindsay et al., 2023). One promising option is to have more female role models and coaches. Rasmussen et al. (2021) support this direction asserting that nontraditional female athletes can be role models to get women to engage in a broader range of sports and other activities.

## Imagination

Reflecting upon Dirx's (2012) propositions on the imaginal method and work with emotion-laden images, I suggest that the use of imagery and imagination could be significant to pedagogical approaches and practices that support transformative learning in martial arts. This method could challenge negative stereotypes of fighting and women's bodies perpetuating gender injustice within martial spaces such as the "thin" and "toned" ideal, sexualization of female athletes and white femininity (Channon & Phipps, 2017; Velija et al., 2013).

To support current and future female martial artists requires critical understanding of their complex historical position and challenging heteronormative ideals within and beyond practice spaces, which can benefit from imagination. Approaches to challenging gender norms in martial arts learning might consider speculative fabulation to support imagining directions for women learning martial arts that are more supportive for challenging gender norms (Haraway, 2006; Truman, 2018).

## Alignment

Lastly, a crucial pedagogical prerogative is the alignment of the teacher's commitment to feminist values and vision, which supports transformative learning in martial arts and gender justice (Guthrie, 1995). Nichols et al. (2023) recommend a “**feminist coaching pedagogy**” (p. 132) to create change and disrupt gender hierarchies in martial spaces. The intentional “implementation of feminist principles and pedagogies rather than simply providing a space for women to learn how to punch and kick” (Hamilton, 2022, p. 672) must be a focus for creating the critical consciousness that is necessary to challenge power and hegemony in the context of martial arts and beyond. Moreover, the use of feminist values and vision is a means to building alignment which Lave and Wenger (2006) recognize can “amplify our power and our sense of the possible” (p. 180). A feminist pedagogy will also support the “care of self” and potential healing for women to maintain alignment with their commitment to learning (Guthrie, 1995). Women coaches need support which will be furthered by must come from a feminist praxis that can foster community and *agential realism* (Barad, 2007).

Considering how intra-action between nature and culture is of importance to feminist new materialism shows how and why some women are able to benefit and grow stronger in mind, body, emotion, and spirit through their martial arts training and others are not because these benefits are aligned with a common socialization experience and the development of culture (Truman, 2019). For instance, the dojo culture was significant to enhancing women’s learning experiences in Taekwondo (Cholet, 2020). Therefore, coaches and practitioners should focus on the culture they create through their actions and teaching practices. Reasons for these teaching and training implications are apparent based on the situated learning theories of Lave and Wenger (1991) and communities of practice (Wenger, 2016).

## Conclusion

This article took as its starting point an investigation into the literature on women’s experiences learning martial arts with a particular focus on evidence of transformative learning and community building and how these learning processes might disrupt gendered and hetero-patriarchal norms. This investigation produced evidence of both positive outcomes and controversies for women learning martial arts (Channon & Matthews, 2015; Lindsay et al., 2023). Higher numbers of women participating in martial arts are not enough for gender equality and equal treatment and the focus must push beyond the individual level with more work at the organizational and a societal level to transform the narratives surrounding women in sport and martial arts (McDonagh & Pappano, 2008; Pape, 2020).

Based on the evaluation of my findings, I made suggestions from my perspective as an adult education researcher using a feminist lens involving my understanding of creative approaches to supporting women in learning martial arts. I presented martial arts as a creative practice in this article. Creativity and invention in practice are needed to support women in learning and benefiting from martial arts. While certain creative practices, such as “alternative femininity” (Channon & Phipps, 2017) and “ingenious agency” (Davies & Deckert, 2019), engaging in martial arts, have been observed, implementing specific changes in martial arts pedagogy more women can experience the benefits of learning martial arts.

There is merit in considering creativity through implementing feminist values and praxis which presents a promising area for future research. This article provides some recommendations and points of departure for future studies. Lave and Wenger’s (2016) three modes of belonging — **engagement, imagination, and alignment** — structured my suggestions for creating a feminist ethos in martial arts and how these suggestions might help disrupt hetero-normative forces in learning martial arts.

Future interdisciplinary research and initiatives on feminist pedagogy and practice that connect feminist scholars and practitioners in martial arts will benefit this direction of scholarship and provide more evidence and examples. I was limited in this article by the fact that that I could not consider all kinds of martial arts. Additionally, the literature that I consulted was restricted to a Western context, which will have affected the questions asked and directions of scholarship.



Disrupting gendered and hetero-patriarchal norms in sport and society is an enormous and ongoing task. Creativity in pedagogy and practice is essential for negotiating these struggles for gender justice. Martial arts present one example of a creative practice wherein there is potential for challenging and renegotiating gender norms and expectations which will be furthered with support from the wider society. Context and situatedness must always be of consideration to determine the efficacy of action in transformative approaches for gender norms (Cislaghi & Heise, 2020). Consistently reflecting on our praxis and looking for new evidence and examples of creative practices is essential for supporting research and scholarship into methods for fostering social and gender justice.

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# Sharing the Lived Experiences of Women in Academia by Remembering, Reclaiming and Retelling Stories of the Feminist Imaginaries

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## Abstract

Feminist Imaginaries are psychological and social spaces where creative possibilities are overflowing. They facilitate new ways of being, new ways of knowing and new ways of knowledge creation. This paper embraces a decolonial and feminist approach to storytelling, remembering, reclaiming and retelling; telling the stories of a band of wandering women, journeying to the psychosocial spaces of the Imaginary. Drawing upon a feminist theoretical tapestry, creative writing methods and autoethnographic approaches, the story is an example of the possibilities for Feminist Imaginaries in academic research. Many female students I have encountered naively believe they have social justice and equality but the inequalities are hidden in low paid, part-time work and unpaid care. To explore patriarchy's deceptive nature, reference is made to the canons of Western art and literature as spaces from which to depart. It is from this space and time of departure that our journeys to the Imaginaries begin. Our lived experiences as artists as educators makes our activism all the more urgent to care for racialised, working class and disabled students. Those experiences are illustrated in poetry and visually in an artwork created to accompany this paper entitled, *Remember, shout her name, tell her-story*. Furthermore, creative writing is a form of the Imaginary and is used to tell this tale. I suggest, by borrowing from Laurel Richardson, creative writing is a method of inquiry to learn about ourselves and our research. By writing into the topic, rather than reading around and then writing, the imagination can wander and wonder freely. I include a small demonstration of how this process might be performed. In this way the story is open-ended, to be continued, as so too the fight for social and gender justice must continue. Accordingly, I invite you, the reader, to remember your stories, reclaim, imagine them, document and share them.

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**Keywords:** Creative writing; storytelling; poetry; art; lived experiences; marginalisation; feminist imaginaries; patriarchal discourses.

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## Introducing stories of the feminist imaginaries

The conceptualisations of the stories presented in this paper have been entwined in my subconscious for many years. The threads from stories of my past, with that of my ancestors, are stitched together with the present. The stories are meshed within the closure of the University for the Creative Arts (UCA), Rochester campus, in July 2023. As I wander the empty corridors, a ghostly presence of patriarchy haunts the landscape at Fort Pitt (Tuck & Ree 2013, p. 640). Fort Pitt is the name of the road upon which the campus is constructed, a large tower on a hill, the foundations of which are the remains of a Napoleonic fortress. It is necessary to record our affects from this departure 'as artists as educators' and researchers (Clover, 2010). And although it is important to remember, it is essential to search for what future (re)searching might become, as we imagine different ways of writing stories, telling stories, imagining in a feminist aesthetic, as talents are developed in creative practices. The telling of which embraces creative methods, poetry and embroidery in order to imagine 'a better world' (Formenti and West, 2018), a just world of inclusion and diversity, a world of utopian imaginations (Piercy, 1976). With this in mind, the middle part of the paper tells the story of a group of women pilgrims, the support workers at UCA, on a journey to feminist imaginaries. Those feminist imaginaries are 'differently academic' ways of writing, searching and gathering stories. They encompass psychological and social spaces where creative possibilities are overflowing. They facilitate new ways of being, new ways of knowing and new ways of knowledge creation. By drawing

upon a creative approach to record our stories, I make psychological and geographical connections to explore how an application of the feminist imaginary might ‘rupture ... the prevailing relations of power, a shaking loose of normative perspectives, the generation of new knowledges, histories and possibilities and senses of hope (Clover et al, 2022, p. 1).

So, the scene embroidered, is a collective of women, departing from Rochester to Canterbury, both Cathedral cities with towers-fortresses and campuses dominating the landscape. This is the same journey many made through the centuries as actual pilgrims. Strangely, this geographical location, Pilgrim’s Way in Kent, is often in my thoughts as it was where my ancestors resided. The journey illustrates the mapping of my ancestors’ lives as I researched my family tree some years ago and their experiences are described in the poem, *Sisters, We Hear You, We Shout Your Names* (towards the end of this paper). Searching for hours, I gathered their stories from the archives and parish registers. The experience of remembering was painful, as the poem depicts. The embroidery, figure 1 is in remembrance of them and the women with whom I have the privilege to converse, these past 15 years as support workers at UCA. But like all tapestries there is a back to the embroidery, figure 2, which shows the underside to the scene. Turnover the aida fabric and much is revealed; there are many knots with hanging threads, stitches overlapping, and threads jumping across the perfect rhythm of the weave and weft. What is this story? Back to a story, stitching back, back stitching time. ‘For we think back through our mothers if we are women’ (Woolf, 1929).

Thinking back, we, the women support workers at the University, have been leaving this place of employment when the first round of redundancies occurred in 2016. Now as the last of us depart, or as the management like to inform us, we are taking part in their ‘transformation;’ some decided to make that journey from Rochester campus to Canterbury campus. Thus, the backstory illudes to the damage neoliberalism and patriarchy are inflicting upon higher education. Human capital is a cost that can be cut; for as a resource in the market masculine economy (Cixous, 1976) we are commodities to be removed or moved from one campus to another.

In the context of the short story, the feminist imaginary is an approach by which the researcher acknowledges that qualitative research practices are messy, entangled processes (MacLure, 2013). They are tapestries of rich colour, where some stitches are raised and pronounced and others are smooth and faint, as are the diverse voices of the researched and researcher, weaving together a ‘good story’ (West, 2016). Imagined is a story contextualised into a Chaucerian genre of a Mediaeval milieu. Engaging this feudal, misogynistic narrative, as an historic backdrop, a story is told of patriarchy’s grip upon the lives of a group of women within the current and overt neoliberal pedagogic agendas in England’s educational system. But as feminists we must be active, patriarchy must be named and slain, whether the many headed hydra from Greek myth, or this story’s insidious bogymen. The monster that is patriarchy may seem inescapable but just as in Chaucer’s (1476/2007) tales of pilgrimage, where women were often prevented from fulfilling their dreams, on occasions there were/are opportunities to celebrate their achievements (de Pizan, 1405/2000).

Inspired by the travails of Alison, *The Wife of Bath*, a pilgrim from Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales* (1387-1400/2007), I unlike Chaucer, am not drawing upon stereotypes (Turner, 2023), for ‘[w]riting stories are not about people and cultures “out there” – ethnographic subject (or objects). Rather, they are about us – our workspaces, disciplines, friends, and family’ (Richardson, in Denzin and Lincoln 2005: 967). Thus, storytelling is a way in which to legitimise the subject-object (hooks, 1988; Smith, 1993). For this story, I recall and reframe fragments of fiction and literary sources that are not irrelevancies ‘out there’. They all have meaning to me and are used to extend the dialogue between you the reader, myself as the reader and writer and the narratives of the protagonists of the story. Cixous suggests value can be given to literature in the same way that a researcher can draw upon theory and academic writing to support the exploration of a topic (1993, p. 21-22). Often as I am writing I remember and recall texts that temporarily hold my thoughts and consciousness. Similarly, Cixous (1993, p. 5) says that certain texts call to her in ‘different voices’; they have a certain ‘music’ that she is ‘attune to’. When texts stay with us, they inform us as writers, they transport the reader and facilitate creative ways of knowing, suggesting that reading is a form of the feminist imaginary. Those



texts-images which have formed the threads of this story are Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* (1387-1400/2007), Lorenzetti's *Allegory of Good and Bad Government* (1338-9), Dante Alighieri by Domenico di Michelino (1465), Marge Piercy's *Woman on the Edge of Time* (1976) and most importantly my continued dialogue with Hélène Cixous.



**Figure 1 & 2:** Beverley Hayward, Remember, shout her name, tell her-story, tapestry with mixed media front and back.

A pronounced thread in the story is religion, as Catholicism was part of my childhood. Being educated in a faith school, the patriarchal discourse was running under the surface and above in religious paintings that saturated my psyche. More importantly, *Woman on the Edge of Time* (1976) was a hugely influential book in both the form and content. Simultaneously, exploring the lives of women in a dystopia, overlaid with a utopian future, narration swings back and forth in time. It is an example of how a just society might develop in the feminist imaginaries. Similarly, *The Book of the City of Ladies* (1405/2000) is written as a dreamlike vision; it serves as a counterpoint to the lack of literature by women about women in the Middle Ages. *The Book of the City of Ladies* illustrates a safe

space for women, free of misogyny. I have borrowed these writing devices to create a dialogue with women of the past, present and future.

My story stitches together the many stories I have heard, the ‘gifts’ from friends (Cixous, 1976, p. 876; 1991, p. 66), colleagues and feminist imaginaries, as well as histories from those men that made up the canons of Western art and literature. Studying English Literature, A Level, in the 1980s, women were completely excluded from the syllabus. Chaucer was part of the curriculum, and it was *The Miller’s Tale* that was selected. At that time, I did not understand the point of the story, other than it was slapstick, misogynistic degrading humour. Then as a mature, first-generation degree student in the late 1990s, I gained a degree in humanities with art history, and again sameness was reproduced by the exclusion of women and people of colour (Smith, 1993).

I cannot unpick those memories as they punctuate my psyche. I have included them in this story to explain how and why these texts have lingered just under the surface as I write (Partridge 2022). I explore the inspirations, motivations and reflections upon the poetry and embroidery presented. The fabric upon which the feminist imaginary is woven does not confine our creativity to canons, rules and dogma (Vintges, 2017). We are free to wander (Braidotti, 2002), and in ‘[t]his multiplication of narrating subjects’, there are spaces to thread the strands of our stories (Smith, 1993, p. 399).

This approach significantly differs from the epistemologies of the masculine ‘heroes’ of history and the writing of the monograph. By the mid-2000s, I undertook a master’s in Art History, the course presented ways in which art history might be written, such as the monograph. It opened with *Caravaggio: A Life* (1998); another uninspiring story about a master of the arts. There were the same ‘boring’ stories of monographic monotony (Hooks 1994); these were stories boring into the soul with no relevance to our experiences as women. Laurel Richardson (2005, p. 957) ‘found much of qualitative writing to be ... boring’ characterised by patriarchal structures of reading, writing and research. Conversely, the feminist imaginary creates a canvas bringing together variety, enthusiasm and inspiration (Clover, et al 2022), where the depths of the feminine knows no bounds in a kaleidoscope of psyches, sights and sounds (Hayward, 2021). In this approach the social constructs of taken for granted truths are disrupt. With this in mind, this paper is neither about self-promotion, nor the genius of the individual; instead, plurality of difference is encouraged in a network of support, tangled in a ‘hive mind’ of ‘collaborative life writing’ (Shani, 2019, p. 15; Smith, 1993, p. 400).

Thus, in the research and writing process, it is so important not to be enticed by those masculine economies that desire the perfect student researcher who collects data in a mechanical unthinking process. Instead, it must be an ethical way of knowing the self and others, facilitating ‘access to knowledge’ (Skeggs, 2004:14). In a dialogue of compassion, care and friendship with the self and others (Tillmann-Healy, 2003), the writings and craft-artworks bring from the shadows the parts of us that we avoid, stories that are painful, traumatic and distressing. Seeing those discourses that are harmful, society’s collective shadow is acknowledged, and named, and by understanding patriarchy, it becomes less insidious (Abdellatif, 2021). This enables our journey into the light of new knowledges (Cixous, 1993, p. 3; 1976, p. 876; 1986, 79). The fabric of our stories marks shared spaces of ‘resilience-vulnerability’ (Hoult, 2012) depicting emotions, familiar, raw and significant to us, not out there but somewhere, remote to some just not to us. Feminists’ imaginaries in their plurality, creative freedoms of practices and community, enable a collective survival, a legacy of feminine resistance and tenacity needed to challenge the monstrous hydra (Vintges, 2017) or in my experiences the insipid, slippery bugaboo.

Thus, by following creative and imaginative approaches, they challenge epistemological research traditions of a ‘homogenized voice of “science,”’ that sets up the research process in a logical, structured, standardised format, so knowledge is produced by the dominant authority. The organisation of which is hardly ‘enlightened’, rather an example of how a scientific experiment would be conducted; structured with an introduction, literature review, method, analysis and conclusion. And there lies the problem: we are not objects upon which to experiment; rather we are people with

feelings, affect and emotion. Research, as a collaborative embodied process, weaves the voices of the many, those imagined in my short story, those read from theory and literature and those from interactions and lived experiences. The pilgrims-support workers were invited to share their journeys as they either left Rochester for Canterbury or for new landscapes but they were not able to contribute to this narrative at this time. Accordingly, I have drawn upon the work of Saidiya Hartman (2008) and her notion of fabulation, which is a way to redress the gaps in history. Hartman's use of critical fabulation is a counterpoint to the omissions in archives and historical records, particularly those in the lives of enslaved people. She suggests the use of storytelling and speculative narration as a means to understand new possibilities in stories yet to be told. These stories of the present facilitate new narrative landscapes that rupture the neat archival accounts presented as the universal truth. I have used creative writing as a method of inquiry to illuminate the way I saw the trauma of our redundancy. Remembering, reclaiming and retelling stories, the stories of the present within the feminist imaginaries are presented and here begins our tale. The context for the short story in chapter 2 combines feminist theories, with creative writing practices and the events of neoliberal policies in an arts university

## Chapter 2: Feminists' tales of the imaginary

Clouds hang heavy as the portcullis ascended, creaking, pregnant with the strain of the thick latticed metalwork, poised above our heads. The penetrating spikes of this creaking gate were a metaphor for the danger that lay in our wake. Tangible was the fear, although dissipating now we are leaving the fortress. Yet, the menacing concrete construction loomed behind our pilgrim's train, as we left the threat of this monstrous edifice, a reminder of the bugaboo within.



**Figure 3:** Ambrogio Lorenzetti, The Tyrant in Allegory of Bad Government, 1338-9, fresco, Palazzo Pubblico, Siena, Italy (A head of the hydra/ bugaboo).

Our fears were difficult to define; all at once elusive but there all the same. Our fate was hell on earth, spinning in Dante's circles of hell, whirling in and around the citadel's hierarchical systems. Strangulating the populous within. The goodness was squeezed from the community through treachery, greed, violence, and fraud, consuming the essence of our souls. A shadowy presence, not quite within reach, slippery, insidious; firstly infecting, subtle changes in values and morals. Then, behaviours oppressing, pressing our bodies down in the mire until we could taste the muck of immorality.





**Figure 4:** Domenico di Michelino, Dante Alighieri Dante and the Three Kingdoms, 1465, oil on canvas, Museo dell'Opera del Duomo, Florence

### Chapter 3: Departing from patriarchy's illusion

The sense of relief was palpable in our urgency to be free of the suffocation of body, mind and spirit. We were free, no longer confined in a corrupt patriarchal society of vice and sin. Knowing we had far to travel, the city of Canterbury was but an apparition in our collective conscience. However, feeling the small delicate droplets of rain sprinkle our faces, like translucent freckles, was a reminder we were free. Free to feel, at a distance away from the encasement of the cold thick stone walls and those therein. No longer oppressed in captive servitude, our containment was over. But the presence of the towering monster was difficult to relinquish from our psyches, as his threatening prevailing authority was only just behind our small party. A constant reminder of dangerous times of bygone days, days gone by without realising. Beyond conception, beyond comprehension, beyond a state of conscious contemplation.

Residing at the fortress for the last fifteen years, it was a sanctuary for women when we arrived; however, as time went on, the hydra's heads multiplied and there we were, deceived in the knowledge that it was a place of safety, comfort and community. We were tricked, betrayed into believing this illusion of truth. What treachery. As teachers for those less fortunate, we tried to educate the people that arrived in search of something better. But they too were deceived and should have fared better in the community from whence they came. Yet for all the weight of patriarchy's need to oppress our very existence, it served as a reason to band together and forge firm friendships. Women, whose mental bonds gave us a commonality, to push back against the master's misogyny. Leaving our daily lives of familiarity and ritual, now we are in a space of lightened liminality, journeying to replenish the emptiness of our being. For neither were our talents developed, nor our creativity imagined.

If he had not imposed such draconian ideologies upon the inhabitants, we women still might be at the fortress, teaching, caregiving, weaving, sewing, creating. However, we are in a time of immense poverty where the disadvantaged are left out, left without fuel, food and substance. Yet, like it or not, we are in the great age of pilgrimage and in this cultural climate we could not ignore this opportunity to escape. So 'likeness of lot and intension is converted into commonness of feeling into

communities' (Turner & Turner, 1978). In our own small community, of a 'hive mind' we are mobile in public, an unusual occurrence in the day and age of medieval times (Shani. 2019). We travelled on, private with our thoughts of our adventures to come. Happy as a small band of wandering women, we sought to intercede for those we left behind. To pray for the sick, the starving, the ill and infirm but what of ourselves? None of us wanted to go back, for his power was all consuming. He sought to conquer all in his way. Slowly choking our humanity and spirit, we were under the rule of this tyrant, from a far-off land where dragons and hydras were real and not yet slain.

So just as those seeking solace made their way to this fortified tower of safety, we took our own path to another tower, a different type of fortress, a stronghold to the power of good Christian beliefs., Canterbury Cathedral. Was this a mistake? Substituting one manmade edifice for another? When profit and greed are put above the needs of the disadvantaged, religion's righteous morality is conveniently put aside for economic gain. How do men justify the ethics and morals of treating others with such cruelty, contempt and subjugation? By treating women and those of racial and cultural differences as objects or commodities, the taken for granted truths will never change. These 'truths' are a blight on society that scar the opportunities of those that are neither white nor male. The ego of the Lord of the Tower was such that support, compassion and justice for others, was lacking. Good governance was left for those with a conscience. Citizenship was the attribute of other more accepting communities, not ours. There was neither peace, fortitude, prudence, magnanimity, temperance nor justice. Rather power was abused, accountability and transparency were eliminated, as fraudulent activities took hold. Outsiders and strangers were exploited for their coin, just as those that lived there for many years. The direction of violence was not selective, and discrimination was rife.



**Figure 5:** Ambrogio Lorenzetti - Allegory of Good Government, 1338 – 1339, fresco, Palazzo Pubblico, Siena, Italy.

## Chapter 4: Tales of women wandering

Following in the footsteps of the many, travelling along Pilgrim's Way, this band of wandering women acknowledge the perils of their journey. To a spiralling sanctuary in the ever-increasing towers to the trinity, we went. For those perils were less than that which was to befall the inhabitants left at the fortress. Ill equipped to uphold the peoples and the city's needs, the good women had no choice but to leave. To part take in pilgrimage was a plausible excuse to leave with little notice. After all, why would men such as this bother about the disappearance of a group of insignificant women. But that was their mistake, for we are not insignificant but artisans, unlimited, unbound, unruly, and women wandering, troubling the landscape.

So, our sojourn took place at The Woolpack Inn, Chilham. The fire was raging, ash drifted in the air as we sat down to rest. Although we were bereft of food for our body, we were a group of

women that knew how to support each other in times of need. We talked about our hopes for the future and past traumas. Settled into the hospitality offered at the Inn, the stories came with ease as we were comfortable in our friendships. Having a familiarity with the women in the group only comes with many years of understanding and knowing. The story I told was about my mother but equally it might apply to many having suffered a loss. She was in my mind as my pilgrimage was to pray for her departure. She was gentle and kind and too good for this world. I could feel her presence as an energy filling the room. She was a *Presence Everlasting* (2019), in my psyche. It makes me sad how she suffered but she is at peace now. I remembered how I watched the changing colour of a rose bush in the grounds of the fortress. The changing colours reminded me of her life and death. Death opens up possibilities of new meanings. In bereaving, leaving, lamenting the loss; beginning, being. Remembering. I remember the dialogue I had with Helene when her father died of the white plague, the pain of loss birthed her creativity; she said:

I had gone into the cemetery rotten, used, extinguished, expelled, annihilated by myself. I came out the other side. Nothing is what we think. On that day everything began a little less, a little more, not quite what it is. (Cixous, 1998. p. 53)

I entered the cemetery. She leaves on the other side. The side of the other. Nothing (death) is not what we think. Our thinking falsifies. Death offers a beginning from which everything may be different, other. My cradle, my tomb. (Cixous, 1998. p. 82)

I sat thinking, contemplating, gently cradling, cradling grief, and grieving in the **cradle of creativity**. In the rocking motions, emotions, oscillating back, singing back, swaying forth, akin to the thin branches of the osier tree, bending, weaving the willow, stitching the soul together in sadness and celebration as the withies shape the basket made to contain a new world. Helen continued: Death gives 'everything, it gives us the end of the world. ... We need to lose the world, to lose a world, and to discover that there is more than one world and that the world isn't what we think it is (Cixous, 1998. p. 10) So, in losing the world in which our parents occupied, we are *Newly Born* (Cixous & Clément, 1986) as the tomb is the womb in which a new world is cradled into existence. On the death of Cixous's father, her mother was able to pursue a profession as a midwife. Uncannily, death brought about a new world and literally new life.

## Chapter 5: Wandering in the wonder of the imaginary

And what of that world? The warmth of the fire and our friendships softly covered my being, I wondered what would happen to the generations to come. Would they have agency to be creative, or would they be constrained in the ways of men? My eyelids heavy, sinking into the depths asleep, a sleep so deep, it would take me to another space. Invading the dreamscape, escaping to the realm of the Real, unknown and unknowable. I could feel my head nod backwards, finding a worn space in the fabric where many bodies had rested before me. I dreamt of uncanny happenings of my future selves, and those that sought refuge in the subconscious.

### Sisters, We Hear You, We Shout Your Names

I give thanks to my ancestors,  
Without whom I would not be here,  
Writing stories,  
Of pasts long ago.

Up were my Sisters,  
As the sun relentlessly breaks the dawn,  
Day after endless day,  
Cleaning,  
bodies broken in,  
Mines,  
Factories  
Farms.  
Labours that break the soul.



What of your souls, dear brave sisters?  
 Women who gave their lives.  
     Electrocuted,  
     In the asylum.  
     Dying  
 In the workhouse,  
     Dying  
 In the big house,  
     In service,  
 To the masters who abused bodies and babes.  
     Sisters, Aunts, Cousins,  
     Dying  
     In childbirth.  
     Babies,  
     Crying,  
 Not heard by those that would have loved them.  
     Given  
     Up,  
 Up to those that are not knowing.  
 But I know you; never forgotten.  
     You are all  
     Seen,  
     Heard.  
 Names, now spoken in dusty archives  
     Found, not forgotten  
     Searching  
     Fearlessly,  
     Tirelessly  
     Not in vain,  
 Broken is the seal of shame.  
     We are here.  
     Proud to know,  
 Florence, Lizzy, Daisy, Lucy, Doreen ...  
 I, with you my Sisters, shout all your names.

I woke up, knowing. I knew, it was here in a collective community, here was my salvation. Ivory towers are made by men for men. We had no need to worship at edifices that held the bones of the dead. We had already reached a space of possibility, a space of feminist imaginaries:

Where the red sky flows bleeding into the sea,  
 The turbulent tides of the raging wild Imaginary.  
 Turns back the tiny trickling stream of the Real,  
 As the essence of the mystic's gifts are revealed.  
 Here the depths of the feminine knows no bounds.  
 In a kaleidoscope of psyches, sights and sounds.  
 The beautiful abundance of flora and fauna,  
 Shore up the banks of a flooding limitless aura.

Diving into the pool of the creative unknown,  
 And dreaming in the unconscious, now shown.  
 What jouissance the rich mystic mind conjures,  
 Made possible in the mysteries far beyond us.  
 Picture the flood of tempestuous transformations ...  
 Whirling in the pools of majestic imaginations.  
 Feeling the surges of oceans' expansive emotions.  
 Forming imaginative concepts – see the explosions!

Absorb the experiences. Lie back, ... take it all in.  
 Sharing, embracing the wild waves of feeling,  
 Floating in land-seascapes, boundary-less, timeless.

Be knowing of our freedoms, enchanting success,  
 Embody the mysteries of those that transgress,  
 Where the azure sky seeps into the sea green.  
 Let us bask, enjoy our expansive senses. Seen -  
 Are the swirling, flooding, overflowing, women,  
 Wandering, joining, together. We invite you in.

(Tides of Imaginary Transformations, a version of which is published in Hayward, B. 2021. *Memories Made: An Anthology of poetry in a covid context*)

## Chapter 6: Remembering, reclaiming and retelling in the feminist imaginary.

To facilitate this fabulated narrative, I sought the support of my theoretical friend, by including an imaginary dialogue with Helen Cixous. The suggestion of which was from Maxine Chester, a member of the Feminist Imaginary Research Network. I often sought her support and she kindly read a draft of this paper and then I realised that she too was on the pilgrimage and will travel to Canterbury to work. She asked me how I am able to write in this creative way. On reflection, it is not enough to promote the feminist imaginary to challenge Eurocentric, masculine ways of writing and knowledge creation, this process requires an unravelling of the praxis. This was problematic as much of my work is intuitive but by inviting others to be ‘academically different’ (Jackson, 2004) action is required. I thought about Maxine’s suggestion and situated at the end of chapter 4, was an ideal place to converse with Cixous in a way that was intuitive, expressive and creative. After my mother’s death, I did see the world differently for no emotion could come close to the pain I felt. Accordingly, the fear of failure no longer had a grip on my psyche for the worst had happened. So I began my doctoral studies, part of which included creative writing, poetry, art and art curation; I had the motivation and courage to attempt that which I previously found insurmountable. It was as Cixous argued: death births

### Birthing the Feminist Imaginary

Gently cradling,  
 Cradling grief,  
 Grieving in the cradle  
 of creativity.  
 In the rocking motions,  
 Emotions,  
 Oscillating back,  
 Singing back,  
 Swaying forth.  
 A-kin to the thin  
 branches  
 Of the osier tree,  
 Bending.  
 Weaving the willow.  
 Stitching the soul

creativity and in response, I referenced her writing of her father’s premature death from tuberculosis. For this paper the phrase that most resonated with the feminist imaginary was: ‘My cradle, my tomb’ (Cixous, 1998, p. 82), as often creativity is birthed from loss. In the diagram below I have tried to show that creative process, which birthed the feminist imaginary.

Therefore, this example of creative, embodied writing is a way to confront the norms of writing and researching in the masculinised academy. At the same time, I hoped to have engaged your curiosity, and not to have bored you. But maybe you are wondering if this is ‘academic writing’ as I once did, when some years ago, I read *Language and Discourse in the Academy* (2004) by Professor Sue Jackson. Immediately I was drawn in, as the chapter began with the classic children’s fairy-tale opener: ‘Once, upon a time, a time that has gone and a time still to come, in a far and distant place, not too far from here, not too far from now, live the Guardians’ (Jackson, 2004, 101). I did not understand the full importance of this significant example of the feminist imaginary, I did not

understand the significance of language (Jackson, 2004). I was discombobulated; the writing was at the same time creative, embodied, familiar and unfamiliar. Uncanny. I was to come back to this example of the feminist imaginary. She discusses the part that ‘language plays in widening women’s lifelong learning opportunities’. This resonates with me and many of my students, for learning how to write academically is challenging; it feels detached and sterile (Westmarland, 2001). It is achieved, I argue at the expense of the creativity possibilities of the feminist imaginary. Jackson made this point, outlining ‘how academic discourses disable ways to be differently academic’ (Jackson, 2004, p. 101).

My cradle is my tomb

- My process: I researched cradle for meaning to ignite and stimulate ideas.
- **cradle** *ˈkrɑːdl̩*: a bed for a baby usually on rockers. : a place of origin, the cradle of civilization. : the earliest period of life. to hold gently or protectively
- **cradle** [usually singular] cradle of something, the place where something important began
- this linked to the idea of birthing creativity, a place of importance to nurture the feminist imaginary. Also the word rocking brought to mind the conceptualisations of grief, swinging through a vast range of emotions.

Cradle

- I often use repetition and alliteration which supports a rhythm to the prose and links to the back and forth motion of the rocking cradle.
- **Gently cradling, cradling grief; grieving in the cradle of creativity. In the rocking motions, emotions, oscillating back, singing back, swaying forth.**
- I then researched etymology: "baby's bed," usually mounted on rockers or suspended for rocking or swinging, c. 1200, *cradel*, from Old English *cradol* "little bed, cot," from Proto-Germanic \**kradulaz* "basket" (source also of Old High German *kratto*, *krezzo* "basket")

Cradle-craft

- I held the word basket in my mind and wrote the line above focusing on 'oscillating'. In the story I told, I felt myself oscillating, between the past, present and future, remembering and retelling and this feeling I visualised in the rocking motion of the cradle.
- When exploring the meaning and etymology, I made a note of the words before and after cradle, specifically 'craft' and oscillate - 'osier'. I did not know what osier meant; accordingly I looked up the meaning:
- a small Eurasian willow which grows mostly in wet habitats. It is usually coppiced, being a major source of the long flexible shoots (withies) used in basketwork.

Cradle-craft basket

- The osier connected with weaving the withies to make the basket-cradle. This definition took me back to when I supported a student create a structure using the craft of weaving the withies. **Basket-cradle-craft.**
- I then wrote: **swaying, a-kin to the thin branches of the osier tree, bending. Weaving the willow**
- Using the metaphor of weaving, I thought about how sewing, stitching is a means to repair, mend, make and created: I wrote
- **stitching the soul together in sadness and celebration, the withies shape the basket made to contain a new world.**

Prose to poem

In agreement, Richardson states qualitative researchers are not required to write as ‘disembodied omniscient narrators claiming universal and atemporal general knowledge’ (2005, p. 1413). We have the means to fabulate, embody stories, by untying ourselves from epistemological traditions of knowledge creation. It is difficult to relinquish those ingrained approaches to researching and writing, tying ourselves to objectivity, positivism, neutrality etc. However, this is an example of a sharing of our lived experiences of women in academia by remembering, reclaiming and retelling stories of the feminist imaginaries. Going against the grain is a risk and it has taken me many years to embrace a way to write in the feminist imaginary, or in the words of Sue Jackson, ‘differently academic’ (2004). By embracing this approach, I share the words of the women liberated in the knowledge that academia is not the ‘Ivory Tower’ that we must climb; we have our own stories to tell in spaces other than those man-made colonised towers to which we make pilgrimage. Sue Jackson explains:

I heard tell that one of us reached the Ivory Towers once, shielding her eyes from the crown of Truth, dodging the sword of Power and pushing aside the shield of Knowledge. But the Ivory, so dazzling and full of promises, was just the bleached bones of something long dead, and the Word was ours all the time, waiting to be freed (Jackson, 2004, p. 101).

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## About the Author

**Bev Hayward** is an Associate Lecturer at Birkbeck College, University of London, within the Psychosocial Department. She teaches on the master's programme in Education, Power and Social Change. Having a learning disability and working-class, she was often marginalised in the UK educational system; accordingly, by exposing her vulnerabilities she hopes to foster a transformative and democratic pedagogical student experience. During her PhD in Education, Transformation and Lifelong Learning, Dr Hayward presented her research at SCRUTREA and was awarded the Tilda Gaskell prize for the best student paper and prior to that she won the Laurel Brake award for her master's dissertation. She is a poet, writer and embroider and is interested in the artist as educator. This position was drawn upon in the exhibition she curated, in 2022 entitled, *Unruly Women*, and presented in a piece created to celebrate the collaboration entitled *Wandering Women: A Journey as Feminist Imaginaries*, exhibited in 2023.

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# The Feminine Outsider: Resistance through the Feminist Imaginary

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“...we will dream our way out; we must imagine beyond the given.”  
(Butler, Davies et al., 2022, p. 16)

The feminist imaginary is a space of resistance against patriarchal structures of oppression and the silencing of women’s voices and histories. It inspires transformation through new possibilities and untold narratives. Ultimately, the feminist imaginary mobilizes collective co-creations of knowledge, meaning and activism to speak to contemporary womanism.

My concern relates to ageing women and ageing maternal identities including those engaged in mothering practices. Notions of Othering through cultural feminine ageing stereotypes will be discussed and also related to ageing mother stereotypes.

Included here are two of my art works. A creative writing piece entitled *The Pink Bonnet* (2023), which demonstrates a process of writing to surface experience and ideas. Another is shown here as photographic documentation of a live, multisensory installation entitled *Reach* (2021). *Reach* incorporates two materials: industrial steel floor grating and raw yeast bread dough. The written and visual pieces do not illustrate but respond to ideas related to the ageing feminine and ageing maternal. Overall, states of becoming and potential transformation are key themes. I also discuss Othering in relation to the formation of states of self from psychoanalytic and philosophical approaches, including de Beauvoir (1949), and Bracha L. Ettinger (2006) with matrixial subject theory. A touchstone is Octavia Butler’s quotation (above), which I position within the feminist imaginary, emphasises the need to dream and imagine in order to resist oppression for empowerment.

Considering my position as a researcher and creative practitioner, I am a white, cis-gendered woman. I recognize my own privilege, which enables me to even imagine ideas of transformation. I try to resist the confined spaces of Eurocentric, heteronormative epistemologies. The term maternal subjectivities is open to biological and non-biological mothers with the emphasis on mothering practices (Baraitser, 2009, p.20). The term motherwork is used to refer to biological and non-biological mothers involved in the mothering of children. I acknowledge that maternal subjectivities are gendered since they refer to women who are engaged in childcare practices. This is relevant because of the way they engage with historical and current female mothering identities (Ruddick, 1997, p. 206). Significantly the bulk of mothering work is still carried out by women. Considering the shaping of maternal identities, the psychologist Wendy Hollway (2001) states that this formation is due to the structuring of the gendered mother subject through the relationship with the child (Hollway, 2001, as cited in Baraitser, 2009, p.20). Thus, it is paramount that these types of women’s identities and ways of being are not lost in contemporary tensions around gender identities.

In relation to older age generally, it is important to mention that societal and cultural contexts vary depending on the values of cultures, regions, contexts and practices. According to Kornadt et al. (2022), “Socio-ecological and cultural factors in which countries differ are imperative contexts of human thought and behaviour” (Kornadt, 2022, p. 4). For example, older adults can be seen negatively in relation to health and physical appearance, compared to other positive areas such as family and personality. This is of course, then also dependent on geographic regions. While this is a significant area of research it lies beyond the scope of this discussion.

For context, sixty-five is generally taken as a marker for the start of older age in the UK, probably due to the traditional official retirement age although this no longer applies (Office for National Statistics [ONS], 2021).



Various cultural perceptions and stereotypes are described in Susan Sontag's essay *The Double Standards of Aging* (1972), where she states that ageing is culturally difficult for women compared to men because of the cultural pressures on youthful appearance (Reiff, 2023, p. 5). Sontag continues by pinpointing a number of negative stereotypes that culturally characterize the feminine, and significantly the ageing feminine, including "... helplessness [and] passivity ..." (Reiff, 2023, p.7). Other stereotypes I focus on see ageing women as sick, sexless and outsiders as highlighted by Kathleen Woodward (1990). Notably she points out the still influential Freudian framing where ageing women are perceived as sick – in a state of decline, sexless – undesirous and undesiring and missing (Woodward, 1990, p. 150). From this perspective, missing can mean that ageing women are viewed as outsiders and are thereby Othered.

Similarly, Simone de Beauvoir, in *Old Age* (1970), describes a cultural ambivalence towards older people generally, where they are required to display virtuousness and serenity. If they show the same desires as the young however, they are perceived with "disgust" and "absurdity" (de Beauvoir, 1970, p. 10). Furthermore, Sontag again discusses this idea of ageing women and disgust in relation to youthfulness by saying "One of the attitudes that punish women most severely is the visceral horror felt at aging female flesh" (Sontag, 1970, as cited in Reiff, 2023, p. 30). Sontag stresses the cultural value placed on women's appearance in terms of youth which is not experienced by men in the same way.

Briefly, I mention positive lived experience of ageing women rather than cultural stereotypes which are well recorded. For example, Corolyn G. Heilbrun (1997), at age seventy looks to her sixties and describes feeling more herself, with less conflict, more happiness and overall "more powerful" (Heilbrun, 1997, p. 6). Notably, this experience is contingent on a number of factors. These include a privileged socio-economic and educational background which Heilbrun recognizes (Heilbrun, 1997, p 2). Nevertheless, my aim is to look at cultural perceptions of feminine ageing through the sick, sexless, outsider stereotypes because of their dominance in this society and their potential influence in shaping states of self and personal narratives. This influence is argued by Anna E. Kornadt et al., (2020), who says that cultural contexts (which for me include cultural perceptions) impact on states of self. "... even though ageing can be considered a biological process, it does not happen in a vacuum, and is shaped by societal and cultural contexts... which then translate into the views that people have of their own and others aging" (Kornadt et al., 2020, p. 3).

Perhaps it is also possible to see the discriminatory ageing stereotypes in relation to the maternal. For instance, taking the sick stereotype as positioned within a medicalized discourse, Rosemary Betterton (2014), states that "The maternal body is constructed as a site for regulation and control through medical practices and reproductive technologies..." (Betterton, 2014, p.4). Betterton also highlights extreme cultural perceptions and representations of the maternal from the religious perspective, where they are elevated and idealised to the monstrous and grotesque (Betterton, 2014, p. 136). All of these cultural perceptions which impact on identity and personal narrative construction deny specificity within the experience of ageing and of mothering. It is vital that these stereotypes are resisted because of the huge part they play in the ways women are Othered and oppressed. The intention is that my creative practice, within the feminist imaginary, can articulate more meaningful experiences of ageing and mothering as a contribution to the many voices of resistance.

### **Materialising reach**

The main material in *Reach* - raw yeast bread dough (with food colouring) - is unruly, messy and acts on smell, touch, sound, as well as sight. In terms of materiality, the raw yeast bread dough in *Reach* can be said to have a type of agency. Accordingly, the political theorist Jane Bennett views materials as having vitality - the capacity to act as types of agents and forces with "trajectories, propensities, or tendencies of their own." (Bennett, 2010, p. viii). Therefore, it is possible to see intra-relations within the dough itself arising through active chemical processes. These involve fermentation and, later, stages of decay. Notably, I regard decay as another life stage of the organisms within the dough. Thus, the dough can be viewed as being in a continual state of change where "... matter becomes" rather than "matter is"... " (Cool & Frost, 2010, p. 10). So perhaps ageing can be viewed as a state of becoming, rather than a state of diminishment as suggested by the feminine aging stereotypes mentioned above.

The changes in the bread dough lead me to imagine states of becoming. For a literal example, take the menopause life stage, the end of reproductive years in women, which includes chemical changes in hormonal activity (World Health Organization [WHO], 2022). This may be viewed as a state of becoming and a new life stage. The WHO (2022), also describes the menopause as “... one point in a continuum of life stages for women ...” (World Health Organization [WHO], 2022). This resonates for me because of the focus on the idea of continuum and life stages. I try to resist mainstream narratives of the menopause, as circulated by governmental and public services, because they often use medicalized discourses which refer to symptoms and treatments (National Health Service [NHS], 2022). I prefer to talk about the menopause as a set of characteristics and as a state of becoming.



**Figure 1:** Reach detail (own photography)

The process of making the raw yeast bread dough relates to the often culturally unacknowledged labour of mothering practices because the labour involved in making the dough is not seen either. This idea of the unseen can also be connected to the airborne fungal spores within the yeast of the dough, which are microscopic and reproductive particles invisible to the naked eye; it could be said that mothering is invisible, but pervasive.



**Figure 2:** Reach (own photograph)

Reminiscent of feminist collective methods, large quantities of raw yeast bread dough are made by people from my community, mostly women, who share complex feelings about ageing and mothering. A poetic and physical articulation of the haptic sense of touch is imprinted into the dough. A multiplicity of experience is captured and intermingles in the dough. It is my aim that *Reach* can provide a space for bringing together experiences in a multi-sensory and thought-provoking way (see Figure 1).

As a conceptual and aesthetic counterpoint, the dough is placed on five 1m x 1m steel floor grids. Figure 2 shows the grids suspended just above head height so that what is usually the floor becomes the ceiling. This inversion disrupts the engagement with the architectural space. I think this helps to create a disorientation in the audience, promoting more effective encounters with the piece. The dough moves through the grating landing on the floor. The audience is invited to engage with the installation by standing close to or under the structure and touching the dough on the floor. The dough is formless. It does not adhere to any forced shape. It moves freely through the steel floor grating evoking an emancipatory sense. From a feminist imaginary perspective, the dough might act as a metaphor for something which has a type of agency and is breaking away from containment. Furthermore, this could articulate positive ideas of ageing with a sense of freedom from oppressive, traditional cultural perceptions and norms (see Figure 3).



**Figure 3:** Reach detail (own photograph)

The main ideas manifested in *Reach* engage with ageing feminine subjectivity and maternal subjectivity situated within the patriarchal ideology. By subjectivity I mean the psychoanalytic construction of meaningful interior selves which affect all aspects of life and being. When talking about the ageing feminine and the maternal, I am referring to the co-existence of multiple selves which form as we age and engage in mothering children (Moglen, 2008, as cited in Segal, 2013, p. 28). I view the two categories of feminine and maternal not as separate but as porous, in constant relational change (Baraitser, 2009, p. 20). Figure 4 shows the dough settled on the floor where it lies in various stages of chemical change and decay, a multiplicity of porous elements which allude to ideas of potential transformation.



**Figure 4:** Reach (own photograph)

## **Feminine outsider**

Considering feminine identity and the perception of the outsider, I look at ideas of Othering. de Beauvoir, in *The Second Sex* (1949), theorises the construction of the feminine as Other in relation to the masculine. Later in life, in *Old Age* (1970), she raises the complexities of ageing within the self and society by stating that generally old age is something to be rejected, placed outside society and is viewed as a “... foreign species ...” (de Beauvoir, 1970, p. 315). This can be related to ideas of the outsider and Othering.

When looking at Othering in terms of women’s internalization of ageing and the relationship between external societal perceptions, again de Beauvoir comments on her own subjectivity. She argues that there is a tension between Othering through initial construction of self and another form of Othering which occurs in old age. She asserts that “... my being as he defines it objectively and the awareness of myself, I acquire by means of him” (de Beauvoir, 1970, p. 316). Hence theoretically, even though the feminine is contingent on the masculine, an awareness of herself is still possible. She offers up a type of doubling notion of Othering when she argues that “Within me it is the Other – that is to say the person I am for the outsider – who is old: and that Other is myself” (de Beauvoir, 1970, p. 316). de Beauvoir seems to be saying that from the outside she is perceived as different and ageing, probably due to appearance, but inside her sense of self is unchanged. Once again there is an underlining sense of her own subjectivity. Moreover, she also highlights that ageing has two aspects of the self; one perceived from the outside, which is likely to relate to appearance, while the other is an internal understanding. So according to de Beauvoir, there is scope for the existence of meaningful states of self even accepting the doubling notion of feminine and ageing Othering.

Another aspect of Othering is particularly relevant to motherhood because motherhood is societally restrained by patriarchal normative structures resulting in idealised mothering practices (O’Reilly, 2021, p. 10). In attempting to step out of these structures, Othering occurs. I imagine whether it is possible to use this position as a form of resistance against oppression perpetuated by gender and age Othering.



## The geriatric mother

As an older mother, commonly termed a geriatric mother (a standard medical term applied to women over the age of thirty-five in the UK) I was already outside the normative mothering model. I did not fit the good mother “fantasy mother” stereotypes. These often include the valiant and idealized, e.g., the mother as hero and religious icon, and the notion of the mother as natural. This version encompasses the appearance of constant unconditional love and availability and self-sacrifice (Baraitser, 2009, p. 52). Clearly, this is another example of cultural stereotypes which influence the shaping of states of self and personal narratives.

When discussing maternal subjectivities, I reflect on the potential for the formation of multiple internal subjectivities or states of self. Accordingly, subjectivities can be formed through different encounters including ageing and maternal experiences. Helen Moglen in the essay *Ageing and Transageing* (2008), explores divergent experiences of women and ageing by reflecting on ageing as offering up many different subjectivities or states of self (Moglen (2008), as cited in Segal, 2013, p. 28). A type of revisiting of younger selves or resonances of earlier selves takes place. Similarly, as previously noted by Hollway (2001), it is important to recognize the formation of maternal subjectivities in terms of pre-maternal selves and those states of self which emerge in relation to the child. (Hollway, 2001, as cited in Baraitser, 2009, p.20). Also, I would add, not only in relation to the child.

What follows is the creative writing piece which is a recent response to the experience of giving birth to my daughter twenty-two years ago. A new perspective was provided by Baraitser and Ettinger, instigated by Baraitser’s question “What it is like to encounter a child?” (Baraitser, 2009, p. 17).

### *The Pink Bonnet*

*I am finally still, surgically bound by dressings in big brilliant white cotton pants.  
No more jolts, wrenches, or incisions just a numb deep ache  
I am pulled into the nauseating sludge of the  
linoleum floor. Penned in by the Formica bed locker  
the baby, my baby is presented to me  
like a bouquet of mystifying flowers.  
In that split second, I clock the scratchy, sugar pink,  
hand knitted (not by me) bonnet.  
When was the last time I said that word? A dim picture –  
a five-year-old self absorbed in playing mummies with the rigid Tiny Tears.  
Given all the planning for a first baby  
pre, and after (not so much during) birth this bonnet is an affront.  
Like many things this was not on the plan.  
Another decision taken out of my hands.  
In an instant I did not fit  
the ideal mother with newborn image.  
Elaine, the well-meaning midwife with the very familiar face by now  
explains the baby will be cold.  
Why don't I know that?  
And why am I focussing on the wrong things?  
Questions uttered too many times in the years to come.  
Latching onto my daughter's dark shiny eyes  
I am held by their blank deep gaze.  
Filled with awe and a rising in my guts like dusky flapping moths.  
I was at one and the same time looking at a person I had birthed -  
of me but not me.*

(Chester, 2023)

## Feminine prisms

The sensation of birthing from one's own body and psyche created a huge shift in my understanding of state of self. To partly address the question "What is it like to encounter a child?" (Baraitser, 2009, p. 17), I refer to Ettinger's matrixial subject theory (2006); a psychoanalytic framing of internal subject object relations in the human psyche. There are two interrelated areas pinpointed here; intra-subjective relations between the mother and child, and the discourse of Othering within the feminine paradigm.

For context briefly, Ettinger is an Israeli born feminist, psychoanalyst and artist who provides a psychoanalytic shift in subject object relations. She reconfigures the feminine and the maternal in response to the symbolic in Freud's Oedipal complex (Pollock, 2004, p. 6), which is later developed by Lacan. The Oedipal complex sees the male child distanced from the mother in favour of the father. By foregrounding the symbolic mother and thereby the feminine Ettinger also responds to Freudian and Lacanian paradigms of the Other which view an independent feminine as absent and symbolically sees the feminine in relation to the masculine. For example, Lacan positions the feminine "outside of" what he terms the symbolic universe; thus the feminine exists as a form of "other-ness" (Ferris, 1993, p. 3).

Additionally, Ettinger further diverges from Freud and Lacan - and is closer to Klein because she prioritizes the mother child relationship. From a Kleinian perspective though, the mother is still not seen independently but viewed in relation to "...those that lay claim on her..." such as the father and the child (Wright, 2002, as cited in Brennan, 1989, p. 145). Also, like Klein, Ettinger emphasises a relational intersubjective perspective (Ettinger, 2006, p. 218). The subject (individual) is formed within inter-subjective relations (paradoxically called subject object relations). This is where subjectivities in individuals are formed through encounters experienced between individuals. Again, this contrasts with Freudian and Lacanian theory in the Oedipus complex which prioritises the subject (individual) development through responses to objects, such as entities, people, things and conditions.

Thinking about Othering in relation to ageing feminine subjectivity and maternal subjectivity, Ettinger uses an intersectional approach which maintains specificity of difference such as those that exist within gender and internal subjectivity construction. This approach positively pinpoints difference and inclusion rather than exclusion, thereby moving away from more traditional and binaried forms of Othering. For example, for Ettinger the subject is still viewed as the "I", but the object (the other person) is seen as the "... non I neither rejected nor assimilated." (Ettinger, 2006, p. 218). This is interesting with regards to the formation of ageing feminine and ageing maternal subjectivity because it opens up new approaches to the way the feminine is traditionally perceived as the Other to the masculine.

The dissolution of traditional Othering occurs partly through the idea of connection, described in what Ettinger terms a psychic space. This is the experience of subjects encountering each other where co-emergence and inclusion take place. This is termed "transsubjectivity" (Pollock, 2004, p. 6). In this understanding it is important to mention a key concept for Ettinger which is connection through compassion (Ettinger, 2006, p. 218). This provides a shift away from engaging with people as Other, and by emphasising connection she is arguing for the emergence of multiple internal selves through compassionate responses with other people. This could indicate that our notion of our multiple sense of self is to some extent dependent on how deeply felt these encounters with people are experienced. I see a resonance here with metaphorical and material readings of *Reach* and the feminist imaginary, where the chemical dynamics of the raw yeast bread dough co-exist in the creation of new bacterial life forms.

A final point on Ettinger takes us to maternal relations, which are symbolically expressed through the symbolic maternal womb; the "intra-uterine experience" (Pollock, 2006, p. 4). The intra-uterine experience is a state experienced within the processes of birth both physically and psychically. Importantly, this theory does not essentialise the maternal body because the complex is viewed as a dimension where psychic encounters occur (Pollock, 2006, p. 9). It can be said that Ettinger

foregrounds the idea of inclusion because we all have an experience of being birthed. Referring again to *Reach* and at the risk of further anthropomorphism, during the making of the bread dough people have said that it has womb like qualities. It seems to connect with a deep visceral experience. I am keen to sidestep the womb and the commonplace empty vessel analogy because of the way it emphasises the womb as a so called “negative space”. However, it seems as though the womb evocation is present anyway, and this time I assert that it is full of dynamism and potential.

The development of subjectivities and the opposition to Othering are linked by compassion, difference and inclusion. Also, by highlighting the intra-uterine complex and the shared experience of being birthed, Ettinger provides thought provoking ideas of the formation of states of self which relate to my experience of giving birth as expressed in *The Pink Bonnet*. I wonder if what I felt in first encountering my daughter was a deep connection which could have resulted in the emergence of an intra-subjective self. The notion of me but not me still echoes.

The feminist imaginary provides a space through which to explore ideas of the ageing feminine and ageing maternal identity. It is acknowledged that these identities and states of self are significantly shaped by socio-contextual factors. It is also recognized that cultural perceptions of ageing, as discussed in the aforementioned stereotypes, come into this category. However, it is important that attempts are made to resist these stereotypes in the exploration of specificity and diversity of perceptions and narratives. I have attempted to do this in various ways.

On reflection it feels as though the ideas I have described around states of becoming and potential transformation relate to notions of Othering, and a shift to less binary thinking has occurred through Ettinger. Her approaches involving intersectional and relational inter-subjectivity through inclusion and compassion offer a shift from traditional binary perspectives; for instance, in the way Ettinger describes the “I” of the subject and the “non-I” of the object – the Other. Also, a change in the use of terms provides multiplicity and feels less binaried, such as a change from using the feminine to femininities. Similarly, Ettinger’s approaches combined with the foregrounding of the maternal symbolic offer ways of exploring maternal states of self and identity not only relationally, within the mother child dynamic, but through encounters beyond the child.

My creative practice is not an illustration of the approaches discussed but it is a process of thinking through and hopefully articulating some important elements. For instance, one of my intentions in using live materials, in this case bread dough, is to surface ideas of changes in life stages and states of becoming. This is a move away from feminine ageing stereotypes of diminishment to focus on life affirming perspectives and potential transformation. I aim to contribute to existing forms of resistance for the emergence and articulation of more meaningful, diverse ageing feminine and maternal narratives. This is a collective, co-created action of resistance which is energised through the feminist aesthetic and imaginary, a critical space which offers hope for the potential transformation and empowerment of women.

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## About the Author

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Maxine exhibits regularly including recent exhibitions at the Halpern Gallery, Nucleus Arts Centre, Medway, and she has shown as part of the Power of Women Festival Thanet. She delivers creative workshops in a range of mediums and presents papers on her practice research at conferences, such as the 'Missing Mother' conference (Bolton University 2021), and the 'Conflict and Creative Practice Conference' (UCA, 2021). Maxine is currently undertaking a practice-based Ph.D. at UCA.

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# The Weaving is Us: Decolonizing the Tools for the Feminist Imagination

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## Abstract

This article documents weaving as a decolonizing epistemic tool for feminist futures that emerges from the work of our collective – the Feminist Imaginary Research Network. As a collective of feminist adult educators who work in both the academy and women’s museums, weaving challenges the centrality of rationality over other ways of knowing and being. Following the teachings of Indigenous women thinkers and artists, including the work of some of our members, we frame weaving as an epistemic tool and aesthetic language for future-making. Weaving acts upon us as a mirror of our history, as an antidote against the supremacy of rationality, and as a tool for collective projects of transformation. As a decolonizing tool, weaving gathers us around Indigenous women’s traditional knowledge, but also confronts us with the question of our obligations when the teachings of weaving have been offered to us – what is our responsibility to the work, to each other, and to this emergent knowledge?

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**Keywords:** Coast Salish weaving; decolonial pedagogies; feminist imaginary; settler colonialism; heteropatriarchy; gender justice.

## Introduction

When we teach our weaving, we honour our ancestors and let people know that we are here today, not just surviving but thriving. We went into hiding for so many years, and now it is time to share and to educate.—CHEPXIMIYA SIYAM’ Chief Janice George, Guest Curator

(Janice George, 2021)

Chief Janice George’s words epitomize not only the role of weaving as traditional knowledge in identity-building and healing, but also, it signals its power to imagine otherwise futures. Colonial attempts to eliminate Indigenous culture by confiscating regalia and mechanizing weaving techniques that originally involved hand spinning, dyeing, and weaving, partially succeeded, dispossessing Indigenous women of their birthright, including weaving practices that incorporated traditional knowledge around governance, culture, and spirituality, and included positive economic and community benefits (Tepper et al., 2017). Today, Coast Salish weavers are revitalizing and reclaiming this critical practice and knowledge.

We propose that weaving is an epistemic tool for feminist futures through knowledge production and future-making. We situate weaving in the context of the Feminist Imaginary Research Network (FIRN). This feminist collective gathers feminist adult arts-based educators, researchers, and women’s museum practitioners from around the world - Canada, United States, Argentine, Costa Rica, Spain, Italy, United Kingdom, Germany, Albania, South Africa, India, and Nigeria. Women’s museums and arts-based practices are the places and tools the collective uses to mobilize the feminist imaginary (Clover et al., 2022). The collective is committed to varied forms of feminist practice inside and outside of academia that provide opportunities for community-led work, feminist activism, and feminist care. One question at the centre of our work is: How can we move towards a decolonized gender-just world? In other words, how can we imagine and create an alternative decolonized future? The collective acknowledges our different and unique positionalities and the complexities of this question in a context where feminism has been accused of complicity with colonialism (Lugones, 2010; Purewal and Ung Loh, 2021; Ramos & Roberts, 2021).

Among the FIRN’s members are the authors of this piece: Dorothea Harris and Thea Harris, mother and daughter, and Claudia Diaz-Diaz. Dorothea and Thea are from a family of Coast Salish artists in Snuneymuxw First Nation, an Indigenous community on Vancouver Island, B.C., Canada. Dorothea is also a Ph.D. candidate who works in post-secondary education and Thea is a Master's student who works in Indigenous language revitalization. Claudia is a Latina scholar, educator, and

settler in Coast Salish territories. We bring our positionalities into conversation following the work of other Indigenous and women of color feminists, as we further elaborate. As Simpson (2017) reminds us, knowledge is relational. Each author has contributed equally to this manuscript, and we do this work together as an approach to epistemic justice in which we see the world in a new light through the eyes of our companions. In this way, we aim to replace the centrality of Eurocentric notions of rationality with Indigenous concepts of relationality (Blackstock, 2011; Wilson, 2008) in knowledge production.

Grounded in Coast Salish teachings, the future we envision through weaving builds on alliances between Indigenous and settler women who acknowledge the role of settler colonialism in heteropatriarchy and gender-based violence (Arvin et al., 2013; Green, 2007; Mendoza, 2015). As a system of oppression, settler colonialism has displaced Indigenous Peoples and imposed a gender binary that diminished Indigenous women's knowledge and roles in Indigenous governance structures. We start by recognizing the pervasive nature of settler colonialism and its continuing role in erasing Indigenous ways of knowing and being, and knowledge production, to avoid celebratory and tokenistic forms of recognition that center Indigenous culture without addressing land restitution, sovereignty, and decolonization. The field of feminist studies has been complicit with the modern-colonial episteme when it avoids "the dismantling of its tools and edifice as a necessary step for epistemic change" (Purewal & Ung Loh, 2021, p. 1). If feminists put their imagination to work without interrogating the role of settler colonialism in heteropatriarchy, they will fail at creating the future they wish. For us, decolonizing the tools for feminist futures means uncovering the colonial structures, narratives, and spaces that inhabit women's imagination and recentring Indigenous ways of knowing and being in those spaces.

To engage our feminist practice in the decolonizing of the tools for the feminist imagination, we now turn to the teachings that weaving as a visual language brings to us. We intend to be guided by the weaving rather than by what we call our reason. We are wary not to create false binaries that situate reason on one hand and something else like intuition on the other. Instead, our attention is on what we can learn from the practice of weaving as an epistemic tool as it has been framed and used by Indigenous Peoples across the globe, and Coast Salish Peoples in particular.

In August 2022, the Feminist Imaginary Research Network held a conference called The Feminist Imaginary: Creative Pedagogies and Methods for Gender Justice and Change. Dorothea and Thea travelled from Victoria, Canada to Lancashire, UK, where the conference took place, with looms, wool, and all the materials to demonstrate weaving as an Indigenous feminist aesthetic work and cultural revitalization and reclamation practice. As we further elaborate through the following passages, the weaving presented itself as an unexpected gift confronting the collective with the question: What are the collective's responsibilities to this generous gesture? We undertake this question not as a romantic invitation to experiment with ourselves and arrive at common better futures; instead, we aspire to do justice to the gift offered in a spirit of reciprocity, by being open to decentering the mind to tune in to our desires for a healthy decolonial future (Tuck, 2009).

While we draw on Coast Salish weaving in settler colonial Canada, the insights proposed are not limited to this context. Decolonizing our minds is a practice that must be connected to place, and the place where we situate our work brings different futurity projects into being, depending on where these projects occur. As a collective that gathers women from around the globe, we acknowledge that 'internationalism' (understood as a political principle of solidarity) and "our local place-based existences are intimately intertwined" (Simpson, 2017, p. 57). Endeavoring to make sense of how Indigenous and feminist internationalism continue to be situated in our distinctive geopolitical contexts, we are drawing on the Coast Salish teaching of Nuts'a'maat which "teaches us that we are all one" (Thomas, 2018, p. 26).

### ***Weaving as a gift: "It belongs to all of you."***

Dorothea didn't grow up with weaving, as many Coast Salish aesthetic and cultural practices either went underground or were almost lost due to the impacts of colonization, and it has only been revitalized in their family in the last few years. Her relationship with weaving began when she was

engaged in work as a manager of education and programs in a local Indigenous community, and she had partnered with the Victoria Native Friendship Centre (VNFC), which offered weaving classes as a method to revitalize traditional parenting practices. Dorothea saw the profound impact that Coast Salish weaving had on the community, observing how the weaving acted as a teacher of embodied learning and traditional knowledge.

Thea had always been artistic and interested in culturally-based practices, so she asked if she could participate in the weaving classes, and the community welcomed her. She took to it immediately, quickly learning the spinning and weaving process. Moreover, the weaving often took her on a journey, teaching her new patterns and designs, revealing things about herself that she wasn't aware of and bringing back old teachings. She started studying books on weaving, looking at historic weavings in the museum, talking to weavers and watching weavers on YouTube. She developed a passion for it. In Dorothea's words, watching Thea, and others in the Nation, it was like the weaving was inside of them, in their DNA, and it was being brought back to life. Since then, Thea has taught weaving in schools and in various youth programs.

Dorothea invited Thea to present *Facilitating Uy'skwuluwun: Indigenous Feminist Aesthetic Work as Cultural Revitalization* with her at the conference. The plan was that Dorothea would share her PowerPoint presentation on weaving as a pedagogy that supports cultural revitalization and the embodiment of teachings such as uy'skwuluwun – "to be of a good mind and heart" (Thomas, 2005, p. 249), and Thea would do a weaving demonstration while Dorothea was presenting. Afterwards, Claudia would present on *Decolonial Feminist Pedagogies and Artistic Production*. In preparation, the three of them briefly discussed the possibility of Thea continuing to weave as Claudia presented as well.



On the day of the presentation, what was initially planned as a weaving demonstration became a form of documentation or record of the knowledge production process women were participating in and contributing to. After the morning presentations wrapped up, Thea moved with her loom and materials toward the back of the room next to our graphic note-taker (Nicola Dickson), where they could gather a full perspective of the rest of the conference, taking in the thoughts, ideas and energies

of each presenter and incorporating them in their work. The collective's members had varied experiences with weaving as well as other forms of aesthetic practices, so they felt attracted to come to the back of the room and contemplate Thea's weaving and learn from her. Quite literally, Thea's weaving felt like it was covering us with her textile – blanketing the room. For Coast Salish people, this is a form of protection.

At the end of the conference, Thea shared the meaning of the weaving, offering it to us as a gift: “I don't think it is mine; I think it belongs to all of you.” Thea passed it over to our collective leads to be held and shared by them as a representation of our collective and documentation of the conference and our time together.

## The two sides of the weaving

The weaving offers a story through, what Thea calls, the two sides of the weaving: the one that is most often perceived, the front side of the weaving, and the one that is woven behind that tells another part of the story. Elders will often approach a piece of art, like a weaving, and flip it over to see what is on the other side. The weaving presented to the collective offers a story in the present moment, what we can see and touch, grounded in the teaching of Coast Salish weaving techniques and practices, and the back side that represents what is happening in the spiritual realm – the ancestral connection. The weaver brings those two stories together, almost as if they were two worlds woven together. The messages at the front and back of this gifted textile are important to decipher.

Weavings have a life of their own. Coast Salish weaver Chief Janice George, of the Squamish Nation, elaborates on the life of woven blankets: “You should think about blankets as merged objects. They are alive because they exist in the spirit world... they are part of the weaver; they are part of the wearer” (Tepper et al., 2017, p. xiii). Thea explains how her weaving took on a life of its own:

When I first started, I created a plan, but the plan got totally flipped on its head quite literally. I was weaving from the top down intending for this to be the top and quite quickly I realized it needed to be flipped so I feel that this has happened here in a way, there are a lot of flips in the kind of stories we tell or the way we tell them – and a lot has flipped for me, so having that kind of flip [in the weaving], I was shocked to see that come forward - not my intention.

Informed by Indigenous Elders' oral history and stories, weaving has been used to document their laws and systems of governance and had considerable trade value. For example, treasured goat hair blankets were used as standardized currency as well as objects that represented wealth and status (Tepper et al., 2017). Thea highlights the value of documentation as she presents the weaving to us:

In our culture, as you may know, we didn't have a written language, but my grandfather says, we have a visual language. All of our stories were visually depicted. We can look at a totem pole or a weaving and know the story of that place or the peoples who live there, so I feel that this weaving is very much a story of what happened here [at the conference] over the last several days.

Weaving, particularly blankets, has also been central to Coast Salish culture for its ceremonial and spiritual relevance. As Tepper and colleagues (2017) document, Squamish Elder Lena Jacobs (1910 to 2008) explained that robes and blankets provided spiritual protection for the leaders of their communities from the “negative thoughts that came from enemies or strangers” (pp. xvii-xviii). Today's leaders describe wearing a woven blanket as giving them a sense of “strength and focus and a feeling of calmness” (Tepper, 2017, pp. xvii-xviii).

It is in the spiritual value of the weaving, where the gift of the Coast Salish textile resides. As Tepper et al. (2017) reminds us: “Every aspect of Salish textile production is bound by an awareness of the spirit world and a respect for the Ancestral gifts of knowledge” (pp. 1-2). Traditional teachings highlight the power of woven garments, particularly their importance in spiritual protection. They also emphasize the responsibilities of the weaver and the obligations of the wearer. Weaving a blanket is seen as an act of spiritual responsibility in which the weaver is a channel of the ancestor's company



and protection and both the weaver and the wearer's obligations, including honouring the traditional knowledge and carrying themselves with uy'skwuluwun (a good heart and mind), are conferred through the gift.



The Salish worldview understands that robes and blankets already exist in the spirit world and it is the weaver who brings them into the human realm as we further elaborate through Thea's gift of the weaving. In a way, the weaving doesn't belong to, or is produced only by the weaver. Many people



have spoken of feeling their grandmothers or great-grandmothers near them and of having their hands guided during the creation of the work. Thea reflects:

This bottom piece was really energetic. This was the first day of the conference. I didn't mean to weave this. It was just what came forward and it was high vibration with lots and lots of energy and even though it was kind of the beginning when I first started weaving, because it is now flipped it is at the end as well. That kind of high energy is very representative of what has happened up to today.

At the beginning of Dorothea's and Thea's presentation/demonstration, Thea had handed out small pieces of wool to each of the participants so that they could both connect with the fibre and learn thigh-spinning, a basic form of twisting the wool into weavable strands by rolling it on your thigh. Several of the participants became very engaged in the activity, with one participant saying that she would use the piece as an exhibit in her women's museum and another one giving her strand to Thea to be used in the weaving that she was creating. Notably, the only spun wool that was given to Thea came from this woman who later became quite ill and could not participate in the rest of the conference, but according to Thea, she was still there as her work, her energy, was woven in.

In this way, the weaving transcended the individual, containing ancestral knowledge and wisdom, standing as witness to the powerful work that each woman is doing around the world in the present, and channeling their energies to signal what a decolonial future can be. The art and symbolism in the weaving became a metaphor for the weaving together of past, present and future, and the weaving together of a feminist collective. Moreover, this took place on both a physical and spiritual plane, with the potential for the energy in the weaving – the energy of each participant, to guide our future work together.

### ***When a gift is offered: Our obligations***

As Jimmy and Andreotti (2021) poignantly argue: “In modern/colonial contexts and modes of relationality, the gifts of Indigenous Peoples are often perceived as part of settlers' colonial entitlements” (p. 6). For us, as a collective, Jimmy's and Andreotti's (2021) provocation begs the question: “What are our obligations when a gift is offered?” (p. 6). The question is not only about reciprocity, but most importantly, about the responsibility to work towards decolonial futures that appreciate this gift and embrace everything that comes with it.

We began this paper by stating our commitment with feminist imaginaries that work towards a decolonized gender-just world. Weaving as an epistemic tool offers teachings that Indigenous women weavers reclaim to mitigate and subvert the impact of colonialism on their lives, communities, knowledges, and governance. In this sense, by receiving the gift of weaving, we are compelled to understand the role of settler colonialism in heteropatriarchy to build alliances that acknowledge, rather than overlook, our differences. Thea illuminates:

The decorative black motif here is ... actually a black butterfly, and I was questioning, what is that about? I've never seen a black butterfly coming through my weaving... again I did a bit of research and I found that for some people the black butterfly is a symbol of death, but for other cultures and other people it is a symbol of rebirth, so again, I thought it was very significant. I kind of chuckled to myself and I said maybe it is the end of the patriarchy and the rebirth of the matriarchy (laughs).

Coast Salish peoples are matriarchal, as the traditional teachings and cultural knowledge are passed down through the women (Thomas, 2018). As Thea, Dorothea, and Claudia reconvened to discuss and reflect on the weaving's story, Thea brought up that the weaving offers a story in search of cultural perpetuity (Blackstock, 2011) grounded in self and community actualization and the impact on future generations. Cultural perpetuity is aligned with the desire of Indigenous feminists to return to matriarchal societies where connections to land and identity are one. Returning to matriarchal societies after colonization is a vision of a future that demands reconfiguring colonial gender divisions that marginalize Indigenous women's contributions to governance, laws, leadership, spirituality, and relationship with the land. Importantly, matriarchal knowledges bring up the question of reparations for land dispossession and Indigenous epistemic erasure.

The gift of weaving also confronts us as a collective to center our work on reparations, land restitution and sovereignty in ways that do not happen on the same terms that colonialism has predicated. Rematriation brings a decolonial intention through the restoration of matriarchal authority grounded in Indigenous law, meaning that restitution of lands is not enough, but it must be accompanied by material and spiritual reparations (Maracle, 1996). One story that is brought to life through the weaving is about rematriation as an “embodied practice of recovery and return and a sociopolitical mode of resurgence and refusal” (Gray, 2022, p. 1). The work of the collective – in the written word as well as in the curation of collections in women’s museums – has refused heteropatriarchy, white supremacy, and dispossession. What else must we refuse and in what terms? Furthermore, what can we embrace?

## The weaving is us

The two sides of the weaving show us that embodying our imagination challenges the centrality of rationality and centres the material and spiritual realms of knowledge production for the feminist imagination. Dorothea asks us to consider a crucial question: what will we do with the work our feminist collective does? What are the steps moving forward as we theorize and find ways of enacting the feminist imagination and decolonial feminist futures? As the weaving has been passed to us, it is our role to pass on and share the knowledge that has been embodied in the weaving, the lived experience and wisdom of the women in the collective, to the next generation. The question ahead is how we become responsible for making our imagination real by passing on the knowledge offered by the weaving and the weavers that came before us to those who will come after.

Now that we as a collective have received the gift of weaving, we are compelled to reflect on these questions: 1) How can we as a collective imagine a future where we are responsible for ensuring that reparations are made, renewal is protected, and cultural perpetuity is possible? 2) How can we, as feminist academics, educators, and practitioners, commit to a decolonial feminist future grounded in Indigenous theorizing? As we have elaborated, weaving revealed an essential teaching about the centrality of spirituality and the renewal of cycles. The weaving flipped itself, and the energetic red design that was embodied in the weaving at the beginning of the conference subsequently became the end of the weaving, so the energy became cyclical – both beginning and end, propelling us forward towards cultural perpetuity. The work at the end of the conference became the beginning of our journey together – the practice yet-to-come, guided by the gift of the weaving. In this sense, a decolonial feminist future means weaving the collective imagination as a practice that challenges the centrality of rationality and acknowledges the role of spirituality in collective projects of transformation. Spirituality becomes both the many threads in the weaving and that transcendent moment that weaves us – individuals – as a collective: The weaving is us.

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**Thea Harris** is a member of Snuneymuxw First Nation. She has been a grateful visitor on the Ləkʷəŋən, W̱SÁNEĆ, and Sc'ianew territories in Victoria, B.C. for more than thirty years. She holds a Diploma in Indigenous Business Leadership from Camosun College, pursued a Bachelor's Degree in Business Administration and Sustainability from Royal Roads, and most recently has been completing her MBA in Indigenous Business Leadership at Simon Fraser University. Thea is also an artist and weaver, being trained in Coast Salish art by her grandfather, Dr. William Good, and other mentors and teachers who have been critical to her development.

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# Conducting Arts-Based Research with Rural Women in Columbia, South America: A Tool for Community Empowerment and Gender Justice

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## Abstract

Women's social movements in Colombia are known for being visible in the streets, on social networks, in the courts, and neighborhoods (Zulver, 2022). In Colombia, women have mobilized to seek gender justice. Many of them have to face violence not only daily, but also in a structural way such as the legal impossibility of owning land. Sometimes, mobilizing means exposing themselves to the dynamics of power and violence to which they are subjected (Rojas, 2000). Many women, however, seek to form associations to protect themselves from these dynamics. Associating and organizing as a collective allows women to start transcending the patriarchal structures that keep them in a situation where they are held as immobilized victims, and in turn, become the new protagonists of a struggle that allows them to be the builders of a different destiny for themselves and future generations (Llevadot, 2022). This new scenario demands that women recognize the importance of building a collective identity that can lead them to establish common objectives that are broader compared to the individual goals that lead them to satisfy their immediate and daily needs. Building this identity implies establishing actions that commit them, through participation, to change how they interact with their closest people and the social and political environment in their territories (Zulver, 2022). Some of these actions are expressed in the production of handicrafts, food, embroidery, theatrical performances, and other community activities that strengthen the community's organization.

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**Keywords:** Art; autonomy; Colombia; community empowerment; critical reflection; forgiveness; governance. justice; self-management; social action; violence.

## Introduction

This article presents an organizational experience that uses handicrafts to express women's imagination and creativity. Art is used to highlighting reflections on the territory's history, including environmental care and complex community issues. In this case study, 8 women from the Asociación de Mujeres Empoderadas y Emprendedoras del Cañón del Combeima- AMEECC (Association of Empowered and Enterprising Women of the Combeima Canyon - AEEWCC), participated in an art-based research process to explore the concepts of women, sustainability, forgiveness, peace, and harvest and how these concepts affect their role as members of a rural community.

Community-Based Participatory Research (CBPR) demonstrates that art is a powerful tool for engaging community members in research and allows them to express their perspectives in a creative and meaningful way (Clover, 2011). Art can foster critical reflection and social action, which can lead to more effective and sustainable solutions to previously identified problems. In addition, it can trigger critical self-reflection by “learning from diverse cultural perspectives through art, knowing self through art, accessing or uncovering hidden knowledge, image making as a way to deepen understanding, learning through the arts, art in the curriculum, and art as a means for social change” (Blackburn Miller, 2020, p. 2). Moreover, this methodology ensures that the results are relevant and useful for the community and that the proposed solutions are culturally appropriate and socially acceptable.

## Literature review

Historically, women in Colombia have been subordinated and often ignored in both public and private life. Many of them are subjected to inequitable power dynamics in which violence and abuse prevail. As Rodriguez (2022) argues patriarchal ways of relationships, interactions, and behaviors persist in Colombia. These are immersed in the social, political, cultural, and economic systems in the 21st century. Consequently, some of the women's associations have emerged in the framework of struggles that demand primarily women's civil rights, economic justice, and gender justice (Zulver, 2022; Sánchez-Jimenez, et al 2021) and are expressed through protests in the streets, on social networks, and in the courts. Sometimes, the fact that women engage in this type of mobilization is a sign that the dynamics of power and violence to which they are exposed are exacerbated (Rojas, 2000), so to protect themselves from such dynamics of violence and injustice (Zulver, 2022), they seek to organize themselves collectively in associations, strengthening their demands.

By associating and organizing as a collective, women can begin to transcend the patriarchal structures that keep them in a situation where they are held as immobilized victims, and in turn, become the new protagonists of a struggle that allows them to be the builders of a different destiny for themselves and future generations (Llevadot, 2022). This new scenario demands that women recognize the importance of building a collective identity that can lead them to establish common objectives that are broader compared to the individual goals that lead them to satisfy their immediate and daily needs (Zulver, 2022). Building this collective identity implies the development of actions that commit them through participation to make changes in how they relate and interact with themselves, with those closest to them, and with the social and political environment in their territories (Zulver, 2022). For instance, these collective actions are crystallized in handicrafts, food, embroidery, theatrical performances, and other community activities, strengthening their identity by making them feel useful, productive, and capable of generating income. By participating in these organizational activities, women from the Asociación de Mujeres Empoderadas y Emprendedoras del Cañón del Combeima (AMEECC) have begun to transform their mindsets and ways of acting. They have discovered new skills and potential within themselves, enabling them to be more productive and involved in local, regional, and even national events. This increased participation provides them with economic opportunities, expands their social networks, and grants them greater recognition in the community. Thus, working collaboratively with the organization offers them an alternative source of income and drives a positive change in their lives, empowering them to reach their personal goals and aspirations.

Handicrafts can be used as an expression of women's imagination and creativity. Art is used as a tool to highlight reflections about the territory's history, including environmental care and the community's complex problems. In this case study, eight women from the (AMEECC) Canyon participated in an art-based research process to explore the concepts of women, sustainability, forgiveness, peace, and harvest, and how these same concepts affect their role as members of a rural community.

## Methodology

Community-Based Participatory Research (CBPR) demonstrates that art is a powerful tool for engaging community members in research and allows them to express their perspectives in an evident creative and meaningful way as Clover (2011) mentioned in a case “The growing sense of community was also noticeable to the audience at the exhibitions” p. 20. Art can foster critical reflection and social action, which can lead to more effective and sustainable solutions to previously identified problems, contributing to Sustainable Development Goals.” Therefore, now is the moment to widen the scope of knowledge in society and move beyond creating fragmented solutions, to a true knowledge-based society through engagement with the citizenry as a whole, at all scales of activity, to deal with the problematic issues and global challenges of the day” (Tandon, Singh, Clover, and Hall, 2016; p. 22). In addition, the methodology ensures that the results are relevant and useful for the community and that the proposed solutions are culturally appropriate and socially acceptable, as Tandon, et al (2016, p.

3,4) remark “they will gain access to the methods, tools, and values of CBR to promote the use of research by community members and encourage the collaborative creation of knowledge democracy.”

In this Community Based Participatory Research, a focus group consisting of 8 women from the association, which comprises 36 members, was conducted. This approach also enabled the triangulation of information gathered from fieldwork practice with feminist theory. Such integration facilitated the analysis of how art-based research methodologies influenced gender justice and contributed to nurturing critical and creative consciousness. In addition, as Butterwick and Lipson Lawrence (2023, p 349) posit: “One of the most important aspects of this type of learning is meaning-making, which the arts help to process in a unique way. When adults experience a transformation and suddenly their lifeworld has new meaning and purpose, it can be a powerful experience that has many ripple effects in their lives”. In this sense, we recognize that arts and various forms of creative expression introduce us to new forms and creative expressions that allow us to think and feel how things should be and can be different to reframing the problem and subverting sexism. Finally, the relationship between women artisans and environmental care is linked to the role they play in the territory as caretakers and entrepreneurs. In this sense, we can say that imagination to transform its reality makes sense in this new identity that is configured through arts. In conclusion, this case study demonstrates how communities can use imagination and creativity (Butterwick and Lipson Lawrence , 2023) linking with different university actors to generate efficient processes of local transformation (Tandon, Singh, Clover, and Hall, 2016).

## **Community based participatory research**

This case study was conducted from the perspective of Community Based Participatory Research (CBPR), considering that this is an approach that seeks the active participation of community members in all phases of the research. This implies that throughout the research process, there is collaborative work between researchers from the academy and the community, where each participant contributes to the identification of problems, research planning, data collection, and analysis, as well as decision-making to carry out the necessary and relevant changes (Tandon, Lepore, Singh et. al., 2006). In this sense, community-based participatory research fosters greater equity and justice in research by ensuring that those directly affected by a situation collaborate in transforming it and that the proposed solutions are culturally appropriate and socially acceptable.

In the narrative of this experience, three aspects stand out. Firstly, the co-construction of trusting relationships to understand the context, listen, and dialogue. Secondly, a process adapted specifically to the territorial context was developed. Finally, as part of the solution to the problems encountered, individual work dynamics were generated, while respecting each participant's personality traits, which resulted in collective constructions of a new empowered identity. Ethical issues were considered and developed with several important aspects in mind by participants. First, agreements related to mutual respect were generated between the women of the participating organization and the two Higher Educational Institutions. The agreements considered aspects such as caring for others and attentive listening. We also ensured that all participants were informed of the different decisions that were made during the process, recognizing the differences that arose during the development of the project (Banks, 2016) Moreover, we decided to use arts-based methods that allow for broad participation and free expression of all involved within the project (Kuri, 2020).

This also included aspects such as privacy and confidentiality preservation, promotion of equitable inclusion of all community members, as well as adequate representation of the participants' perspectives. During the research process, it was also identified that all women, including university professors, should be involved in the research and knowledge production processes through artistic expression from a perspective of social responsibility “as active moral agents in a political context of challengeable framings, norms, rules and policies about social justice, social responsibility, and societal compassion” (Banks. 2013. p. 46). To address these ethical issues, clear and transparent practices were followed involving explicit communication with participants about their rights and the use of information, promotion of inclusion, and equity in the research process (Akenson, 2014).



Careful consideration was given to how the results would be presented and communicated. In addition, we complied with formal protocols, and all participants provided their consent through their signature. (Guilemin & Guilian, 2004)

## Cooperating partners

The cooperating partners for this case study included the organizations and individuals who contributed to the achievement of the study's objectives in a variety of ways. This includes three faculty members from the "Universidad de los Andes" and the "Universidad de Ibagué", a student from the "Semestre Paz y Región" at the same university, the "Museo del Arte del Tolima" (MAT) and the "Asociación de Mujeres Empoderadas y Emprendedoras del Cañón del Combeima" (Association of Empowered and Enterprising Women of the Combeima Canyon) (AMEECC). Although not all AMEECC members participated throughout the research, they all provided logistical support during the meetings and in the dissemination of events such as the Craft Fair.



## Art, self-management, autonomy, and governance

Art becomes a powerful tool in Community Based Participatory Research to engage the community in the research process and to help them express their experiences and perspectives creatively and meaningfully. Art possesses the ability to be a universal means of communication that overcomes language and cultural barriers, allowing for more active and effective community participation in research and decision-making. Furthermore, art can stimulate critical reflection and social action within the community, potentially leading to more effective and sustainable solutions to identified issues. As Blackburn Miller (2020) asserts, "The arts can be accessible for everyone, and they hold much potential for creating transformative learning experiences" (p. 350). In summary, art plays a critical role in CBPR by strengthening community participation and empowerment in research and by promoting social change.

In this case study, there were no pre-defined roles. Each participant contributed to the definition of research criteria and processes, fostering autonomy and governance. Even though we played a coordinating role in guiding the process, we always promoted each group member's sovereignty and self-management. Decisions were made through agreements and voting, to guarantee equal conditions within favorable conditions for horizontal dialogue and the valuation of different perspectives. This made it possible to consider all the participants' ideas and coordinate actions with the association and the cooperating partners, achieving a positive impact on the territory.

## Mapping, reflecting and connecting

By using tools such as mapping, we were able to identify and address local problems encountered throughout our territory. We used Social Cartography (Herrera and Flores, 2021) to position ourselves in our context, identifying problems related to social and geographic dynamics, and identifying possible actions to tackle them. This exercise allowed the community to become actively involved in the design and discussion of maps that reflected their realities and experiences. The location of problems was highlighted in orange circles and possible solutions in green triangles in the corresponding images.

Throughout the reflection process, questions arose related to the concern for the environmental care of the Combeima River canyon. Questions focused on the impact that the lack of environment care has on the area, the importance of the Canyon for the city of Ibagué, as well as the interest of artisan women. These questions also focused on the relation between handicrafts and natural environment and how women artisans contribute to the sustainability of the area.



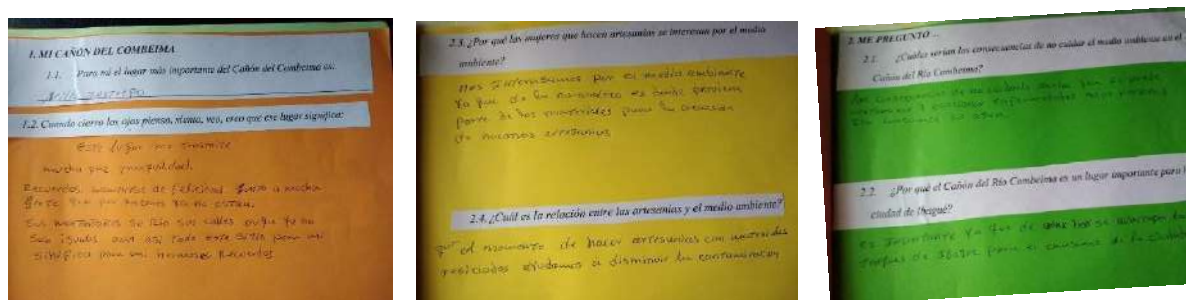
In this phase of the case study and after analyzing the data, it is concluded that water contamination caused by waste and litter is a serious problem with significant implications for the health, biodiversity, economy, and well-being of the communities in Ibagué. The river is essential to the city of Ibagué in the Tolima region of Colombia, both as a source of safe drinking water and, as a recreationally beautiful and peaceful place. Therefore, and according to (Budd et al. 2019) it is critical to take care and protect this natural resource while passing on its importance to future generations.

Recycling emerges as a multifaceted solution to address pollution, offering economic benefits and serving as a cornerstone of sustainability efforts. Beyond its immediate advantages of waste reduction and resource conservation, recycling plays a pivotal role in minimizing the extraction of raw materials, thus mitigating the environmental impact of resource depletion. By diverting materials from landfills and incinerators, recycling helps mitigate greenhouse gas emissions and reduces the need for energy-intensive manufacturing processes, thereby lowering the carbon footprint associated with producing new goods. Moreover, recycling fosters a circular economy model where materials are repurposed and reused, promoting efficiency and resilience within the supply chain while alleviating



pressure on natural ecosystems. Importantly, this paradigm shift recognizes waste recyclers women as community political actors (Batthyány, K. 2022), empowering them to actively participate in decision-making processes regarding waste management and environmental policies. Embracing recycling initiatives not only yields economic rewards but also aligns with long-term sustainability objectives, making it a crucial component of global environmental stewardship efforts.

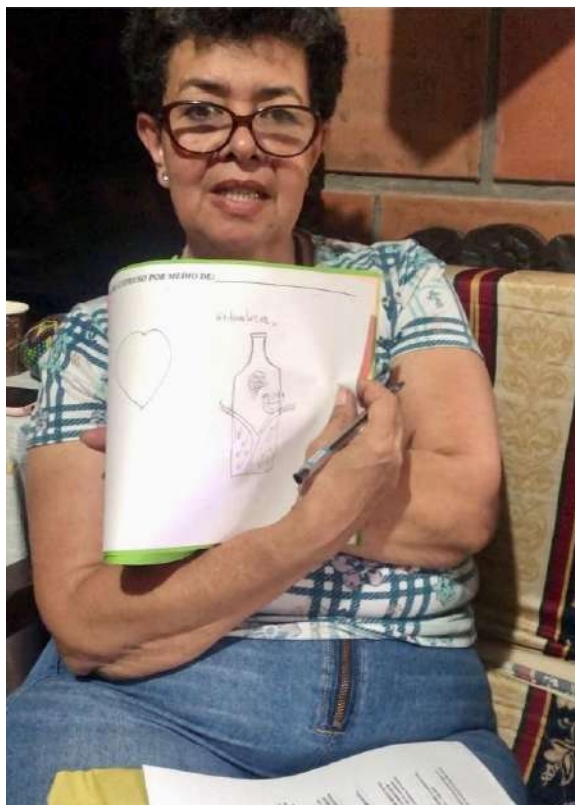
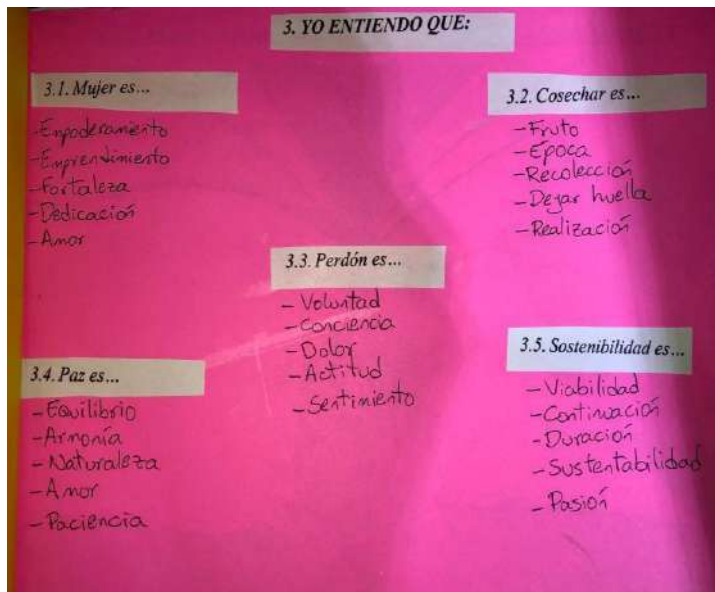
The collaborative process and collective reflections led to the co-construction of a fundamental question: How can the handicrafts crafted by the women of Asociación de Mujeres Empoderadas y Emprendedoras del Cañón del Combeima - AMEECC contribute to a strategy that promotes sustainability in the region of the Combeima River Canyon? This question arises from a deeper understanding of the intertwined relationship between the local environment and the activities of the community, particularly the women artisans. By recognizing the value of their craftsmanship beyond mere artistic expression, the community begins to explore the potential of these creations as catalysts for sustainable development by articulating academic, community, and political scenarios (Batthyány, K. 2022). This question reflects a shift towards holistic thinking, considering not only the economic benefits of handicraft production but also its broader implications for environmental conservation, community empowerment, and cultural preservation in the region. Through this inquiry, stakeholders can envision innovative approaches that leverage the unique skills and perspectives of the Asociación de Mujeres Empoderadas y Emprendedoras del Cañón del Combeima - AMEECC women to address environmental challenges and promote resilience in the Combeima River Canyon area.



Themes and Co-creating concepts: Peace, Sustainability, Forgiveness, Women, and Harvest

During this stage of the process, an analysis of the information that emerged from the previous reflections was carried out. In this space, Asociación de Mujeres Empoderadas y Emprendedoras del Cañón del Combeima - AMEECC women identified important themes and sought to establish connections to express their feelings, thoughts, and actions. They defined key concepts related to their identity and values, such as:

1. **Being a woman** is described as an individual that has a mixture of attributes. Some of these attributes include: empowerment, intelligence, creativity, strength, entrepreneurial spirit, dedication, love, responsibility, commitment, humility, beauty, kindness, organization, concern for the environment, self-confidence, courage, and passion. A woman is characterized as a courageous warrior and fighter as well as an entrepreneur.
2. **Harvesting** implies undertaking, sowing, cultivating, and reaping fruits at the right time, leaving a footprint, and experiencing a sense of fulfillment. It is also related to sowing with love to reap positive results and to take care of what has been sown.
3. **Forgiveness** is seen as a way of liberating negative feelings such as bitterness, resentment, anger, and pain. It involves loving others, being conscious and willing to change attitudes and feelings, seeking reconciliation, and freeing oneself from resentment to achieve tolerance and peace.
4. **Peace** is understood as a state of tranquility that is achieved through balance, harmony, nature, love, and patience. It is also related to awareness, cleanliness, and dialogue while seeking agreements and accepting differences.
5. **Sustainability** implies dedication, perseverance, and effort to achieve viability, continuity, and durability. It also relates to passion and love for what one does, as well as managing resources responsibly and creating opportunities for all, including the use of renewable energy sources and recycling.



In brief, a thorough analysis was conducted to ensure that the essence and significance of the concepts identified by the Asociación de Mujeres Empoderadas y Emprendedoras del Cañón del Combeima - AMEECC women were faithfully preserved. These concepts, rooted in their experiences and reflections, encapsulate profound aspects of their identity and values. For instance, the notion of “being a woman” embodies a multifaceted blend of qualities encompassing empowerment, resilience, and compassion. “Harvesting” symbolizes not just the act of reaping rewards, but also the journey of nurturing and growth, leaving a meaningful legacy. “Forgiveness” emerges as a powerful tool for personal liberation and fostering reconciliation. “Peace” is depicted as a state of serenity derived from balance, love, and dialogue. Lastly, “sustainability” encompasses dedication, responsible resource management, and a commitment to creating equitable opportunities. Each concept reflects the genuine sentiments and aspirations of the women, ensuring that their voices are authentically represented in the narrative.

## Expressions of territory through handicrafts

As a result of the information analysis and the development of their concepts, women identified the passion that would motivate their creativity. They also managed to recognize that handicrafts are the main area where the association works, so it was decided that this would be the best way to express the co-constructed concepts of Forgiveness, Peace, Sustainability, Women, and Harvest, through artistic expression. By doing so, they were able to show who they were and how they related and identified with their territory. Initially, sketches were created as drafts of the artistic ideas and each expression was given a name that would reflect what they wanted to convey. Finally, through the development of a booklet, the memories of the reflection and creation process were recorded.

Below, we present the names of the artistic expressions, which emerged from a reflection where participants defined the composition of their essence as rural women in three aspects: their mind, their heart, and their body, these three aspects were finally captured on the handicrafts.

1. **Coffee tree:** "In the head, it carries the leaves and flowers that show the result of the sowing. The heart is a basket full of coffee that is the result of my harvest. In the body are its roots and the earth that is where I can continue sowing and harvesting, in that earth and that basket, all my dreams with love (Sandra)."
2. **To be Reborn:** "It is when a woman allows herself to bloom as a second chance so that the beauty of the heart also blooms and the colorful nature is recovered, helping sustainability. To be reborn has a head of love and second chances, a heart of recovery and sustainability, and a body of nature and colors" (Yaneth).
3. **Pacifica:** "Its body is made of stems that signify strength. Its head is made of flowers that mean conservation and its heart has leaves that stand for tranquility" (Blanca).
4. **Colors of love:** "It has a snowy head, a multicolored heart, and a river body. In my earrings I describe the color of nature, beauty, and tranquility" (Yohanna).
5. **Cultivate yourself:** "It has the head of a rainbow, the heart of a hummingbird, and the body of flowers. We are from nature and we will return to it. Therefore, "Cultivate" shows the relationship you have as a human being with Mother Nature; the same one that provides us with the resources and raw materials to shape the designs of artistic and cultural expressions that beautify and bloom with the most beautiful colors; the same ones that adorn the thousands of landscapes with their flora and fauna, filling with light and harmony each of the physical and spiritual spaces that surround us" (Milena).
6. **Christmas:** "The head of my bottle has light to illuminate tranquility. The heart of my bottle is life, flowers, and seeds. And the body holds everything that contains it, with pebbles it holds" (Sara).
7. **Nature:** "The dove has a head of flowers, a heart of birds, and a body of a tree. The dove means peace in Colombia, the rose represents the woman in the head and nature means forgiveness and sustainability" (Olga).
8. **Chapolera:** "It has a coffee bean head, a coffee flower heart, and a coffee plant body. It signifies everything I do: my cooking, my handicrafts, the cultivation of coffee. It is quite simple but when I try to express myself through art, I succeed. I manage to show who I am and who we are, the women who harvest coffee" (Mirian).

In this way, the women described their creative work identifying what it represented from their minds, hearts, and bodies, conveying the meaning of each artistic expression, its name, and components.

Consequently, and as part of the community action, they considered that the best way to make the artistic expressions known would be through a handicraft exhibition called "Territorio de Paz" (Territory of Peace). To carry out this exhibition, the most appropriate place for the exhibition was selected. We also had to identify the public to whom the handicraft exhibition would be shown. In collaboration with professors from the "Universidad de Ibagué" and the "Universidad de Los Andes",



arrangements were made to exhibit these artistic creations at the "Museo del Arte del Tolima" (Art Museum of Tolima). As a result, the Craft Fair was held on February 16, 2023.



The following is a photographic record of the Craft Fair.



### United to transform: Resilience and sorority

Transformative actions play a key role in building capacity to bring about positive and sustainable change in the community. These actions focus not only on understanding community problems but also on addressing their underlying causes and collaborating with

community members to develop effective and sustainable solutions. For that reason, the art is considering The Soft Power (Waddock, S. 2022). It is described as the capacity to sway others through the appeal of culture, values, and policies. As an example of the above, we can mention that because some of the Asociación de Mujeres Empoderadas y Emprendedoras del Cañón del Combeima - AMEECC members also work in the tourism and pastry sector, they helped to market the handicraft products of all the members of the organization in the "Cañón del Combeima" (Combeima Canyon). This place is very popular on weekends with occasional national and international tourists that visit the area because of its natural attraction. This was done with the idea of building relationships to improve the perception and experiences of visitors in the area. As part of this exercise, a collective decision was made to carry out a campaign to raise awareness and develop ways to take care of the surrounding areas.



## Conclusions and future directions

There are several important insights that our study provides:

- Community Based Participatory Research highlights the importance of art as a powerful tool for engaging the community in research processes. Art stands out as a universal means of communication that transcends cultural and linguistic barriers. This creative approach promotes active community participation in research and decision-making. In addition, art can stimulate critical reflection and social action, fostering more effective and sustainable solutions to previously identified problems. Therefore, art is an engine of community change.
- The study highlights the absence of defined roles and the promotion of autonomy in the research process. All participants worked together on the definition of criteria and processes where governance and autonomy were fostered. Equality of conditions was valued, facilitating spaces for horizontal dialogue, and encouraging respect for all perspectives. This structure favored the inclusion of all the participants' ideas and coordinated joint actions, which generated a positive impact on the territory. In this sense, the CBPR is a generator of autonomy and empowerment. In other words, we perceive her approach as primarily focused on transformative learning, wherein she assists individuals in scrutinizing the underlying causes of environmental degradation and encourages them to participate in devising strategies to tackle these issues. Consequently, individuals swiftly assume responsibility and feel empowered to actively contribute towards effecting change (Butterwick & Lawrence, 2023).
- Water pollution poses significant threats to various aspects of life in Ibagué, including public health, biodiversity, the economy, and overall well-being. Given its profound impact, it is crucial to find effective ways to address this issue. Here, art emerges as a powerful tool for raising awareness and fostering environmental stewardship. Through artistic expressions such as visual arts and handicrafts, communities can engage with and understand the gravity of water pollution. Art has the unique ability to evoke emotions, spark conversations, and inspire action. By incorporating environmental themes into artistic endeavors, individuals are encouraged to reflect



on the importance of preserving water resources and taking proactive measures to safeguard the environment. In this way, art transcends its traditional boundaries and becomes a catalyst for environmental advocacy and positive change in Ibagué.

- Recycling serves as a multifaceted solution to combat contamination, offering not only economic advantages but also serving as a cornerstone of sustainability efforts. Beyond its immediate benefits of reducing waste and conserving resources, recycling contributes to the broader goal of sustainability by minimizing the extraction of raw materials, which in turn lessens the environmental impact of resource depletion. By diverting materials from landfills and incinerators, recycling helps mitigate greenhouse gas emissions and reduces the need for energy-intensive manufacturing processes, thus lowering the carbon footprint associated with producing new goods. Moreover, recycling fosters a circular economy model where materials are reused and repurposed, promoting efficiency and resilience within the supply chain while reducing pressure on natural ecosystems. Therefore, embracing recycling initiatives not only reaps economic rewards but also aligns with long-term sustainability objectives, making it a crucial component of environmental stewardship efforts worldwide.

By becoming aware of ourselves as questioners, as makers of meaning, and as individuals engaged in constructing and reconstructing realities with those around us, we may be able to communicate different points of view about reality, emphasizing that its construction is never complete and that there is always more to explore (Greene, M. 1995). Hence, the relationship between women artisans and environmental care underscores the importance of incorporating diverse perspectives and experiences into educational curricula. Moreover, by recognizing the roles of women as caregivers and entrepreneurs in environmental stewardship, educators can foster a more practical, inclusive, and integral approach to teaching sustainability. This involves promoting critical thinking skills and encouraging students to explore the intersectionality of gender, entrepreneurship, and environmentalism. Additionally, this case study highlights the value of collaborative learning experiences that bridge academic knowledge with community expertise.

In conclusion, this case study suggests that future research could delve deeper into the specific mechanisms through which women artisans contribute to environmental care within their communities. Exploring the cultural, social, and economic factors that shape women's roles in sustainability initiatives can provide valuable insights for designing targeted interventions and policy measures. Additionally, investigating the replicability of the collaborative model presented in this case study, with Community-Based Participatory Research methodology could inform efforts to empower communities and promote sustainable development on a broader scale. Overall, future studies in this area have the potential to advance our understanding of the intersection between gender, entrepreneurship, and environmental sustainability, ultimately guiding more inclusive and effective approaches to environmental education and community development.

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# Examining Feminist Pedagogy from the Perspective of Transformative Learning: Do Race and Gender Matter in Feminist Classrooms?

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## Abstract

Although feminist pedagogy has been widely used as a teaching approach in classrooms in higher education to enhance diversity, issues of race and gender are often areas of contestations for non-White faculty. The purpose of this study was to explore how non-White professors, a Black woman tenured full professor and a gay Asian male pre-tenured professor, co-created a feminist classroom and how they negotiated power in that classroom environment. The research questions that guided this study were: 1) what does a feminist classroom look like in higher education; 2) how does the intersection of race and gender influence feminist pedagogy; and 3) what strategies do adult educators and practitioners use to deal with disoriented dilemmas? This research progressed into a longitudinal study, focusing on how the faculty members' praxes grew from critical classroom incidents that the professors believed directly related the negative reactions from students to their positionalities as a Black woman and an Asian man. Three themes emerged from the data: a) Confrontation, b) Resistance, and c) Hostility. Each of these themes are defined and presented through direct quotes from our teaching logs and students' reflections. Discussion and implications for practice are also provided regarding how race and gender matter in feminist classrooms. The concluding section describes how the two faculty members implemented reflective practices in higher education to create feminist classrooms.

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**Keywords:** Feminist pedagogy; gender; higher education; race.

## Introduction and background of the study

Feminist pedagogy has been widely used by many practitioners in education and is understood by its users to create safer and more inclusive learning environments for their students. Feminist scholars and academics who center women's perspectives in their practices have strived to develop safer and more inclusive educational settings for learners where a more democratic pedagogy is practiced using feminist pedagogy. A broad spectrum of feminist literature embraces the notion that the ideal classroom is a refuge for all students and is a site of caring; but these concepts of safety and caring are questioned by women and faculty of color (Delano-Oriaran & Parks, 2015; hooks, 1989; Sue et al., 2011). The authors of this article, maintain that the classroom is rarely a safe space for People of Color, as students or teachers, because the classroom is merely a microcosm of our larger society and is therefore representative of the hierarchical systems that order the nonacademic world. Furthermore, we believe that when the *other* is the teacher, the class environment can become a *contested terrain* (Delano-Oriaran & Parks, 2015; Johnson-Bailey, 1998; Sue et al., 2011; Vargas, 1998) and a battlefield, where clashes can occur between the teacher and the students.

The purpose of this study was to explore how non-White professors, a Black woman tenured professor and a gay Asian male pre-tenured professor, co-created a feminist classroom and how they negotiated their power in that classroom environment. Initially the faculty members examined a three-hour one-semester course. The guiding research questions were: 1) what does a feminist classroom look like in higher education; 2) how does the intersection of race and gender influence feminist pedagogy; and 3) what strategies can adult educators and practitioners use to deal with disoriented dilemmas in a feminist classroom in higher education?

At this point in our research, over a decade later, we are both tenured professors. In the continuation of this study, we remain focused on our experiences as perceived academic outsiders. From the original study, we concluded that our students' negative and hostile interactions with us were directly related to our positionalities as a Black woman and an Asian man. Currently, this ongoing longitudinal study is grounded and informed by our initial efforts where we examined critical incidents that occurred in the 2007 class and that centered on the students' and faculty members' collective disorienting dilemmas. Those early experiences for us as faculty of color, led to transformative learning, which became the theoretical framework of this work from the collective disorienting dilemmas to continuous transformations in teaching through critical reflection and praxis (Johnson-Bailey & Alfred, 2006; Mezirow, 2018; Taylor, 2000). As we have continued our critical reflections that centered on our classroom experiences, we have developed coping mechanisms, teaching strategies, and an understanding of our students' reactions.

This article explores foundational literature on feminist pedagogy, briefly discusses the methods used, and highlights the three themes that emerged in the original study. Lastly, as feminist pedagogues, we reflect on what has been gleaned from our decades-plus critical reflections.

## Foundational literature

Feminist pedagogy has revolutionized the academy and has powerfully informed and transformed teaching and learning as it has been implemented in higher education where diversity and multiculturalism are valued and encouraged. Some strands of feminist pedagogy bear a strong relationship to both critical pedagogy and multicultural education literature and yet others have no relationship (Tisdell, 1998). Most scholars describe feminist pedagogy as a viable framework through which to create and foster learning environments that center the voices and experiences of women and other marginalized learners (Maher & Tetreault, 2001; Misawa, 2018, 2019).

Feminist pedagogy as defined by Maher and Tetreault (2001) is the art and science of teaching using women-centered and feminist approaches that aim "to encourage the students...to gain an education that would be relevant to their concerns, to create their own meanings, and to find their own voices in relation to the materials" (pp. 3-4). Feminism is both a social justice movement as well as a framework through which to understand women's experiences in male-dominated societies and their institutions. As a movement toward promoting equity for women, feminism has served as one of the most effective and liberatory social movements in the Western society (Freedman, 2006). Feminist pedagogy flows directly from feminism and facilitates students and teachers' understanding of how knowledge and viewpoints can be gendered and multifocal instead of uniform. Practicing feminist pedagogy is valued in contemporary postsecondary education, especially when the institution provides feminist components and women-centered curriculum; but traditional ways of operating feminist pedagogy can be complicated by the positionality of instructors and learners (Johnson-Bailey & Lee, 2005). Feminist pedagogy enables educators to enhance and promote an understanding of social justice from a gender-aware standpoint; however, historically feminist pedagogy has routinely focused on White heterosexual women's perspectives. Research shows that it may be the case that people who are not White heterosexual women are more readily questioned about their authority and knowledge when operating as feminist educators (Belenky et al., 1986; Maher & Tetreault, 2001; Tuitt et al., 2009). Additionally, they are not afforded the trust that is customarily bestowed on White professors, and this makes the positive holistic teaching experience described by Brookfield (2015) elusive for the *other* who teaches.

This *otherness*, as de Beauvoir (1968) stated, is defined against the norm of maleness and in today's context is additionally extrapolated and defined in contrast to the normalcy of whiteness and maleness. Baker and Copp (1997) state the dilemma more succinctly: "Faculty members who violate the White male, able-bodied stereotype must also experience students' contradictory expectations regarding gender, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and physical abilities" (p. 42). According to Baker and Copp (1997), students see professors who do not fit the accepted stereotype as inferior and judge professors with

different positionalities as *liabilities*. In extending this line of reasoning, then such students would also be less accepting of what such “other” faculty members could offer.

Feminist pedagogy also seeks to “create learning environments where learners can critique social conditions and understand how their gender, race, sexuality, or class affects their personal, work, and social lives” (Merriam & Bierema, 2014, p. 218). By addressing the power issues that are inherent in the classroom, feminist pedagogy also has asked academicians to examine their individual practices, curriculum, and perspectives for subjugation by gender, race, and class (Johnson-Bailey & Lee, 2005; Johnson-Bailey & Misawa, 2017; Tisdell, 1998). However, there is no one-size-fits-all feminist pedagogy, and the combination of feminist pedagogy and teachers of color can make for a *dangerous liaison* (Johnson-Bailey & Lee, 2005).

As an essential method of teaching, feminist pedagogy has encouraged teaching practices that empower students because it asks teachers to develop styles that are nonauthoritative and nurturing. In other words, some of the characteristics of feminist pedagogy are: participatory learning, validation of personal experience, encouragement of social understanding and activism, development of critical thinking, open mindedness, and an ethic of care (Diller, 2018; Hoffmann & Stake, 1998).

## Methods

Professors usually share their educational narratives to understand what is going on in their own teaching practice (McNiff, 2017). Oftentimes, they use their narratives as a way to explore their own journeys as educators (Clandini & Rosiek, 2007; Ramdeholl & Jones, 2022). As a gay Asian male tenured associate professor and a Black woman tenured full professor, we, the authors, have also been discussing our pedagogical practices and in particular the pedagogy we used in a class that we taught in the Spring Semester of 2007, our first joint teaching experience, a graduate course on feminist pedagogy that we continued to teach together for several consecutive years. The critical reflections on our teaching collaborations began as a way to manage the disorienting dilemmas (Cranton & Taylor, 2011; Mezirow, 2018), that occurred in those early co-taught classes. At the time, we never imagined it as the beginning of what would become our transformational learning experiences or a fifteen-year longitudinal examination of the teaching experiences of faculty of color in predominantly White classroom at PWIs.

Since 2011, we have taught separately as professors at two different predominantly White research institutions. Yet, we still continue to discuss how our positionalities influence our own teaching practices and how it all began in a feminist pedagogy class, an environment where we naively expected to find students who were invested in social justice and who were practitioners of its tenets. As we are in the same academic discipline, on occasion we teach similar graduate classes, this study is based on our joint teaching experiences in a graduate level Feminist Pedagogy class and on our subsequent separate teaching experiences at different research universities at two PWIs in the Southern United States.

The context of the original study was a feminist pedagogy course that was offered as an elective course for graduate students. We chose to research this feminist pedagogy course in 2007 because we thought this particular course was difficult and challenging in terms of instructor-student interactions where we witnessed and experienced racism, sexism, and the intersection of racism and sexism. The course was cross-listed for adult education and Women’s Studies majors. So, any graduate student who was interested in teaching or in women’s studies could take it. However, adult education students typically took the course because they were interested in understanding different ways of teaching. The class composition was a bit unique: two non-White co-instructors and 15 women students. Mitsu, the gay Asian pre-tenured professor, was the only male in the class. The class was racially diverse: two South Korean women students, four Black woman students, and nine White woman students. There was a mix adult education and women’s studies majors.

In order for us to recapture our own teaching experiences of this the 2007 feminist pedagogy class, a retrospective narrative approach was implemented. A retrospective narrative approach is widely used to examine critical incidents, phenomena, and cultures in social sciences (Clandinin & Rosiek, 2007) and is usually told from the point of view of a character looking back on past events to clearly demonstrate how the events led to personal growth and some degree of transformation. Multiple sources were used to construct, re-construct, and co-construct stories (Johnson-Bailey, 2001). We used our personal and teaching journals and notes from our various conversations as the data for the original study.

In our teaching journals, we kept our thoughts on our teaching experiences in class and on our teaching plans outside of the class. We followed Brookfield's (2017) reflective strategy, *teaching logs*, to capture what we thought was important in our teaching and planning processes each week. We soon realized that this feminist pedagogy class was not the idealized feminist pedagogy of our dreams. We tried to capture the moments in the particular week where we felt most connected or disconnected in class. Also, we attempted to address the incidents or events that were surprising or distressing to us during our teaching and planning processes. Since we began this research after the class had ended, we decided to seek information from students who were in the 2007 course and did a purposeful sample (Patton, 2014) and used a nine-question survey consisting of open-ended questions (Patton, 2014). Our criteria included seeking students with different positionalities, students who had graduated from the institution and students who were perceived as class leaders. We asked the students to provide us with their own reflections on the class and their thoughts on their own experiences.

The constant comparative method as presented by (Maykut & Morehouse, 2000) was used to analyze the data. As researchers, we read the data generated from our former students to discover areas of agreement and disagreement in an effort to identify possible themes. Next, we reviewed our teaching logs and critically reflected on the incidents from the class that we found disorienting, recounting how we felt in the moment. As a final step, we placed the data sets, the recollections from the students and the teaching logs, in dialogue to determine main themes.

## **Findings: A classroom experience and a longitudinal pedagogical study**

The findings are presented in two parts. The first section is about the initial study, where two professors, a gay Asian man and a Black woman, explored their first collaborative teaching experience. They taught a graduate feminist pedagogy class that was cross-listed between Women's Studies and Adult Education. The second set of findings came the critical reflections and dialogues that continued over time between the two faculty members and from their subsequent teaching experiences.

### **The 2007 feminist pedagogy class**

In the past we have each had difficult teaching experiences in our predominantly White university environments --- where we were called names such as an angry Black Woman, a foreigner, and biased teachers. As a result, we would describe ourselves as battle-scared and saw the 2007 course as a marker in our teaching journey that led to epiphanies (Denzin, 1989). Although we long for teaching situations like the ones that Brookfield (2017) describes in which the teacher facilitates learning processes and the respect seems bidirectional, we enter our classrooms with an embarrassing amount of trepidation. That means, there was no generic or ideal teaching situation for us. So, we needed to find a way to survive in our teaching, and we arrived at feminist pedagogy where there is inclusivity and complexity of the themes of knowledge, mastery, voice, positionality, and authority (Maher & Tetreault, 2000).

The struggle for academic place and airspace is fraught with unique challenges when people of color in predominantly White environments teach about difference including diversity, equity, and inclusion (Isaac-Savage & Merriweather, 2021; Johnson-Bailey & Cervero, 1998; Romney, Tatum, & Jones, 1992; Williams, Dunlap, & McCandies, 1999). Commonly, an inordinate amount of stress and

student resistance occurs in this intense setting (Romney, Tatum, & Jones, 1992). According to Williams, Dunlap, and McCandies (1999), student resistance, in the form of talking back, hostile nonverbal behavior, inappropriate chatting, and rigid body language, can be a means of disrupting and silencing uncomfortable and difficult dialogue. It is also a way to challenge or interrupt the voice of the teacher, thereby making the classroom an un-safe, risky, and stressful place for the teacher who is the *other*. When the *other* is in charge of such an educational setting, they frequently encounter such situations compared with racial and gender majorities.

It was our finding that three types of incidents dominated the class interactions: Confrontation, Resistance, and Hostility. Subsequently, each of these themes are defined and presented through direct quotes from our teaching logs and students' reflections.

### **Confrontation**

The first theme is "Confrontation," an argumentative situation between instructors and students. As reported in the literature, teachers of color received more direct challenges to their knowledge despite their academic rank, gender, or personal teaching style (Griffin et al., 2011; Johnson-Bailey & Cervero, 2008). In this study, confrontation was manifested in different ways in the classroom. In these incidences of confrontation, the learning environment was unsettled: bullying occurred, and students were dismissive of their professors and of other student voices. The expected power dynamics, where professors facilitated the dialogue were disrupted. This theme is important because it demonstrates how a student could be an agent who changes the classroom atmosphere from a positive nurturing environment to a negative environment. Mitsu recalled in this journal what he described as a painful confrontation from a White female student, Wendy:

When I was talking (in class) about how each person's sociocultural identities such as race, gender, and sexual orientation influenced a specific context of the southern community, and I pointed out that it was important for us to understand how positionality shifts in a different social context, one of the White woman students suddenly stopped me and said, "You are a man. And you are not from here. So, you do not understand what feminism means and how women were treated."

From our critical reflections and from Mitsu's perspective, Wendy's comments revealed that she did not know what feminism meant because a feminist perspective should empower people to examine how positionality would be influenced when we interact with other people. She was rejecting this feminist pedagogical principle by insisting that she alone as a White woman understood feminism and that an Asian male instructor certainly did not understand and could not and maybe should not disseminate information on feminism. It did not matter to her that the Asian male professor had studied feminism, obtained a Ph.D., taught women's studies courses, and demonstrated a perspective that was informed by a woman-centered viewpoint.

Juanita also recalled a similar incident with Wendy where she was openly confrontational: She always questioned the readings, remarking that one reading in particular seemed racist and alleged that it was indicting and attacking White women students. She confronted us and couldn't believe that we would "dare" to select such an offensive journal article for the curriculum. When she was told that the reading was written by a White woman, she accused us, the professors of being duplicitous, and maintained her disbelief. She rejected our assertions. However, it was revealed in later discussions that she refused to check on the race of the journal article author.

The incidents of confrontation were also obvious to the students who were contacted to participate in this study. Without prompting, a White woman working-class student, Janie, who was also a graduate teaching assistant while she was in this class, recalled one tense class session where several of the White women students became angry when the faculty were trying to address issues from their feminist perspectives: She wrote:

I remember both Juanita and Mitsu were very open about their identities and experiences; however, it seemed that some of the White women students tended to use this as a way to elicit emotion work from them, particularly Juanita; although I remember this also being true

of Mitsu when we discussed sexualities. It seemed not only strange (feminist classrooms aren't therapy sessions) but also when Juanita would push back against this labor, students would act frustrated and angry. I remember some White women students even leaving in the middle of class. The semester seemed like an example of questioning the feminist classroom as a safe space and for whom.

The professors' critical reflections also interpreted the White students' actions as demonstrating the overarching belief that the space of feminism, especially in the feminist classroom, was theirs and subsequently their actions flowed from their sense of ownership and entitlement. Furthermore, the agitated students felt it permissible to question and challenge their professors' knowledge, expertise, and authority because they viewed the professors as 'others' and as interlopers. The resulting confrontations were therefore solicited by the professors' differences -- Juanita's and Mitsu's races (Black and Asian), and Mitsu's gender (male), and in part his nationality (Japanese).

## ***Resistance***

The second theme from the classroom study was "resistance," meaning that students refused to accept or comply with the learning process and materials in class. Issues of resistance were tangible in the classrooms. There were instances when the students refused to respond to the readings or to direct questions posed by the instructors. On other occasions, some of the students would resist the indisputable historical content being covered. Mitsu remembers his interaction with Karen, another White student, when he was addressing the chronology of the feminist movements:

...she raised her hand and started saying, "I am a Southern woman. I have been oppressed in a patriarchal society. I know all about feminist movements. I do not want you (a man) to tell me about the history of the feminist movement." I was shocked because .... she used her gender identity to resist what I was delivering to the class. Basically, she told me to shut up because I was a man...

Similarly, Juanita had a situation with the same student and wrote in her critical reflection that she shared with Mitsu:

In addition to the confrontation, the White woman student explicitly resisted and refused to understand our perspectives on the class discussion topics and reading materials and our delivery methods in class.... This student did not want to hear non-White scholars' life stories or perspectives that we offered as pertinent to feminist pedagogy.

One student, Jean, a Black woman graduate student in her early thirties, who was researching the experiences of the first-generation working-class women at PWIs, recalled how the course momentum was impeded because of the resistance from some White woman students:

Since the purpose of this course was to examine and explore feminist pedagogical practices, I was somewhat surprised that my peers were unwilling to share their ideas and at times expected to attend class to simply listen to other course members participate. They sat in class in utter silence.

Staci, one of the Women's Studies certificate students, a White woman who is now a professor at a major Southern research university, also remembered how resistance from some of her peers, other White woman students, perplexed her:

There seemed to be moments of resistance directed toward Juanita and Mitsu in particular. My experience in this class and my first-semester teaching in the women's studies department led me to do a qualitative project on student resistance in the classroom. I was perplexed at the ways people would refuse to "trust" readings or experiences at times that you don't see in other classes.... It was emotionally taxing at times. There was a good deal of resistance followed by emotional outbursts from White women (tears in particular) as though rather than understanding oppression and the acknowledgement of privilege as an ongoing process they wanted to "be forgiven" and felt guilty. The anecdotal stories of students "pulling themselves up by their bootstraps" were really isolating and infuriating. I often left class feeling



emotionally worn out but [and] not able to really process one particular reason why. I will never forget that we read a poem on white guilt and women of color wanting a space for oneself [themselves]. Many of the White women were really upset about this.

Resistance in learning environments can be problematic for both instructors and learners because certain materials have to be covered within a designated time per semester. Unwillingness to master the class contents due to the co-instructors' positionalities is not acceptable in any educational settings, especially one where instructors and learners should feel free and open to exchange ideas. Yet, this was not the case for the 2007 feminist pedagogy. The class regrettably became a site for unproductive tensions rather than for learning and knowledge exchange.

### ***Hostility***

The third finding from the classroom study was "hostility." Some of the students, a group of three women, contributed significantly to the unfriendly, oppressive, unsafe, and hostile environments. Both faculty members remembered one incident where a Black woman student felt that she could not share her own feelings and opinions because she felt that a certain group of White women students had created an environment where the voices of women of color were easily dismissed or misunderstood. We offer an example of the hostility from one of the White women students:

During class breaks, one student would send the instructors emails to express her opposition to what was happening in the class. Although this student was very vocal about responding to content and answering questions in class, she would not openly share her opinions or opposition to what others had said.

Another Black woman student, Allison, who was in her third year as a student instructor remembered how difficult it was for her to be in the class when the discussion topic was about white privilege:

When we covered white privilege, I already knew it would be a silent day in class because many of my peers were unwilling and/or unable to think critically about their individual and societal privilege based solely on the color of their skin, which to some degree is understandable. However, what caught me by surprise is the way in which some of my peers chose to disengage. Whenever I teach a course that interrogates race, I find it is absolutely necessary to also engage on white privilege. Part of dealing with racism as a form of oppression means we must also engage the dominant group's privilege as well. One would think that given our emphasis on pedagogy, it would be easier for our professors (Juanita and Mitsu) to facilitate an open dialogue regarding white privilege, but this was not the case. I expected minimal conversation, but what occurred was complete shutdown.

A White woman, Elise, who was a graduate student in Women's Studies also remembered the classroom environment where students were behaving in a hostile manner:

There was definitely hostility among classmates. The class included Women's Studies students and students from Higher Ed as a cross-listed course. The higher Ed students numerically dominated the class and often either: (a) refused to acknowledge systems of oppression existed or (b) exuded white guilt stories (I really loathed that strange behavior). Both actions diverted the conversation away from discussing the tangible questions for the class of how to practice feminism in the classroom.... I specifically remember students refusing to accept particular readings from the course and experiences. This specifically happened with the Johnson-Bailey and Lee's piece, *Where's Our Authority in the Classroom?* Which was strangely ironic.

The literature makes clear that students react to the messenger as well as to the message (Chepyator-Thomson, 2000; Johnson-Bailey & Lee, 2005).

### **Sharing critical reflections led to transformational learning and shaped teaching philosophies**

Since that eventful class in the Spring of 2007, we, the Asian man and Black woman, continued to teach together for two more semesters and then later taught separately at different universities. More importantly, we always discussed our teaching successes and dilemmas and

assessed how our positionalities may have affected their practices. Over fifteen years, from 2007 to 2023, we were transformed in our educational practices by difficult teaching experiences, recounting that we consequently grew as instructors, developed strategies, created new curricular exercises, and most importantly continued to find fulfillment in teaching. The primary results from our work together on developing and honing our feminist pedagogies have been centering on transformational learning as our frame and constructing teaching philosophies that undergird and drive our praxes.

### **Transformative learning as personal frame and practice**

As the instructors in this study have progressed in their teaching and research, Juanita and Mitsu have developed and refined their teaching philosophies that are informed by the theoretical frames that they use in their research. Through their conversations and from their practices, Juanita and Mitsu feel that their transformative learning experiences have almost been a continuum of Mezirow's phases (2018), progressing from the *disorienting dilemmas* that occurred in their classroom, to engaging in *self-examination*, making *critical assessments* of the incidents, and then *recognizing their shared transformative experiences with other group members*. Individually, the instructors explored how their teaching dilemmas shaped *their new roles* as informed instructors and then successively *planned a course of action* based on their *new acquired knowledge and skills*. Since 2007 Mitsu and Juanita *tried out their new roles, building confidence* and *integrating new assumptions based on their new perspectives* and using their informed perspectives to construct a classroom that deploys tools that ground their social-justice-driven praxes and encourage student participation, voice, and empowerment. As feminist pedagogues, they endeavored to create educational settings conducive to transformation (Johnson-Bailey & Alfred, 2006).

### **Teaching philosophies**

The corollary of their collaboration and critical assessment of their feminist pedagogical practices are teaching philosophies that were honed across fifteen years. Juanita's teaching philosophy, which she now applies in her feminist pedagogy class and in her diversity and equity class, has been helping elucidate its grounding and reveal those connections:

Implicit in my teaching, which is rooted in social justice, is a critique of Western rationality, androcentric theories, and structured inequalities. My practice is informed by Critical Race Theory (Crenshaw et al., 1995; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Outlaw, 1983; Wing, 1997) and Black Feminist Thought. I teach within a political framework that attends to and encourages the following: 1) a caring and safe environment, 2) consciousness raising, and 3) activism. My approach has evolved from my personal experiences as a military brat, as a good Catholic girl growing up in the South during the 1950s, and as a non-traditional adult student in a higher education setting. I have been in positions of enfranchisement and disenfranchisement and in positions of privilege and under privilege. Each circumstance continues to shape what I bring to the classroom and to my students. There are a few unexplored spaces in my classroom. Those who venture in will find acceptance, openness, and an atmosphere of constructive and energetic discourse. I will do my best to teach my students and they have never failed to teach me.

Similarly, Mitsu developed his teaching philosophy, which continues to evolve throughout his academic and professional career. He understands that social power is not distributed equally among people and that he is a minority person in various social contexts including classrooms because of his race and sexual orientation. He strives to create a safer and more inclusive learning environment for his adult learners. Physical and psychological safety are important parts of his teaching. In order for him to create such learning environments, he practices Queer-Crit teaching strategies that are rooted in critical and social justice paradigms focusing on establishing an inclusive and respectful learning environment where learners are co-creators of knowledge with their instructor and their lived experiences are respected (Misawa, 2010). The Queer-Crit teaching strategies came out from Critical Race Theory and focus on the intersectionality of race and sexual orientation and the positionality of multiple-selves (Misawa, 2022). Intersectionality and positionality are two key concepts in

the Queer-Crit teaching strategies. When discussing intersectionality and positionality, power-dynamics are naturally discussed. Kumashiro (2001) reminds us that queer people of color are doubly oppressed in society because race and sexual orientation, and race and sexual orientation can be a double-edged sword depending on social, cultural, and educational contexts. So, Mitsu is aware of different layers of power dynamics based on positionalities, and he believes that educators need to be aware of multiple positional power relations in an educational context.

## Discussion

The themes from the initial study presented some of the main experiences that happened in one semester in a feminist pedagogy class and revealed that power dynamics are pivotal in practicing feminist pedagogy. Feminist pedagogy is supposed to be centered around social justice. That means, a feminist classroom governed by feminist pedagogy should not converge into confrontation, resistance, or hostility. However, these negative elements were generated throughout the class primarily because of the instructors' positionalities and intersections of their identities and that of some of the students. Although the ideal of the feminist classroom as an open and safe space is clearly stated in the literature (Brookfield, 2017), that concept proved to be the ideal and was unrealistic in the environment of the 2007 feminist pedagogy class examined. Unfortunately, the co-instructors of color were perceived as the "others" who were not the knowledge authorities.

From the findings of the study, it was noted that positionality greatly influences the practice of feminist pedagogy. Because of that, it is important for both instructors and learners to be able to unpack their privileges and examine the relational aspects of their sociocultural identities in a classroom (Closson, Bowman, & Merriweather, 2014; Delano-Oriaran & Parks, 2015; Sue et al., 2011) in order to operationalize feminist pedagogy. The co-instructors, the Asian man and the Black woman, tried to share their life stories about feminism and endeavored to create a feminist classroom environment for the predominately White women students. Yet, their respective positionalities as co-instructors of color were regarded both as a non-White perspective and a non-woman perspective for the Asian man by several White women students who discounted and dismissed some of the key teachings and refused to see the teachers as having the ability to contribute to knowledge production.

Over time and by continuing to critically reflect on their classroom experiences, the two faculty members have concluded that it is challenging to create caring-centered and nurturing environments in contemporary higher education due to academic, political, and social climates that dismiss and devalue positionality (Misawa, 2010; Ramdeholl & Jones, 2022). The dailiness of these faculty members feminist practices, the cognizance of their social positions, and the perceptions of them have forced the professors to grapple with biases --- against nonnative English speakers, against people of color, and stereotypes that compound what traditional feminist pedagogues describe as the dilemmas of the feminist classroom. However, the critical reflection and deep revelatory dialogue that stemmed from fifteen years forced the two professors to engage in self-examination and mutual exploration. As a consequence, they grew and transformed and embraced transformational learning as the theoretical frame for their teaching. More importantly, the dyad found that their work led them to identify and hold on to the love of and joy of teaching that led them in the professoriate.

In direct response to critical reflection on their praxes, the two faculty have developed strategies and ways of facilitating our classes, setting the following as essential ways proceed: 1) to share authority and decision making with our co-learners; 2) to candidly discuss how power dynamics might affect the topics being discussed; 3) to honor the experience and perspectives of the learners; and 4) to analyze effects of background and status on social life (Misawa, 2019). However, their most important intent in the practice of feminist pedagogy is to empower student co-learners through creating respectful environments where students have multiple opportunities to be heard, develop voice, address power relations and authority as they arise in the classroom. As a

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means of facilitating this process, the duo challenge students to think critically through constructive confrontation, raise issues related to sexism and heterosexism, critically critique how society can be transformed, and routinely assess what part the collective (instructors and students) have in maintaining or deconstructing existing power structures.

Their version of feminist pedagogy foregrounds the development of critical thinking skills, building a community of learners and raises consciousness through linking personal experiences to structural issues (hooks, 2003). In accordance with Maher and Tetreault (2001), the feminist educators believe that feminist pedagogy should create an environment that is driven by a “caring-centered and social justice approach, which focuses on fostering a safer and more welcoming learning environment and attempts to create an open dialogic atmosphere” (Misawa & Johnson-Bailey, 2018, p. 1). Their idealized way of viewing feminist pedagogy has been the wellspring of their praxis. The educational strategies, practices, and beliefs informed and influenced by feminist pedagogy have provided a sound political and ethical framework for the university classrooms.

## Conclusion

This article explored how non-White professors, a Black woman tenured professor and a gay Asian male pre-tenured professor, co-created a feminist classroom and how they negotiated their power in that classroom environment using a retrospective narrative inquiry. Although feminist pedagogy was described and explored by feminist scholars as a powerful teaching tool for educators to use to teach difficult issues such as diversity, equity, and inclusion, the faculty in this study revealed that they did not have such luxury in the classrooms because they needed to establish themselves as credible instructors before dialoguing about difficult issues. That means, these faculty of color need to have extra steps or background work to gain trust and respect from our learners prior to having critical discussions in a safer and braver learning environment (Merriweather, Guy, & Manglitz, 2018; Ramdeholl & Jones, 2022). In addition, the feminist pedagogy of their practices is one that is informed and honed by their positionalities as a Black woman and an Asian man. Such a pedagogy must take into account not only how cultures shape practices but also how the faculty members colleagues and especially students respond to what they regard as the faculty of color cultural “uniqueness” and accompanying mandatory racialized and gendered agendas. Thus, race and gender matter in feminist classrooms.

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**Dr. Mitsunori Misawa** is an Associate Professor and Associate Department Head in the Department of Educational Leadership and Policy Studies at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville. His major areas of research center on social justice and adult higher education and encompass the intersectionality of race, gender, and sexual orientation, academic and workplace bullying, transformative learning, policy and leadership studies, program planning and evaluation, and social sciences research methodologies (qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods). His scholarly work examines the positionality of agents (faculty, students, and administrative staff) alongside policies in adult and higher education using learning theories and sociocultural concepts such as Critical Theory, Feminist Theory, Critical Race Theory, and Queer Theory to understand how agents influence each other's educational experiences and determine the ways in which adult and higher education institutions can more effectively serve diverse populations in contemporary society. Dr. Misawa co-edited a handbook, *The Palgrave Handbook on Learning for Transformation* (2022), which focused on transformative learning and transformation through education in a global context. His scholarship has been widely published and is well recognized by national and international scholarly communities.

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# #creativeworkplace. A Virtual Ethnographic Case Study of Creative Climates in an Innovative London Design Agency

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I would often lay on the grass as a child pondering the clouds. Was that a frog floating by, or perhaps a teddy bear slowly losing a leg and an ear, dissipating as some aviation shadow flew through it, leaving a trail that became a sharp slice in the sky like a Lucio Fontana painting.

I spent much of my childhood dreaming, exploring and playing: ensuring Barbie made full use of all her outfits in her compactible closet because she was going to disrupt the patriarchy without Ken; that my British *Fuzzy Felts* created strange whimsical realities no one would ever go to; and drawing on the windows of the car with my sticky jam sandwich finger before my dad laughed then swiftly said “Oi!” at the thought of the exquisitely clean car. Before I knew it I was also wearing my finest denim dungarees and delicately holding the biggest of household paint brushes, helping my parents ‘paint’ the skirting boards of the newly renovated extension. Little did I know my artful, excitable brain would soon be validated with terms like ‘metaphorical thinking’, ‘analogous ways’ and ‘cognitive tools’ (Egan, 2012).

I naturally followed my inclinations and instinctual expression to study Fine Art, creating giant conceptual realist paintings and leaving people questioning ‘*is that a fridge door or a painting?*’ Showing a clear delineation between conceptual thought and reality has never really been my forte. I would rather cross-contaminate, create new dimensions that provoke, question, problem solve and stimulate thought to see there are other ways to being alive than perhaps those that one has been conditioned to.

At the start of my career I quickly found myself painting commissions in my parent’s garage; working in Interior Design and commissioning graffiti artists to decorate all walls, ceilings and floors in their entirety; myself painting murals on relative’s bedroom walls before progressing into education and setting students’ ‘authentic design challenges’ to tackle real world problems like treating infant asthma and teaching students to code using physical card-based approaches.

What did all these experiences have in common? The climate I found myself in always felt conducive to my creativity and enabled my mind to wander freely enough beyond the conditioned self. The climate I witnessed surrounding others, however, often hindered their experiences - especially in the classroom contexts where students were being tasked with being creative.

“Like love or happiness, creativity is anywhere and nowhere”

(Kaufman & Glăveanu, 1999, p.27)

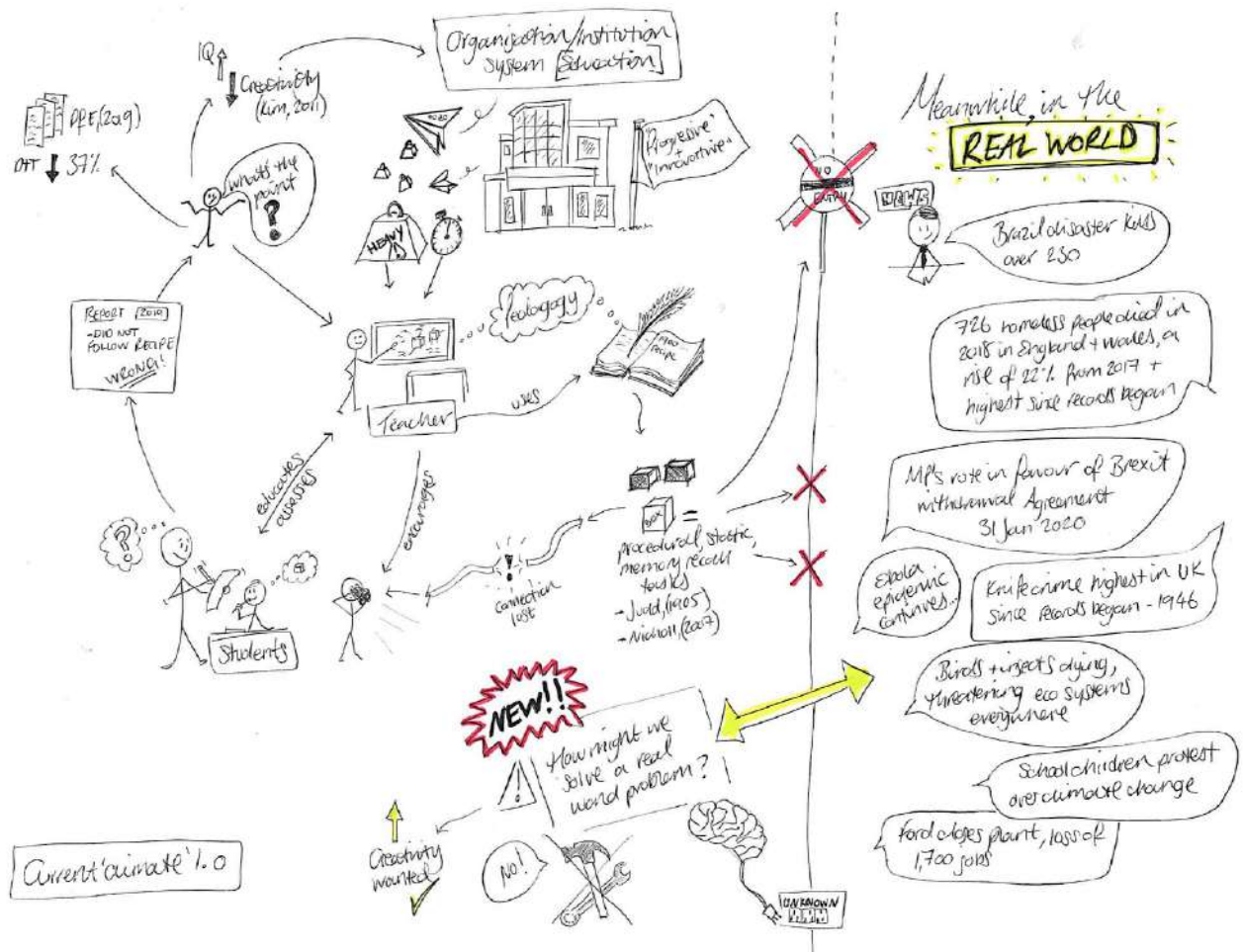
In 2020, I undertook a virtual ethnographic case study to understand how creative professionals respond to their physical work spaces as a central phenomenon to the creative climate being studied. Working directly in context with four participants who hold roles as creative professionals within an innovative London design agency provided me with substantive insights into how their physical workplace settings as research sites may help to induce or hinder the creative

process. The organisation workplace setting was studied retrospectively and the Designer’s remote working locations were studied live and pragmatically due to the Covid-19 pandemic.

The creative climate, as the central phenomenon being studied is generally defined as “an attribute of the organisation, composed of behaviours, attitudes and feelings, which are characteristic of life in the organisation” (Ekvall, 1996, p.122). It is important to differentiate between climate and environment and the attributes that exist within these systems, notably social, emotional and physical.

The subjective realities housed within the organisation I researched can be influenced by the physical space as the ‘object’ in question (E. Wilson, 2013). I drew upon my subjectivities as both an experienced artist, designer and educator, falling into a collective of creative persons sharing a commonly understood language (Taber, 2013, p. 43) or shared paradigm (Kuhn, 1997 as cited in Taber, 2013, p. 42). Using these lenses to leverage my “subjective humanness” (Counsell, 2009, p.257) was key as this is the “very thing that allows you to reach across the distance and make meaning out of your object” (p. 257).

Architectural and interior spaces are typically designed with a purpose in mind. What is interesting to me to consider, is who we become when we enter and spend time in a space and how the ‘climate’ within, can add to or detract from our creativity (and productivity). This climate of course can originate from both the physical building itself and the more embryonic, abstract internal social and emotional elements that also contribute to a climate.



**Figure 1:** My ‘Rich Picture 1.0’ based on my current perceptions of a typical creative climate in an educational setting, in relation to the wider world (Monk & Howard, 1998, p. 22)

## Research questions

The following sections explain the preliminary investigations I undertook that led me to propose these research questions. Note, a London Design Agency in this instance is a creative organisation that provides retail design and physical architectural experiences for brands to inspire human connection and entice customers. This is done through focusing on the visual branding of the client as well as the physical and sensory experience the consumer receives within the retail space.

- (1) What does a ‘creative climate’ look like and work like in an innovative London design agency?
- (2) What does a ‘creative climate’ look like and work like in respective designers’ remote working spaces during a pandemic?
- (3) Do these physical spaces provide a climate for creativity to take place?
- (4) How do these findings inform how a creative climate can be created in an educational setting?

## Key themes: Literature

### Creative Climate:

“an attribute of the organization, a conglomerate of attitudes, feelings, and behaviours which characterize the organizational life” (Ekvall, 1996, p.105).

It was important to review a range of literature given the contemporary workspaces in question and industry contexts portraying the stereotypical “creative workplace”. From reviewing the literature, the most pertinent take away showed that there was, and remains, a fundamental misunderstanding of the creative climate, derived from an aesthetically pleasing stance that is further promoted by such ubiquitous image sharing platforms such as Instagram, Pinterest, Houzz and Unsplash, to name a few. This visual representation keeps us locked in popular culture (Cropley, 1995), as opposed to allowing creative spaces to be embryonic and saturated in authenticity. As French philosopher Camus (2018) states: “bourgeois society talks about freedom without practicing it” (p.45).

Furthermore, this may also begin to support the growing literature on design fixation. Not the focus for this research but it is useful to factor in more broadly given the fundamental misunderstandings of creativity, the creative climates and environments where this thrives and therefore our perceptions as a society on the creatively made world.

When I started this research, I tried to remain objective; from my own experience and the hunches I had about these glorified creative spaces. I was curious enough but naturally had some assumptions based on what I kept seeing time and time again on the image sharing platforms mentioned above, and what De Paoli & Ropo (2017) discuss in their paper *Creative Workspaces – a fad or making real impact?* “The aesthetic appearance of the spaces seems to follow a rather standardized and deterministic understanding of creativity stimulation” (p.2); meaning in order for a space to be deemed creative, it was often embellished with novelty items, subsequently creating a stereotype. The notable slides across various Google office sites (Lynley, 2012) and the beanbags and alien-like phone booth pods that began appearing in the early 2010s. These stereotypical features of the physical workplace setting quickly dominated on a surface level, but it was unclear to me the credible benefits these items had on an individual’s creativity levels.

Historically, we may think of such creative workspaces like the ‘atelier’ or Artist’s studio, oozing artistic milieu and creativity. Today we need not look far to see the endless trends of co-working spaces, evergreen plants and longer menus of coffee combinations paired with the appropriate topping of dairy free milk. But how can we make it un-cliché and rigorous enough to be taken seriously to empower people to make the most of their creative potential in such settings or indeed propose a way to a new creative ecosystem that can be applied both in educational and industrial settings?

Cropley and Cropley (2019) argue the benevolence bias, suggesting that a lay person’s perspective on creativity or professional not as a research practitioner, may derive from popular culture. Thoring (2019) insinuates such visual representations “merely present a collection of

photographic case examples of peculiar creative spaces” (p. 301) without indications of the effects of such on a creative process they seem to glorify. I argue it is paramount for the practitioner as researcher approach in parallel to research conducted by academics simply with an interest in creativity.

Table 1 below outlines key themes deduced from the literature with a summary definition for each. Some notable observations I took were: IQ is going up, Creativity is going down (Kim, 2011); the creative workspace can induce or hinder creativity (Beghetto & Kauffman, 2014); much of current research is grounded in visual stereotypes without experience or research conducted in context (as seen with De Paoli & Ropo, 2017). I would supplement these observations with my own experiences, in as much as educational practice is grounded in out-of-date content and pedagogy (Nicholl, 2007); creativity is conceptualised in many different ways (Kauffman & Beghetto, 2009); and a student’s experience of creativity in school (in particular UK Secondary school) is not preparing students for the fast paced, unknown world of work, especially when creativity is in demand and there is a perceived creativity crisis (Kim, 2011).

**Table 1:** Key themes deduced from the literature.

Key Theme	Summary
<i>Creativity: theory, society &amp; crisis</i>	Definitions, uses, societal positioning and a proposed creativity crisis
<i>Existing models of the ‘Creative Climate’</i>	Typically comprising of a multi-dimensional model with set criteria that are used as measures to gauge creativity within an environment
<i>Creative learning environment</i>	Educational setting, typically classroom or studio based (Secondary & HE), sociological theory
<i>Creativity in organisational contexts</i>	Innovative companies with a creative output, e.g., a product or service
<i>Assumptions of a creative climate</i>	Visual stereotypes & representations, creativity as an undefined notion or concept, loosely used and applied

In sum, much of the literature I have drawn upon is either: 1) research that has not been undertaken in context; 2) methodologies and research designs evolved from a positivist standpoint, selecting the participants (who tend to self-identify as creative) and seek to prove a hypothesis; or 3) researchers that have focussed on systematic reviews of literature that cover ‘creative climates’ as a notion to be considered in a more abstract way, and without fully understanding the physical space and how this may contribute to a creative climate in practice.

I believe this is too broad an area to not approach with an interpretivist, relativist ontology, appreciating multiple realities that can be shaped by context (James, 2015). Whilst I have prior experience of creative climates in various guises and consequently the effects of such, epistemologically I did not seek to influence any data that was collected, but merely conduct research with an awareness and desire to ethically explore the questions that have evolved from a systematic review of the literature. Consequently, I can then offer tentative suggestions for impact and advancements going forward for both educational settings and further creative organisations.

## Existing models of creativity

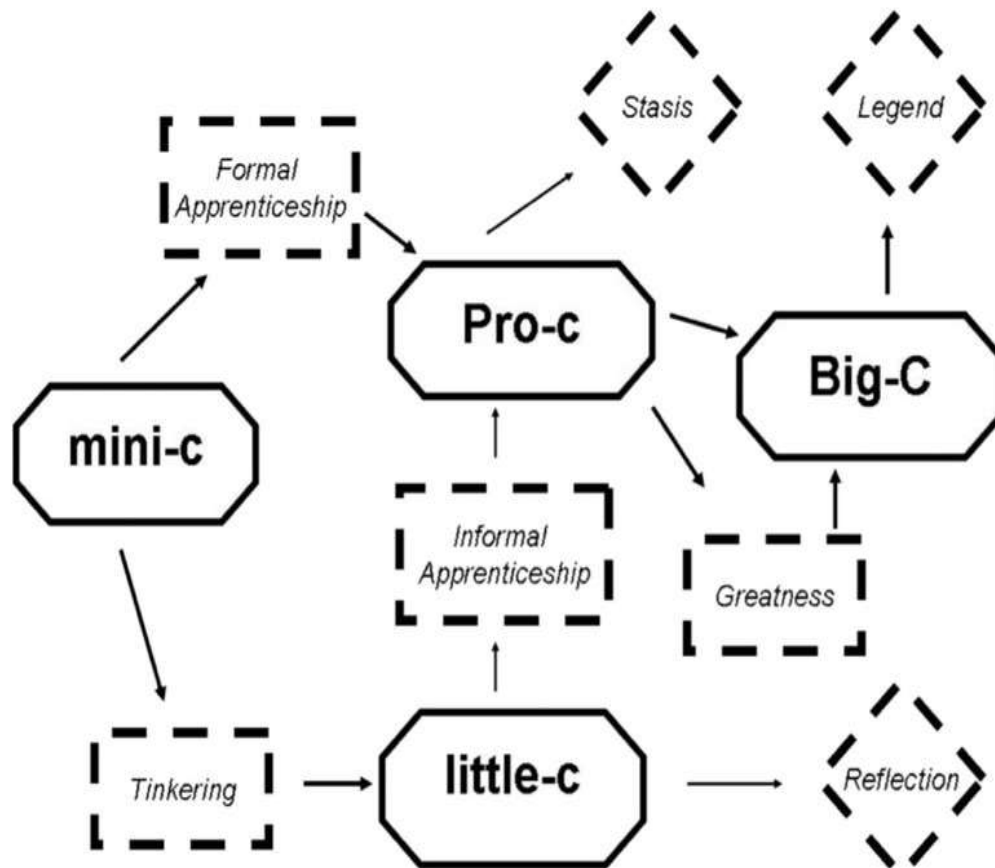
In order to consider a physical workplace setting to see if it can influence one’s creativity, I reviewed existing models of creativity to help structure my investigation in a more systematic way. Note the ‘Rich Picture’ in Fig 1. which derives from the Soft Systems Methodology.

Soft systems methodology (SSM) is an approach for tackling problematical, messy situations of all kinds. It is an action-oriented process of inquiry into problematic situations in which

users learn their way from finding out about the situation, to taking action to improve it. (Checkland and Scholes, 1990, p. 191)

Whilst cognitively I can think in the abstract realm, systems thinking methodologies are also familiar to me. This systematic approach to creativity allowed me to collate concepts in a more structured manner to assist when it came to measuring how creative a physical workplace setting could be and, of course, as a more robust and credible approach.

Existing models that have been reviewed below haven't been used directly but do help to explain how we might be able to use models and frameworks to assess when, how, where or indeed the level of creativity that has occurred at a given point in time. The 4C Model of Creativity by Kaufman & Beghetto (2009); which, as one example, is useful to help us consider personal levels of creativity and therefore how we might nurture and enhance these when considering positive aspects of creative workplace contexts. The four types of creativity in this framework are: '**mini-c**', a novel and personally meaningful pursuit; '**little-c**', the production of something novel and useful; '**Pro-c**' a remarkable creative accomplishment; and '**Big-C**', a clear cut, imminent creative contribution in the field. Most students would produce *mini-c* or *little-c* outputs, with leaders in creative domains such as Jonny Ive, Walt Disney, Vivienne Westwood and the like producing the latter *Pro-c* and *Big-C* levels of creativity.



**Figure 2:** The 4C model of Creativity (Kaufman & Beghetto, 2009)

From my overall perusal of other existing models, they tended to focus on the social constructivist & psychological approaches to conceptualising creativity. In other words, what a 'creative climate' might be and how this can be measured. What I also discovered was that typically the climate will be one of many dimensions measured as part of a larger creativity framework and therefore not addressed specifically in isolation - making the 'climate' slightly more challenging to define.



Table 2 collates taxonomies from existing creativity climate models to consider when thinking about the physical workspaces. I.e. are these present, to what extent and what effect are they having on employees?

**Table 2:** Taxonomies of existing climate Models collated from the literature

Author, Date	Model	Attributes/Dimensions/Taxonomy
Amabile, et al. (1996)	8-dimensional model	(1) work group support, (2) challenging work, (3) organisational encouragement; (4) supervisory encouragement, (5) organisational impediments, (6) freedom, (7) workload pressure, and (8) sufficient resources.
Burningham & West, (1995)	4-dimensional model	(1) participative safety, (2) support for innovation, (3) challenging objectives, (4) task orientation.
Ekvall, G. (1990) & later, Isaksen & Ekvall (2007):	9 & 10-dimensional models – Creative Climate Questionnaire (CCQ) & Situational Outlook Questionnaire (SOQ)	(1) challenge, (2) freedom, (3) idea support, (4) trust/openness, (5) Dynamism/liveliness, (6) playfulness/humour, (7) Debates, (8) Conflicts, (9) Risk taking, and (10) Idea time.
Hunter, Bedell & Mumford, (2005)	14-dimensional model	(1) positive peer group, (2) positive supervisory relationships, (3) resources, (4) challenge, (5) mission clarity, (6) autonomy, (7) positive interpretation, (8) intellectual stimulation, (9) top management support, (10) reward orientation, (11) flexibility and risk taking, (12) product emphasis, (13) participation, and (14) organisational integration.

## Research design

Informed by the literature, existing models of creativity and the subjective nature of a *creative climate*, I custom built the research design using a subjectivist and interpretivist ontological and epistemological stance using qualitative, ethnographic, grounded, case study and soft systems methodologies. The methods I applied were qualitative observation, semi-structured interviews using visual-ethno methods (photo elicitation and floor plans) and assigning one participant to be the key informant to test the research design and to assist in validating the findings when the study's findings were analysed and proposed.

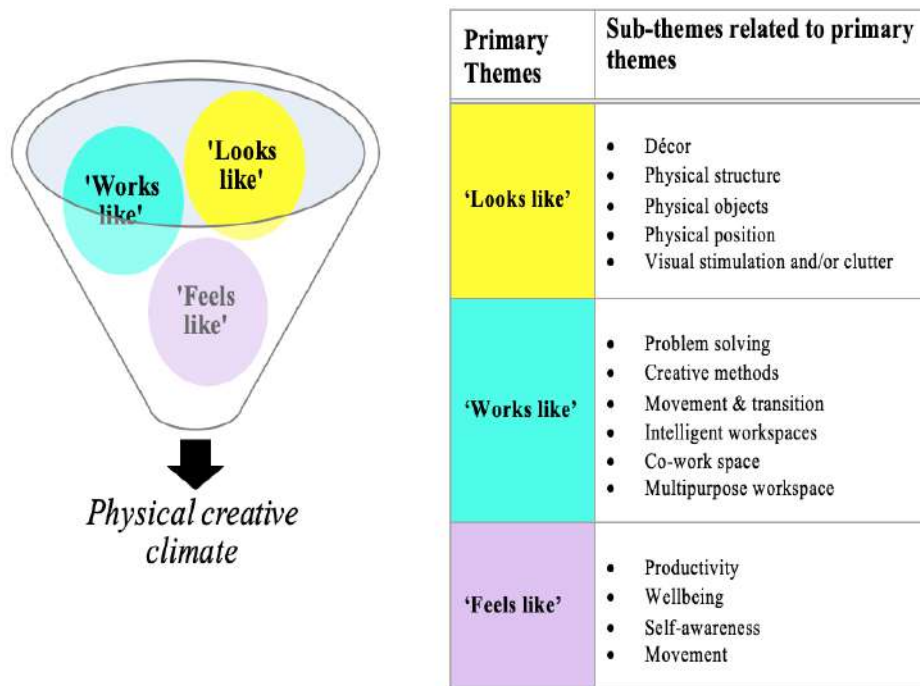
The study was piloted for 2 weeks. Week 1 was a retrospective studio study - participants marking up floor plans and conducting an interview offering insights of the physical studio setting (looks like/works like). Week 2 was a live remote workplace study - participants annotating a floor plan, interval-based sampling diary entries, providing photographs and participating in an interview, again to offer insights of the physical remote workplace setting.

To ease the process, I decided to provide task sheets with guidance and some initial questions for consideration whilst recording the interval-based sampling of diary entries and annotated floor plans/photographing the sites in question. Once agreed with the key informant, the study went ahead with the four participants over the course of the month.

## Findings and discussion

The interview transcripts were analysed along with the annotated floor plans and photographs using codes & subcodes I generated for what the physical space looks like, works like and if it allowed a creative process to take place/what might factor into a creative process for this participant. I then noted anything in addition that felt useful to highlight. This led to the culmination of themes and sub-themes that I collated in the below diagram for visual representation for the reader.

The findings in this section are a conceptualisation and not a prescribed set of recommendations.



**Figure 3:** My data analysis level III, showing overarching themes of participant data

As expected, the data was rich in insight but also vast and suitably subjective and, at times, abstract. The methodological approach that was ‘custom-built’ (Miles et al., 2014) enabled a grounded stance to see what would naturally surface from the research rather than attaching any preconceived notions (especially from my own experiences as a creative). This approach offered a pragmatic and systematic analysis for painting a ‘holistic cultural portrait’ (Creswell & Poth, p.95). The study lends itself to further research and multiple avenues to consider the themes that have arisen in more detail.

Whilst the focus was on physical workplace settings, it was clear from the insights and working with ‘humans as emotional beings’, the physical setting findings are difficult to deduce in isolation without including psychological aspects - ‘Feels like’ was an overarching theme I added once the data had been collated, to encapsulate these insights.

The research questions shared at the beginning of this paper and the specific tasks that were undertaken by the participants to respond to these, are as follows:

### Research question 1

What does a ‘creative climate’ look like and work like in an innovative London design agency?

#### Task 1 - Retrospective studio study

The first task was asking participants to retrospectively mark up a floor plan of the studio and provide a narrative for how they used the workspace, what types of activities did they undertake and any features of the workspace that they felt helped stimulate or induce their creativity. This was required due to the Covid-19 pandemic and entering lock-down just as the research was due to begin. Once completed and interviews with me undertaken, the findings were analysed producing key sub-themes that included: task dependent; personal working styles; physical size & layout; personalisation; hierarchy (staff); and light.

When asked what participants missed from the studio space considering it retrospectively: **four out of four** participants noted “**collaboration**” and being able to quickly discuss, sketch or

brainstorm together; **two out of four** participants noted “**light and interaction between spaces**” and the option of using different spaces for different tasks; and **one** participant missed the **material library** (physical resources including textiles, papers, floor samples etc), which would help to have at hand when working remotely. Interestingly at this point, not one participant mentioned the disco ball, drinks cabinet or any other ‘stereotypical’ object that I deem examples of representations of creative workspaces on visual platforms or ‘internet imagery’ reference from the literature (De Paoli & Ropo, 2017) and as commented in the literature discussed earlier.

## Research question 2

What does a ‘creative climate’ look like and work like in respective designers’ remote working spaces during a pandemic?

### *Task 2 – Live remote workplace setting study*

For the second task I asked participants to take photographs of their remote workplace settings and complete interval-based diary entries for how they were using their remote sites live, for two weeks. Interviews were then held following this with photo-elicitation to demonstrate their experience. Given the pandemic and personal circumstances, some participants ended up in multiple sites (London & Australia, London & Spain) meaning seven sites in total were studied across the four participants. They also were able to provide insights for internal and external areas, whereas the studio setting on the third floor didn’t allow external areas to be considered. All sites for Task 2 were shared with other people with only one participant as a sole occupant.

Key subthemes for this task showed themselves to be: movement & transition; visual stimulation and/or clutter; creative methods; creative collaboration; and physical position and productivity. These themes varied from Task 1, due to working in a pandemic and working within personal spaces where participants reside with spouses, friends, pets or in complete isolation. Another key difference was the use of outdoor space where the studio setting does not permit this. The transition to home working was clearly an effect on personal working styles and various attempts to find satisfactory set ups. Interestingly, most participants hacked/creatively redesigned their working spaces to enable them to adapt to creative working from home, which was often trial and error, fluctuating naturally over time depending on the task. An example of this was one participant turning their bookcase on its side, adding a makeshift worktop and using it as a desk/kitchen counter, which is discussed further below.

## Headline findings

### Research question 3

Do these physical spaces provide a climate for creativity to take place?

### *Self-Awareness and Well-Being*

Once the tasks and interviews were complete and all data had been analysed, it was clear thematically which areas were proving pertinent for the stimulation of creativity for the participants as Designers. Four out of four participants demonstrated self-awareness & wellbeing were important for them, for example:

“Ideas seem to come also when I’m **transitioning between spaces** or just **after I’ve been exercising** and I’m not really thinking.” (Participant 1)

“...like dots start to connect and then you’ll be walking, going to walk the dog or something an it’s like ‘Ah! That’s it!’... I think the pressure of the situation I was under, I needed to get so many thoughts out because... I was caving in...” (Participant 1)

Across all participants was a strong emphasis on health & wellbeing in conjunction to physical position and productivity. Creative methods used were novel and distinctive for this creative individual. Notably the use of post-it notes, cardboard boxes when working outside in bright sunshine and how ideas tend to assimilate when they are transitioning from one space to another and not when working within a specific space, undertaking a specific task.

### ***Physical location***

Three out of four participant responses suggested the physical location was important to them. For example:

“If you can **hear bird sound** in the background and nice things and you're being delivered some not nice... uncomfortable news, I think it's gonna be nicer than just hearing an echo of someone's bedroom.” (Participant 2)

Strong patterns emerged with regards to where participants positioned themselves physically, for specific tasks. Preference for standing to work but moving around a lot more for some. One participant in particular presented themselves as sensitive and perceptive emotionally to their physical surroundings, acoustics are key and can dramatically affect approaches to tasks - they played a big role for this participant.

The physicality noted above was also in conjunction to the actual **physical position** of the participants, for two in particular, especially when mentioning the layout of the studio workplace setting.

“When I'm standing, I notice that I hit my deadlines, my internal deadline and do stuff in a lot more of an efficient way really” (Participant 3)

“I moved the room around as I found the desk too small to think because the wall was too close to my face!” (Participant 1)

Participants showed a clear focus on the benefits of a ‘curated and personalised’ home workspace but with no clear influence of the physical setting on their creativity or productivity. They insinuated a desire or personalisation within the studio setting but appreciate this may be difficult to implement in practice. They also frequently commented on the hierarchical structure of the organisation and assigned physical areas which at times felt constructive and other times oppressive to their creativity.

### ***Physical objects***

The clear desire for personalisation of a workspace, from all participants led to a headline finding of physical objects emphasised on more than one occasion.

“It's almost like I need my workspace to be more vibrant and more stimulating, you know, even if it's messy.” (Participant 3)

“Really nice white light... so the facade that is at the bottom of this drawing it faces North so really nice white light during the morning” (Participant 4)

Participants spoke fluidly of the effects of a physically bright and light space for an energising and vibrant atmosphere. They also indicated they enjoy workspaces with dynamic environments and cultures, which can be attributed to social or cultural connections or through their own ‘mess’ caused by their personal working style. One participant referenced coffee as a heavy influence for creative work as well as the specific use of colour, (white, blue, green and yellow) and they appear to be weather dependent and not task dependent with regards to the physical location within which they chose to work.

### ***Creative collaboration and creative methods***

Finally, and perhaps the most notable headline finding was creative collaboration and creative methods - hard to separate given the nature of the work being undertaken for the organisation as opposed to personal benefit. All participants suggested this was hugely impacted by the circumstantial aspects and even trying to pivot, be creative and approach collaboration and communication in other ways, had its limitations.

“...you're just so much more aware of the dynamic within a project, which obviously cannot be done on zoom or on anything” (Participant 2)

“...like an Ikea bookshelf on its side. It's 90 degrees... I put on its side and then I've added a work top and then I put the two together to make this quite long kitchen island for super cheap” (Participant 3)

All participants commented on working collaboratively and how that differs working away from the usual site or in isolation at home/separated from colleagues. It was fascinating to see how these creative people adapted to their (unknown at the time) temporary surroundings. Many participants ‘hacked’ their remote working locations to assist productivity and to ensure the creative process could still be accessed in all dimensions - thinking, feeling and physically through ‘making’ objects required for their endeavours.

So, do these physical spaces provide a climate for creativity to take place? Absolutely. The participant’s responses have made clear the individual is central to a space and cannot, as discussed by Geertz, be removed from the “webs of significance he himself has spun” (1973, p.5). Without such attributes, how can one decide if the physical workspace has impacted their creativity or indeed provided a positive climate for them to be creative. The physical workspace must match the personal requirements and creative tendencies of the individual. This would sympathise with the existing creative climate multi-dimensional models discussed in the literature (Table 1) and offers a reason as to why the physical creative climate has not been formulated as a climatic model independently, as far as time has permitted me to explore.

### **The creative classroom**

“The most creative spaces are those that hurl us together.  
It is the human friction that makes the sparks”  
(Lehrer, 2012)

Having conducted such a creative research study (also pivoting due to the pandemic), I reached a point where I could offer a preliminary transferability method for an educational context.

My motives and ontological assumptions for this research were born from my own experience in both educational and creative industry professional roles where the hunch of how I have felt and continue to feel in physical spaces is only increasing as I progress through my career. Upon entering the creative classroom, this feeling became stronger still. In part, due to the number of students with so much potential individually, possibly being affected by the physical climates of their classrooms and hence my decision to seek to understand the “current state of the field” (Taber, 2013, p. 57) and pursue this line of enquiry from a contextual and relevant position.

In the larger field of research, I position myself at the crux directly between industry, architecture of creative spaces and educational theory which has allowed me to maintain a subjective etic stance as an outsider not residing within one of these specifically. I am considering how to implement and put forward the disposal of the findings for the contexts in question, to provide a more conducive climate for creativity that students and educational professionals alike can benefit from.

### **Research question 4**

How do these findings inform how a creative climate can be creative in an educational setting?

Circling back to Soft Systems Methodology (Checkland,1990) including the ‘Rich Picture’ from Fig. 1, the revised rich picture below conceptualises my findings visually for ease of understanding for the reader. The main three themes you will see included, and in my view, are paramount for a thriving creative climate in an education setting:

- (1) **Looks like:** Industry
- (2) **Works like:** Intelligent workspace
- (3) **Feels like:** Fun & Purposeful

I’ve reflected long and hard on a clear takeaway message that echoes the ambitious body of work, of which I will say: whether its sticking post-it notes to windows; standing in front of a blank wall sitting on a shower room roof whilst having a difficult conversation; setting your bedroom up like a zoom booth; or having your light bulb moment whilst walking the dog; creativity, much “like love or happiness... is anywhere and nowhere” (Kaufman & Glăveanu, 1999, p. 27). We are facing some big,



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## About the Author

**Melanie Smith** (PGCE-MEd) is a creative leader, bleeding edge instigator & builder, and manages the inception and operationalisation of the Design Age Institute at the RCA. She joined the RCA from the Engineering Design Centre at the University of Cambridge and holds a BA (Hons) Fine Art from UCCA, PGCE Design & Technology and MEd Researching Practice, both from the University of Cambridge. She has also recently completed an MBA short course with London School of Economics & Political Science.

Melanie has worked as an Operations & Project Manager and Designer for private sector Interior Design and Architecture practices and as a conceptual artist upon graduating from art school in 2008. She has undertaken numerous commissions for high profile clients, with her predominant creative interest in inclusive design, gender stereotypes and creative rebellion.

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# Artistic, Visual Thought Processes Supporting High Achievement

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## Abstract

This interdisciplinary, conceptual analysis addresses the nature and benefits of artistic processes in learning and work. While recognizing various forms of artistry, the emphasis is on visual-spatial thinking. The benefits of this kind of thinking in academic and professional activities include the simplification of massively complex writing, improvement of psychological functioning, and the magnification of creative work in various professions, especially in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) fields. Visual-spatial thinking also is a strength that often helps twice-exceptional individuals overcome their learning difficulties. Several thinking and learning strategies are explored, including visual data animation, concept cartooning, visual metaphor, and musical translation of written material. Some ways that visual-spatial thinking can help overcome the problems generated by dogmatic school reform also are scrutinized.

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**Keywords:** Concept cartoons; dogmatism; STEM; twice exceptional; visual metaphor; visual-spatial thinking.

## Artistic, visual thought processes supporting high achievement

Experiences with the arts can have very positive effects on student learning, and on the work of adult professionals. But the arts can be marginalized when dogmatic, self-appointed school “reformers” portray them as far less important than subject areas that deal with the mechanics of literacy and mathematical processes measured by narrow, superficial standardized testing (Berliner, 2009, 2011, 2012; Ravitch, 2010, 2013; Ravitch et al., 2022). Fortunately, the artistic strategies discussed in this analysis can be used to fight back against these forms of dogmatism while supporting the development of impressive talents.

Working in the arts also can improve our psychological functioning. Insights from the study of neuroaesthetics, which are derived from neuroscience and psychology, have been used to show how aesthetic appreciation controls, adjusts, and synthesizes various cognitive processes (Vessel, 2021). For example, Magsamen and Ross (2023) used the science of neuroaesthetics as a window into creativity and well-being. They illustrated how participation in the arts improves our sense of purpose and our health while enabling us to live together more effectively. In just one example from their analysis they showed how participating in an artistic project reduces stress levels and strengthens learning, memory, and other cognitive processes.

In order to explore these positive aspects of artistic work, this analysis delves into the dynamics of some artistic activities to illustrate how they strengthen memory, content learning in various subjects, the development of aspirations and talents, and the growth of a long-term sense of purpose. All of the various forms of the arts (e.g., drawing, painting, sculpture, music, dance, theater, poetry) can strengthen learning. Some processes that rely on visual thinking are emphasized in this paper. Of special interest is the process of *mode switching*, which means the translation of thoughts from one form of thinking to another (Ambrose, 2009; Cohen, 1994). For example, students who learn how to mode switch can efficiently master a large amount of academic content by turning important written ideas into symbolism in drawings or paintings they create (details available in later sections).

## Literature review

Artistic, visual-spatial thinking needs to be addressed and its importance recognized because it can bring considerable benefits to students in the K-12 system and in college, as well as adults

working in various fields. It can strengthen brain functioning and cognition in various ways (Bolwerk et al. 2014; Eisner, 2002; Feinstein, 1982). Impressive examples of these enhancements come from the visual “thought experiments” used by some eminent scientists (see the forthcoming depictions of scientific visualizations produced by Albert Einstein and August Kekule).

Visual thinking takes place when an individual uses mental pictures to understand written or mathematical ideas, and to do creative work with those images (see Kalbfleisch, 2013). This kind of processing is especially important for achievement in STEM fields, or more accurately STEAM fields (science, technology, engineering, *arts*, mathematics) (Anderson, 2017; Miller, 1978, 1986, 1989, 1996, 2001; Makkonen et al., 2022; McGrath & Brown, 2005; Rocke, 2010; Root-Bernstein, 2014; Root-Bernstein et al., 2008; Root-Bernstein & Root-Bernstein, 2013, 2021; Webb et al., 2007). For example, Anderson (2017) illustrates the functioning of isomorphology, which is a method of inquiry based on drawing. It enables scholars to explore and illustrate ways in which forms of animal, vegetable and mineral structures can be similar or different. In another example, Rocke (2010) shows how visual, mental images enabled scientists to come up with more accurate ways of understanding objects and phenomena that elude our senses, such as the structure and dynamics of atoms and molecules.

Similar insights emerge from literature in the history and philosophy of science. As an example, “Scientists strongly prefer the visual mode of thought in their research” (Miller, 1996, p. 281). Those with strong visual thinking abilities are “capable of moving engineering and physical science disciplines forward” (Wai et al., 2009, p. 817). Visual learning strengthens work in engineering (McGrath & Brown, 2005). It also magnifies higher-order thinking skills in biology (Milner-Bolotin & Nashon, 2012).

According to Holton (1998) imagination is an important element of scientific achievement. The ability to construct and interpret images in the mind is at the core of scientific thought experiments. When carrying out these experiments, scientists use their imagination to create and modify visualizations in their minds so they can explore and strengthen their understanding of phenomena that are difficult or even impossible to investigate through empirical inquiry. For example, in his paradigm shifting work in the field of physics Albert Einstein was able to imagine an observer attempting to catch up to a point on a wave of light to help with the development of the special theory of relativity (Miller, 1996). Another example of a thought experiment is chemist August Kekule’s clarification of the structure of benzene through the use of an intuitive, dream-like vision of a snake bending to devour its own tail (Rocke, 2010).

The STEM-visual thinking connection is especially strong when it comes to outstanding mathematical ability (Dunn et al., 2020; Giaquinto, 2007; Van Garderen, 2016). Maor and Jost (2013) provide an intriguing example of this connection with an aesthetically pleasing visual history of geometry illustrating the connections between mathematics and art. O’Boyle (2008), a neuroscientist, shows how young people who are gifted in mathematics tend to rely on brain-based processes that produce powerful, visual-spatial thinking. These processes include enhanced interhemispheric communication and cooperation, and heightened brain activation that can indicate highly developed attentional and executive functions. When students benefit from these strengths, their thinking can be more impressive than that of many intelligent adults.

Visual-spatial talent also helps individuals who have great difficulty learning in school and functioning in the adult world. A significant number of gifted individuals are twice exceptional (2e) with visual thinking as their strength (Grandin, 2022; Olenchak et al., 2016; West, 2009, 2014, 2017). They combine powerful visual abilities with a weakness (e.g., ADHD, ADD, autism spectrum disorder, learning disabilities). The strength and the weakness hide each other. The strength pushes 2e individuals up toward impressive achievement while the weakness pulls them down so they end up looking average to teachers and parents who do not know much about 2e.

Recognizing and embracing the value of visual thinking also can strengthen cognitive diversity. Economist and complexity theorist Scott Page (2007, 2010, 2017) analyzed the results of

many research projects on group problem solving in various kinds of organizations, and found that when dealing with complex problems, cognitively diverse teams of professionals are superior to more homogenous teams, even when the latter are of superior intelligence. A cognitively diverse team includes individuals who differ from one another in terms of their backgrounds, belief systems, theoretical perspectives, and problem-solving methods. Those differences do not exist in a homogenous team. If a team in an organization does not include visual thinkers, it will be less cognitively diverse than a team that has one or a few of them. So enhancing the problem-solving abilities of government agencies, corporations, NGOs, school systems, and other organizations is another very good reason for helping young people develop their artistic, visual thinking abilities.

Visual thinking enhances learning in various subject areas in school (Yenawine, 2013). But in spite of its importance to high-level achievement, it usually has been ignored in gifted education and in general education; consequently, educators and policy makers should emphasize it in the years to come (Andersen, 2014; Kalbfleisch, 2013; Silverman, 2002). Some of this emphasis can come from explorations of various artistic processes that have been employed by skilled visual thinkers. The following sections explore some of these artistic processes and the benefits that can accrue from them.

## **Mode switching**

Students and academic researchers can strengthen their learning and creativity when they employ processes that enable them to translate thought from one modality to another (Ambrose, 2009; Cohen, 1994; Sousanis, 2015). These thought modalities include verbal, visual, musical, and kinesthetic information processing. The translation process involves turning written material into visual images, videos, musical lyrics, or dance movements. The active switching from one thought modality to another requires considerable concentration and creative thinking. This enables the creators and their audiences to invigorate their thinking while mastering academic content and committing it to long-term memory. Some examples of mode switching processes include visual metaphor, concept cartooning, visual data animation, and musical translation (see Ambrose, 2024). The following sections include descriptions of several mode-switching strategies and their benefits.

## **Visual data animation**

Tech-savvy individuals can combine visual thinking with technology to create visual data animations. Through this process, they translate enormous amounts of information into moving figures that burn important ideas into the long-term memory of audience members (see Rosling & Zhang, 2011). An example comes from the work of Hans Rosling, a prominent scholar of global health, who captured thousands of pages of research data in the form of expanding, shrinking, rising and falling color-coded circles that portrayed the evolution of health and wealth in 200 countries over 200 years (see BBC Four, 2011) (video at this link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jbkSRLYSOjo&t=157s> ). He created this visual data animation as far back as 2010. With technological advances in recent years the process can be even stronger. This highly creative strategy can strengthen learning because the videos are intriguing and memorable. It also can encourage citizens to work toward improving conditions in their societies because complex data about enormous, 21<sup>st</sup>-century problems becomes visible and understandable.

## **Musical translation**

Music can enhance cognitive processes. For example, it can invigorate scientific thinking (Root-Bernstein, 2001) and enhance the efficiency of learning (Berk, 2008; Restak, 2001). It also can be used as a catalyst for bolstering the production of outstanding visual art. For example, the eminent artist Vincent van Gogh incorporated music in the production of his paintings (Veldhorst, 2018). Those with musical talents and inclinations can translate large amounts of academic material into songs. The wording in the songs conveys the essence of the academic material in highly memorable ways. Those who create these songs benefit from the memory enhancing translation process because they can play the songs within their minds during exams and in the writing of academic works. One example is a musical portrayal of the tension and conflict between two great inventors, Thomas Edison and Nicola Tesla (see ERB, 2013) (video at this link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gJ1Mz7kGVf0>).

Throughout their musical performance the creative individuals representing Edison and Tesla, humorously and skillfully insult one another through the song while dancing around. They insult each other because Tesla worked for Edison for a while and then they ended up in a bitter rivalry (Cawthorn, 2016; Martin & Birnes, 2017). The entertaining video performance makes the academic content translation stick in long-term memory.

## Concept cartoons

An amusing, enjoyable artistic communication and learning process involves the creation of cartoon-like drawings or paintings that can strengthen learning, especially in STEM (Naylor & Keogh, 2000). Concept cartoons can capture and convey important academic ideas in humorous, ironic, satirical form. Students with some artistic talent can gain inspiration from the opportunity to use their visual thinking to illustrate their mastery of complex ideas in entertaining ways. To create concept cartoons, participants ponder the nature of the academic ideas they are trying to capture and then come up with various ways to turn those ideas into images. Then they draw or paint those images and make some notes about what the symbolism represents.

In one example, the author of this article studied the unethical actions that often emerge from billionaire-supported ideological think tanks that have the purpose of shifting the minds of the public away from the needs and wants of most citizens toward the political positions favored by the selfish funders. While some think tanks are designed for ethical purposes most are not (Roper et al., 2016; Welner et al., 2010; Wilson & Kamol, 2021), so the author decided to counteract them through the use of concept cartooning. Then he created some drawings of cartoon characters eventually settling on one idea – a fish-man hybrid, Gil Flounderfib, who works in an ideological think tank. Figure 1 shows Mr. Flounderfib and explains the corrupt work he does.

### GIL FLOUNDERFIB

...human-fish hybrid (gil + flounder = fish; fib = lies)

He swims around in an ideologically extreme think tank. While swimming he thinks up thinky things that pile up in his cranium in the form of narrow-minded, shortsighted, superficial, rigid, dogmatic mind pebbles. When the pile generates too much pressure he has a dogmatic mind blowout through the hole in the top of his tiny cranium. When that happens, his think-tank bosses send his mind pebbles to the fake news outlets of the nation so they can spread them out into the dim minds of their ideological followers.



**Figure 1:** A concept cartoon illustrating the dogmatic thoughts and actions of professional ideologues who work in think tanks. (from Ambrose, 2009a)





The creative IOWS instructional and learning process is similar to concept cartooning, but it is much more complex because it enables participants to capture and synthesize huge amounts of written academic material in the form of metaphorical paintings or drawings (Ambrose, 1992, 2009, 2024; Cohen, 1994). When individuals create visual metaphors they strengthen their long-term memory of the academic material because the intriguing symbols in the images are difficult to forget. The process of coming up with the symbolism representing written concepts, and actually drawing or painting the images, is memory enhancing.

The fascinating nature of some visual metaphors also makes them useful for conveying complex ideas to audiences. It's difficult for most members of various societies to understand highly complex 21<sup>st</sup>-century phenomena. Examples of these phenomena, which are drawn from Ambrose and Sternberg (2016), Sternberg and Ambrose (2021), and Sternberg, Ambrose and Karami (2022) include the advancement of STEM discoveries through global scientific networking; the massive destruction caused by climate change, looming resource shortages, and the erosion of democracies around the world, among others. But the visual metaphorical renderings can simplify them. For this reason, the images have high potential for making citizens more aware of huge problems and opportunities, and more willing to deal with them effectively (Ambrose, 2009b). Here are a few examples of visual images that could serve as thought experiments for entire populations in problem-plagued societies. The undermining of democracy due to extreme political polarization might appear in a drawing as an

...

expedition diverging onto separate trails, acrimoniously dividing their resources in hostile terrain... corruption as expedition members stealing valuable supplies, environmental degradation as lightly snowed over chasms in a glacier the team is crossing, ideological extremism as a dense epistemic fog that inhibits vision of the terrain ahead. (Ambrose, 2009b, p. 68)

Another depiction of the nature and complexity of visual metaphor shows up in figure 3, which is a portrayal of research and theoretical work in academia. The surface of the hollow, translucent globe in the image represents the entire landscape of all academic fields. The small creatures sticking to its surface, or crawling on it, are the theorists and researchers in various fields. For example, the field of gifted education would show up as a patch of patterns on one part of the globe with other nearby patches representing closely aligned fields, such as psychology and cognitive neuroscience. Other fields such as chemistry, economics, and social epidemiology are farther away because they are less related to gifted education. The bullet-point description on the left side of the IOWS provides a very brief overview of some of the concepts embedded in the image.

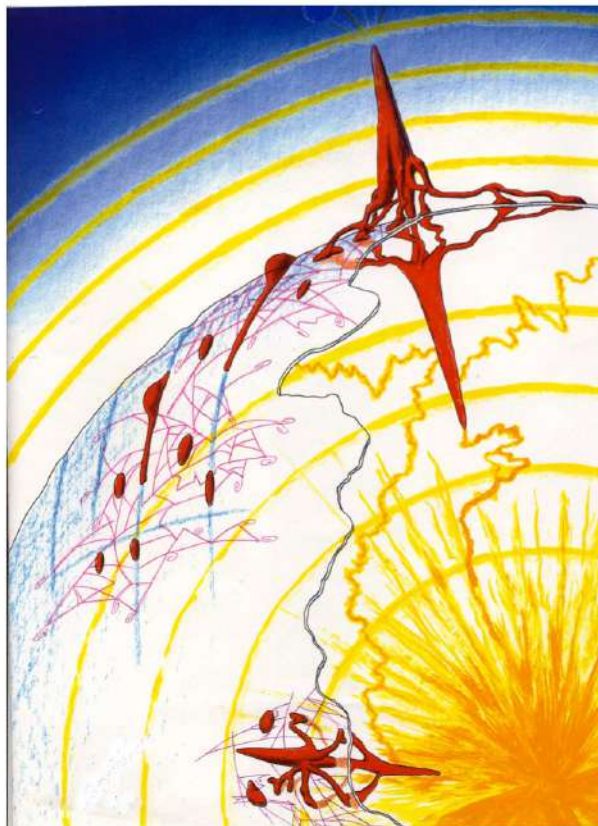
Here is some elaboration on this visual metaphor. The sphere shows how objective rationality (the atmosphere above the surface) relies heavily on intuitive insights derived from lightning bolts from the subconscious (the depths of the inner realm within the globe). The highest achieving scholars are the creatively intelligent giants who stretch deep into the intuitive core of the sphere to derive impressive intuitive power from creative syntheses of enormous amounts of information they have collected over the years. They also reach high into the objective-rational realm represented by the four layers shown in the atmosphere surrounding the sphere. This enables them to connect ideas from the ground-level troposphere layer where practical work takes place in the field, up into the research stratosphere where empirical investigation prevails, and higher yet into the theoretical mesosphere. Finally, they stretch all the way up into the philosophical exosphere where philosophical frameworks drift around near outer space. This aspect of the visual metaphor illustrates how important it is to connect theoretical and philosophical perspectives with research and practice so practical work can be done more effectively.

The smallest amoeba-like creatures that are stuck on the surface in particular locations, derive their limited energy from the frost patterns, which represent the growing, evolving knowledge base of various academic fields. These creatures stand in one place because they lack the vision and power to move around on the surface. The ground creepers are moderately successful scholars who have developed limited reputations by stretching themselves in a single direction along narrow, dogmatic valleys where they can hide from the impact of other perspectives in their fields (the freezing zeitgeist

winds). In order for a field to avoid becoming bound up in dogmatism it needs a few creatively intelligent giants who can holistically perceive the patterns in their fields while envisioning new territories for exploration.

**Visual Metaphor synthesizing several thousand pages of research on creativity**

- translucent/transparent plasticized sphere of reality
- outer (objective, rational) & inner (subjective, intuitive, intrapersonal) zones
- fountainhead of wisdom & lightning strikes of creative insight
- amoeba-like entities building frost-like knowledge patterns (academic & professional fields...) on the surface with varying levels of analysis above & within
- ground creepers following dogmatic valleys to hide from freezing zeitgeist winds
- creatively intelligent giants growing simultaneously in rational height, intuitive depth, & interdisciplinary breadth
- paradigmatic patterns in the fields & phenomena inside the sphere are best visible from a great height + depth
- and so on...



**Figure 3:** A Visual metaphor showing the nature and dynamics of academic research and theory development. (from Ambrose, 2024a)

The complete description of this IOWS is many pages long and cannot fit into this manuscript. The more complex description connects the image with thousands of pages of research and theory. This IOWS is one of many included in a volume on visual metaphor (see Ambrose, 2024a).

## Concluding thoughts

Visual thinking, especially data visualizations, IOWS, and concept cartoons, can invigorate learning while also making the world a better place in the 21<sup>st</sup>-century. Individuals and groups can use these imaginative thought processes to make people aware of 21<sup>st</sup>-century problems so they can work to fix them (see Börner, 2021; Lynford, 2022). For example, a visual metaphor in the focus chapter of volume illustrating the enormous problems and opportunities that have emerged in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century shows a wave of globalization coming toward us with “macro-opportunities” on the top of the wave and “macroproblems” on the underside (Ambrose & Sternberg, 2016). This wave shows readers that we have to do a better job of developing 21<sup>st</sup>-century skills so we can make a leap to the crest of the wave where unprecedented success resides. If we can’t do that we will be crushed by the macroproblems on the underside of the wave and our lives will be poor, nasty, brutish, and short. Those who gain understanding of 21<sup>st</sup>-century conditions from this visual metaphor will be inclined to work harder on the development of 21<sup>st</sup>-century skills and knowledge.

Educators and policy makers need to pay more attention to the high potential of visual thinking in educational processes. Metaphors and analogies are powerful tools for teaching most content in any subject area (Wormeli, 2009). For example, yet another visual metaphor portrays humanity as a large group walking backward on a path through the 20<sup>th</sup> century landscape toward a



cliff where they will destroy themselves if they don't gain forward-looking vision of the 21<sup>st</sup>-century (Ambrose, 2024). This visual metaphor is based on scholarship in history, sociology, and political science. This magnifies the importance of IOWS, because they emerge from the use of metaphorical thinking. Integration of the arts with other subject areas can strengthen understanding of complex concepts and make connections between diverse ideas (Goldberg, 2021).

Ten of 57 creative and critical thinking strategies in a forthcoming volume can strengthen visual thinking (Ambrose, 2024b). Three of them (concept cartoons, visual metaphors, and visual data animation) are discussed in this article. Among other purposes, some of the other strategies can enable powerful memory enhancement, imaginative story development, and elaborate outlines of thoughts pertaining to complex phenomena.

Rather than relying so heavily on the assessments of verbal and computational abilities through standardized testing, educators can strengthen those abilities while expanding the functioning of students' imaginations through the use of visual thought processes, as well as other artistic capacities. Doing this could enhance motivation for most students while also making it more likely that the next Temple Grandin and Albert Einstein will discover and develop their impressive hidden abilities.

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## About the Author

**Don Ambrose** is professor of graduate studies at Rider University and editor of the *Roeper Review*, an international research journal serving the fields of gifted education and creativity studies. He serves on the editorial boards of major journals in creative intelligence fields and for several book series. Don has initiated and led numerous interdisciplinary scholarly projects involving eminent researchers and theorists from various fields including gifted education, general education, creativity studies, cognitive science, ethical philosophy, psychology, political science, economics, law, history, sociology, architecture, theoretical physics, and critical thinking. Examples of topics addressed by the many books he has published include interdisciplinary explorations of creative intelligence; the moral-ethical dimensions of giftedness; 21st-century globalization and its effects on creative intelligence; innovative, holistic education for the gifted; applications of complexity theory to high ability, transformational giftedness; and panoramic overviews of the gifted education field. Honors include the Mensa Lifetime Achievement award, Distinguished Scholar award from the National Association for Gifted Children (NAGC); Hall of Fame award from the New Jersey Association for Gifted Children; Creativity Award from the International Center for Innovation in Education; selection to the Routledge/Taylor & Francis Educational Expert Panel; Outstanding Book Chapter award from the American Creativity Association; the Research Briefs article of the year award from the Research and Evaluation Division of the NAGC; the Iorio Research Prize for outstanding scholarship; and the Frank N. Elliott Award for outstanding university service. Don has done invited keynote presentations throughout the world. Projects currently under construction include the invention of new creative and critical thinking strategies based on constructs derived from various academic disciplines.

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# The Experiences of Three Teachers Using Body Biographies for Multimodal Literature Study

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## Abstract

The body biography, a visual and written life-size composition to study characterization, makes use of a variety of materials such as markers, crayons, and found material from wrapping paper to remnants of string and yarn. In this study, three teachers were invited to implement the body biography practice as part of their delivery of the English curriculum to answer the question, “What are the experiences of three teachers who applied the body biography practice to teach literature in their English classrooms in a secondary school?” The teachers and students appreciated the opportunity for multiple means of expression, inviting the rich literacy experience. As a result of the study, the three participating teachers came to reconsider their instructional agendas to include more multimodal options.

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**Keywords:** Multimodal learning; teacher education; literature study.

## The experiences of three teachers using body biographies for multimodal literature study

*Lugging bags of found materials and art supplies up the front steps of the beige brick school building, a swarm of thoughts and emotions swirl around me. With anticipation and many expectations, I move down the right corridor where classrooms of students and their teachers wait for the day to begin. After hanging up my coat in the narrow closet lodged between a built-in bookcase and the chalkboard, the bell rings, signalling the beginning of our study.*

People express themselves in numerous ways, from the rhymes of children’s poetry, to the landscapes of painted scenes, to hand-drawn sketches that represent visual stories. According to Rosenblatt (1986), “The artefact... painted canvas or shaped marble, can become part of the whole spectrum of transactions” (p. 127). Furthermore, Harste (2014) asserts that the use of multimodal systems of expression has been shown to generate new ideas and insights in classroom learning. Furthermore, teachers, whose pedagogical repertoires include multiple modes of meaning making, are in an advantageous position to make the curriculum more accessible to their students who represent a broad range of learning styles and related needs (Boche & Henning, 2019; Griffith, 2018; Wissman, Costello and Hamilton, 2012). To further explore teachers’ use of multimodalities in their classrooms, I (the first author) collaborated with three secondary school English teachers who applied the body biography, a life-size written and visual composition, to the study of literature. Methodologically supported by action research and multimodal learning, in this paper, I asked: What are the experiences of three teachers who applied multimodalities via the body biography practice to literature study in their English classrooms in a local secondary school?

## Multimodal communication and learning

Multimodal learning is a social practice of making meaning using a variety of semiotic modes of communication (Siegel, 2012; Olshansky, 2008). Paintings, musical scores, a written essay, digital stories, and a poster advertising a coming event are just some examples of multimodal texts that people use every day. Jewitt (2008) maintains, “Multimodal texts may be used by teachers in the classroom as the basis for critical engagement, redesign, or the explicit teaching of how modes construct meaning in

specific genres” (p. 262). For example, when Reid and Moses (2019) studied the implementation of a comic writers’ workshop with fourth graders, they found that the students became more aware of what might count as texts in school, while identifying design features that could play a role in reading and composing such texts. Kiramba (2017) carried out a case study of a twelve-year-old student labeled an underachiever, who was detached and silent during classroom instruction. When allowed to use singing and visual art to express himself both socially and academically, he came to document and represent...“his knowledge of the world as a way to transform the otherwise unmeaningful experiences of the classroom into meaningful ones” (p. 272). At the time Chisholm, Whitmore, Shelton and McGrath (2016) studied the application of drama arts to teaching Anne Frank’s diary to several classes of eighth grade students, they found that the students were able to make connections to Anne’s story in ways that language alone would not allow. In their research on multimodal essays, Jensen and Nelson (2022) noted that secondary students who were given the opportunity to express language outside of traditional writing methods “enjoyed the freedom to write about their own experiences, to speak with authentic voices, and to use image and sound to articular nuances of meaning” (pp. 64-65). The body biography, the focus of this paper, is another multimodal practice that encourages learners and teachers to engage in the study of literary works from various perspectives using different modes of expressions.

## Body biography

The body biography, a visual and written life-size composition to study characterization, makes use of a variety of materials such as markers, crayons, and found material from wrapping paper to remnants of string and yarn. After drawing a life-size outline of a body shape, students have many possibilities for filling up their sheet of paper. For example, to express a character’s most admirable qualities, students could select specific colors, symbols, and quotes such as those mentioned in the story, and place them on various locations, such as the mind and heart. To track the transformation of a character during a story, students could divide the sheet of paper in half, with their initial impression of the character expressed on one side and the changes seen in the character on the second half. In addition to concentrating on the area within the body outline, the area surrounding the outline could serve as a place where students express the external factors that have influenced the character’s development. The students’ selection and application of materials would be used to emphasize the contrast from one side to the other. For instance, a fence made from cardboard and graffitied with passages from the novel, could represent a central roadblock placed in the character’s path at the outset of the story. Waves fashioned from the remnants of dark blue corduroy could express challenges caused by the natural world which the character faced and survived. The possibilities for portraying both internal and external factors that shape the ongoing emergence of characterization in a work are endless.

Underwood (1987) devised the body biography as a writing activity to encourage his eighth-grade students to examine their pasts in relation to their current adolescent experiences. After engaging in a selection of autobiographical writing exercises regarding such issues as their first memories and personal descriptive poems, the students then arranged their finished products, along with collected memorabilia, on life-size tracings of their bodies drawn on large sheets of paper. The memorabilia, consisting mostly of visuals, enhanced the autobiographical information contained in their writing, while incorporating an aesthetic sense. To celebrate their work, the students had opportunities to first share their work with their classmates, and then transform the library into an art gallery where they hosted a viewing of their work as a community event. Underwood observed that “the body biographies, provided students with a second outlet for self-expression, achieved...a vibrant visual and written metaphor for a life” (p. 48). First sharing the content of their body biographies with classmates and eventually family and friends was an important aspect of the expressive process.

To create a learning environment to promote both intrapersonal and interpersonal learning, O’Donnell-Allen and Smagorinsky (1999) applied Underwood’s (1987) work on body biography to character analysis in a senior English class. More specifically, they reported on several students’ embodied compositions of the character Ophelia featured in Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*. O’Donnell and



Smagorinsky discovered that the students had established supportive means of working together as a team, while making generous use of both literal and symbolic representations of Ophelia's character. In particular, the researchers observed that the students' collective representations of Ophelia by the color and placement of related images in concert with written text nurtured mutual respect, collaboration, and a fuller range of expression for them in the English classroom. In the end O'Donnell and Smagorinsky concluded, "...This group appears to have achieved an unusual power in their ability to interpret the play through their original use of the artistic medium" (p. 40).

In order to provide teacher candidates with multimodal means to engage their students in the study of English, the first author carried out a study in which the body biography practice was implemented in two teacher education methods classes. Coming together in groups of five, the teacher candidates used life-size body outlines drawn on oversized paper, along with a collection of found and stocked materials to experience and express the transformation of the main character in the young adult novel. An analysis of the candidates' responses to an open-ended questionnaire indicated that they had come to reach a more holistic picture of the character. For example, one candidate stated, "I made many connections and discoveries I may not have before" (p.9). Other candidates found that working together in groups encouraged the sharing of ideas which contributed to a broad range of expertise and mutual support. Still another candidate claimed that the body biography promoted learning in all areas of the English curriculum as well as other subject areas such as art and design. In sum, the teacher candidates felt that they had reached a more holistic picture of the main character as a result of their participation in the implementation of body biography. As one candidate expressed, "Body bio allows for uncovering what is not said/written AND/OR reading between the lines (making inferences) of what is written" (p. 16).

## **Methodology and related considerations**

I (first author) invited three teachers to implement the body biography practice as part of their delivery of the English curriculum to answer the question, "What are the experiences of three teachers who applied the body biography practice to teach literature in their English classrooms in a secondary school?" The teachers, who each had considerable experience teaching English, taught in a composite secondary school located in the center of a sizable city in southern Ontario. Students who attended the school came from different regions in the city. The first teacher was teaching the *Chrysalids* to grade 9 students, the second one was teaching *Macbeth* to grade 11 students, and the third one was teaching *Othello* to grade 10 students, with each class having approximately 25 to 30 students, all enrolled in the academic stream. The teachers welcomed the opportunity to extend their knowledge of multimodal learning, especially the application of the body biography to the study of literature in their classrooms.

For the duration of each of the body biography implementations, I was present in the classroom providing support in such ways as bringing supplies to groups and helping with the clean-up. As the teachers had limited access to supplies, I provided most of the office materials such as markers, glue sticks, large sheets of paper, and scissors. Upcycling, the process of converting a material into something of similar or greater value in its second life (Emgin, 2012; Sung, 2015), played an important role. The students, teachers, and I gathered found materials, which we collected from our homes, nature, and the school. That is, pine cones, ribbon, yarn, paper bags, the tape from audio cassettes, and much more, which would have otherwise gone to the land fill, furnished the working material for creating the body biographies.

### **Action Research**

Action research, a form of inquiry into the continual understanding and improvement of one's own practice (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2000; Marshall & Rossman, 2006), was the methodology used to facilitate the investigation of the three teachers' use of the body biography practice in their English classrooms. More specifically, action research denotes research that is conducted by teachers for themselves regarding the ongoing awareness and development of their own practice. That is, according to Mertler (2009), action research allows teachers to study their own classrooms—for example, their own instructional methods...in order to better understand them and be able to improve their quality or

effectiveness (p. 4). Furthermore, Reason and Bradbury (2004) contend that action research, “seeks to bring together action and reflection, theory and practice, in participation with others, in pursuit of practical solutions to issues of pressing concern to...individual persons and their communities” (p. 1).

For example, Sowa (2009) carried out an investigation on promoting professional development of teachers by having them conduct action research projects, including writing reflective papers and composing their own professional working theory in relation to teaching linguistically diverse students. For example, one teacher studied the strategies she used to improve her students’ phonemic awareness concerning rhyming words, and met with initial success. Another teacher explored the successful application of language code-switching and multimodal learning to help a student develop her math problem-solving skills. The teachers found that their experiences with action research allowed them to reach a better understanding of English language learners, while enriching their classroom practice including the benefit of using research-based instructional strategies.

Using action research, Trent and Riley (2009) carried out a study on arts integrated lessons designed to meet district benchmarks in relation to social studies, visual art, and language arts for fourth-grade students. For example, in one lesson, students illustrated their understanding of privacy rights by creating artistic representations using cut and torn paper, along with written artists’ statements. For another lesson, teachers gave students the opportunity to compose different forms of poetry to express concepts of privacy and pertinent issues that they had addressed in a teaching unit on democracy. Analysis of data such as field notes, samples of student work, and focus group interviews, indicated that the teachers derived knowledge and confidence for future arts-based teaching. In turn, their students’ exposure to arts-based learning allowed most of them to reach or exceed instructional benchmarks and transfer their recent experiences to other subject areas as well as their own personal lives.

In another action research study, Nolan and Patterson (2000) examined the perceptions and behaviors of adolescent and adult English language learners who participated in skits used to help their pronunciation and intonation. In particular, students had opportunities to perform both individual and choral roles as well as supportive ones such as prompter and stage hand. An analysis of data collection via observation and researcher-teacher journaling revealed that the students’ participation in the skits, especially the teamwork, encouraged them to speak English with more confidence and articulation of expression. Suggestions for future implementations focused on addressing stage fright, overuse of repetition related to rehearsals, and the need to edit skits to fit the local community. In sum, the researchers recommended pursuing the application of the skits which provided “...a method of giving equal attention to form and meaning” (p. 13).

### ***Response journals***

As part of the recurring cycle of reflection, action and evaluation proposed by Hendricks (2009), the three teachers’ responses to implementing the body biography in their English classrooms were captured by two semi-structured methods—response journals and audio recorded conversations. Teachers maintained journals in which they recorded responses to their daily involvement in the body biography practice. They kept notes on anything that they deemed significant such as reactions to managing supplies, responses to teaching characterization in a three-dimensional mode, and feelings encountered while implementing the body biography practice. As reported by Borg (2001), the journal furnishes a permanent account of specific aspects of the research process which can be referred to at any time. Smith (2001) maintains that response journaling is a way to think about new concepts and acquiring new self-knowledge to assist in processing new information. Concurring with Smith, Lee (2008) asserts that reflective writing encourages individuals to actively build knowledge, while making learning a more personal interaction.

### ***Audio-recorded conversations***

The audio recorded conversations provided an opportunity for the teachers to collaboratively reflect on their use of the body biography activity. Starting points for conversations included such questions as: What did you learn about yourself as a teacher by using this activity in your class? What

would you do differently next time? Did your engagement in the activity cause you to change anything in your teaching? Sharples and Cobb (2015), state that the value of such conversations "...is in the ideas that an individual respondent might prompt and the immediate feedback given by the group on this idea, or other ideas or thoughts it might propagate" (p. 89). Furthermore, Kamberelis and Dimitriadis (2005) claim that conversations allow for the expression of multiple meanings and perspectives, while generating interactions between and among them. Rosenblatt (1968) refers to conversations as communities of transactions offering different responses and alternative interpretations.

### ***Data analysis***

Using an inductive approach (Hendricks, 2009, Mertler, 2009) for data analysis, the second author and I carried out an adaptation of Saldaña's (2016) coding and categorizing process keeping in mind that once a code is applied to an initial cycle of analysis, it is not a fixed representation. Rather it is pliable, and coarse-grained, requiring further consideration of ideas and observations for a more fine-grained presentation of findings (Butler-Kisber, 2010). Instead of turning to a software program to determine the outcome of my findings, we opted for a more organic and multimodal approach, which would allow us to more closely access the nuances found in the data. More specifically, we printed notes from the transcripts on post-it notes, which we moved through several iterations of arranging and rearranging into an affinity diagram (Holtzblatt & Beyer, 2017), always keeping in mind the research question, while periodically stepping back from the emerging themes to remain as objective and open-minded as possible (Mertler, 2009). Through this meaning-making process, we identified 3 themes with categories of post-its arranged under each one as follows: (i) preparation, (ii) teachers' general responses, and (iii) found materials used for implementation. It is important to note that for ethical reasons, it was not possible to include photos of the students' actual body biographies. The two examples included in subsequent pages are composite representations made by the first author to help the reader visualize what the students had created.

## **Preparation**

### ***Building background knowledge***

In her article on engaging students in the reading process, Ambe (2007) emphasizes the need to build students prior knowledge to provide a meaningful interaction with the printed word. She also recommends incorporating creative activities to reinforce comprehension of what has been read. In preparation for the implementation of the body biography in their English classrooms, the teachers had spent many classes teaching the literary works—*Macbeth*, *The Chrysalids*, and *Othello*. One teacher wanted to provide her students with ample time to read *Othello* to prepare them for future assignments, including the body biography. In particular, she used various dramatic arts activities to help her students "really get to the bottom of the characters". She also reviewed the meaning of symbols by showing many examples from the play. As she taught *The Chrysalids*, another teacher referred to the body biography in anticipation of its implementation with her students, while her colleague did the same with *Macbeth*. In both of these latter two cases, the teachers led students through small group and whole class discussions, written work regarding the plot and characters, as well as daily reading. The teachers seemed to be paving the way for their students to experience the reading of the works of literature as lived-through events both aesthetically and efferently (Rosenblatt, 2005).

### ***Forming student groups and related concerns***

Weeks into the semester, the teachers, already acquainted with the needs of their students, began planning for the implementation of the body biography by establishing student groups. According to Resaei (2018), "For students, groupwork motivates them, provides peer instruction opportunity, give them a chance to look at the problem from multiple perspectives, and helps them to become more creative" (p. 1). "Although all three teachers felt that students feel safer in a group when proposing ideas, whether they are accepted or rejected, each teacher had different approaches to forming those student groups. For example, one teacher gave each student an option to choose a buddy, especially those students who are English language learners. Another teacher, who liked groups of no more than four or five, would count off by numbers to organize students. She explained that in

larger groups some students may pull back and not participate fully. As Burke (2011) posited, smaller groups of not more than five individuals increases each member's opportunity to actively contribute to the group's goals.

Another aspect of implementing the body biography regarded how each group would select their character of focus. While contemplating which characters would be the best ones to study, the teacher teaching *Macbeth* questioned if groups could do the same character. The teacher teaching *The Chrysalids* admitted that having two groups do the same character "would be interesting". She uses "the box of doom" where the students select their topic from a box whenever a choice had to be made. She was relieved to conclude that there were "six characters to study, enough for everyone".

### ***Materials and supplies***

For the duration of the body biography implementation, I supplied the teachers with materials such as large sheets of paper, markers, glue sticks, tape, scissors, rulers, colored pencils and crayons. All three teachers appreciated having the materials and expressed concern that they rarely had enough to carry out some of the lessons that required more than minimal supplies. One of the teachers who shared the fact that she "often pays for so much already", only had some glue sticks, while her colleague had one glue stick and a bin of sharpies. The teachers wanted to know where they could obtain the large sheets of paper for future lessons. Pertinent literature indicates that inadequate materials and supplies emerge as a main concern for teachers as they strive to meet the needs of their students in the classroom (Dagenhart, O'Connor, Petty, & Day, 2008; Kaufhold, Alvarez, & Arnold 2006).

To help to ameliorate the situation regarding the minimal budget for supplies and materials, upcycling, the process of converting a material into something of similar or greater value in its second life, played a major role (Emgin, 2012). According to Sung (2015), upcycling can be economically advantageous for consumers by fulfilling needs with fewer financial resources. In particular, both natural and manufactured found materials, from cassette tapes to soil, were used in the construction of the body biographies. In preparation, the teachers and students began collecting found materials which they sourced from home, school, and the natural environment. To supplement their collection, I contributed a variety of materials as well.

## **Findings and experiences**

### ***Implementation feedback***

Pertinent research indicates that many teachers have encountered positive outcomes in relation to the use of multimodal learning in their English classrooms (Goering & Strayhorn, 2016; Griffith, 2018; Honeyford & Boyd, 2015). In the current study, the three teachers' initial reactions to the body biography implementation were consistently favorable. For instance, one teacher, who shared that she would do the body biography again if she wasn't retiring, asserted, "The kids constantly surprise us and we limit them too much. But they came up with...things I never would have come up with myself. They go so far beyond, it constantly amazes me". The same teacher expressed surprise by a group's support for a student's detailed plan because he usually seemed to be treated as an outsider. Another teacher, who claimed that this was the best experience she had with this project, observed a high level of commitment indicated by her students' body language. She stated, "The level of enthusiasm and excitement represented different layers of symbolic meaning. Their work was off the charts and all anchored in really really solid textual references". Whenever students from other classes saw the body biographies staged on the classroom walls and in the hallway, they expressed curiosity by asking questions and making comments.

Two teachers brought up the issue of programming for the "gifted" classes versus the "mainstream" classes in relation to the body biography practice. They both questioned restricting such practice to the "gifted" commenting, "They (meaning the students in the study) got more out of this than the "gifted" kids because the "gifted" kids are used to doing this." Also, it was satisfying to see "...no kids sitting, while also being challenged." Counihan and Silcox (2014), who advocate

encouraging students to expand their repertoires of communication stated, “when given engaging, rigorous and relevant tasks, they rise to the challenge and do creative work” (p. 38-39). Esposito (2017), who studied improv-inspired exercises as a lead-in to her secondary students formal writing assignments, stated, “The objective of asking students to prewrite in unconventional ways is to expose them to new writing strategies and provide meaningful contexts for discovery that go beyond producing evidence of brainstorming for a grade” (p. 43).

### ***Changing roles***

One teacher, who realized that she needed to change her role from teacher to facilitator, commented, “I had to watch myself because I wanted to help”. She continued “It was more of a challenge for me as an educator and we’re always trying to challenge ourselves by taking risks”. She later exclaimed that she was overwhelmed by how good the body biographies turned out. Wright (2011), who reported on the use of innovations to shift power from instructor to student in his undergraduate course, claims that students experience learning when they take part in problem-solving activities and their teachers guide them in assimilating subject matter in meaningful ways.

### ***Writing preparation***

All three teachers concurred that the challenges of expressing the character’s development in the story via the body biography prepared the students for the final essay, a major culminating assignment. The teachers concurred that it provided them with fodder for their students to write the traditional essay because they had to know the nuances of the characters and all the layers of meaning. In their article advocating using visual arts to support student writing, Press and Epstein (2007) present various ways to use visual art as a pre-writing strategy, such as pre-writing sketching and photo essays. In particular, they found that such activities, which serve as rehearsals for writing, have the potential to increase fluency and interest in writing, while providing opportunities to engage with vocabulary and background knowledge.

### ***Student resistance***

Even though the students were “...allowed to do something tactile, visual, and creative that they didn’t have a chance to do before, not all students seemed to fully participate in the body biography. One teacher mentioned that one boy was quite apprehensive and felt that the activity was below him. The same teacher also noted a detached attitude regarding two other boys, pointing out that they are not “...really engaged with anything anyway, not being able to show I love it that much cause I’m a grade eleven boy. That’s the reality of public school”. Her colleague interjected, “Whatever you do, not everyone is happy.” Short, Kauffman, and Kahn (2000) emphasize that many people are uncomfortable with using sign systems beyond paper and pen as they were not exposed to them in school. In addition, Holdren (2012) claims that some students lack confidence and familiarity in using the arts, which in turn, inhibits their use in completing assignments. Furthermore, a dismissive attitude toward the arts can arise from existing perception that they are “nice to have in school but not necessary” (Eisner, 2008, p. 24).

### ***The use of found materials***

To promote the practice of upcycling, while offsetting the lack of available funds, the teachers, students, and I (first author) all brought together a stockpile of found materials representing an array of design elements such as texture, color, and line. As one teacher commented, “It’s amazing what you’ve got around the classroom.” Another teacher exclaimed, “And I started going through my cupboards. I took out all the metals from robotics and everything else.” This same teacher commented that we were like “scavengers and foragers in the classroom.” In her article on objects that are recreated from trash through upcycling, Emgin (2012) posits that people are often eager to see objects that are no longer valuable or useful to be revitalized with new functions and meanings. Furthermore, McClanahan (2013) emphasizes that English language arts teachers can play important roles in promoting sustainability, once claimed exclusively by the sciences.

## The chrysalids



Figure 5: Body biography composite 1



Figure 6: Body biography composite 2

While her students were engaged in representing their characters from the novel, *The Chrysalids*, the teacher observed a variety of ways in which they made use of the found materials. One group ripped and shredded paper bags providing rich working material to express the shabby nature of Sophie's existence. Another group used the brown paper to show "impermanence and destruction" in the novel. The teacher agreed that "you can do a lot with just brown paper." The meters of tape pulled from the plastic casings of defunct cassettes along with clumps of string symbolized confusion in the brain. One of the students even taped his phone to illustrate telepaths, going from old tech to the modern world. Another group of students who already had the ladder connecting to Sophie's cave exclaimed, "We need something gold Miss, for the golden age." They used large artificial flower petals to act as butterfly wings in relation to the concept of a chrysalid stage transforming into the butterfly stage. Another character sported a zipper across his lips to signify censorship. Rosalind, an intelligent and dedicated character in the novel emerges in one of the group's representation with a magnifying glass over one eye and a bow and arrow constructed from the branch of a tree and threaded with cassette tape. Her telepathic abilities hover over her head in the form of lightning bolts emanating from a black tissue paper cloud.

## Macbeth

In the classroom where multimodal images of the characters in *Macbeth* were beginning to emerge all around her, the teacher noticed a broad range of found materials being used by the students.



To bring Macbeth's character to life, the students actually brought in garden soil to show that he was not able to get the dirt off his feet, to free himself from the murders. They felt that the characteristics of the soil offset the concepts of purity and benevolence symbolized by the color white. To convey further Macbeth's characterization, another group of students selected fabrics to create "loosely-fitting robes" because, according to them, the robes do not really fit him." The same group gave Malcolm a bat to protect himself, and also made a flag from cream colored material.

A different group used cerlox binders for a number of things including a backbone, hilt, and dagger, while incorporating a mask, which their teacher thought was "really thought out." After seeing the long white textured robe made from tissue paper featuring the splatter of blood on Lady Macbeth's hands, the teacher commented, "You can do a lot with plain tissue paper." To express Lady Macbeth's evil side, a group of students extended the length of her fingernails with pieces of long white chord. To emphasize a strong character, a student glued small decorative pebbles down the character's spine.

### ***Othello***

While the students illustrated characterizations found in Othello, their teacher made notes of the imaginative ways in which they utilized found materials. For example, the "green eyed monster" associated with jealousy and hate appeared as artificial green leaves and curved vines made from emerald colored chord. To define Desdemona's submissive disposition, a group of students constructed a cage made out of green straws enclosing butterflies and a cut-out from a magazine saying "USE YOUR VOICE", which they positioned over her face. They completed the look by attaching a small brass lock to the bottom of the cage. This same group expressed Desdemona's death by taping the quill of a black feather to the middle of a bright red heart that they had drawn in the middle of her chest. To implicate Desdemona's own role in her death, they positioned her hand to make it appear that it was wrapped around the feather. To represent Iago's words, "I'll pour this pestilence into his ear", another group of students made a stick figure out of red pipe cleaners which they dangled from puppet-like strings to give the impression of manipulating Othello. Their version of the "green-eyed monster consisted of green tissue paper shaped into serpents that began in Othello's head and slithered down his body.

Still another group featured the following quote in their body biography of Othello: "Excellent wretch! Perdition catch my soul, but I do love thee, and when I love thee not, chaos is come again." More specifically, they crumpled a tangle of twine to address his thoughts and a black heart pasted to the top of a tin can to express his emotions. Having cut apart his body from his right shoulder to his left thigh, they took some string and stitched the opening back together to represent how he was torn apart. They also covered one side of his upper body with crumpled green tissue paper, while drawing a bright red and orange flame that ran from his toes to his knee. A discarded pair of eye glasses partly covered green eyes. A different group used a violin bow positioned over a hole in the paper and a raw-edged piece of burlap to underscore the notion of tragedy. As the teacher teaching Othello commented, "I wanted the character body biographies to be preparation work for the upcoming essay. The students were forced to think beyond opinions."

### ***Literary elements***

The three teachers also found that the body biography practice, as evidenced by the above examples, encouraged students to make effective use of such literary elements as symbolism, color, and texture to express their own interpretations of the assigned works. To represent their responses to a novel study on *To Kill a Mockingbird*, Broz's (2010) students used a variety of literary elements, from imagery to symbolism, expressed through such mediums as felting and collage. While conducting research on identity compositions in a secondary school visual arts classroom, Roswell (2020) encountered students' mixed media compositions that presented meaning in "...a panoply of ways, from blue felt to multicolored lights to written artist statements" (p. 636). In her work on using art to assess reading comprehension, Holdren (2012) discovered that incorporating visual arts allowed students to engage in critical thinking "to use metaphor and symbol to represent their interpretation of literary elements" (p. 692).



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## Concluding comments and future considerations

As teachers continue to navigate learning in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, it is clear that multimodal methods of teaching and learning not only promote individual expression, but also support various educational needs of students. According to Rosenfeld and Rosenfeld (2004), “It is widely agreed that teacher sensitivity to individual differences (ILDs) is an integral component of effective teaching (p. 465). The application of the body biography by each the three teachers provided them with numerous opportunities to consider and expand the strategies and approaches they used to engage their students in the study of English, especially literature. For example, one teacher noticed a student, who usually appeared to be an outsider, create a plan that played an integral role in the creation of his group’s body biography. Another teacher, who recognized that her role as teacher had changed to facilitator during the body biography session, expressed amazement at the quality of the work her students had produced as an independent group. All three teachers appreciated the multiple means of expression which helped to expand their students’ capacity to analyze a character as well as prepare to write a formal essay.

Additional issues such as creativity, student resistance, the use of found materials, literary elements, and much more emerged from the teachers’ observations and experiences. By the end of the implementation of the body biography, the three teachers not only agreed that they would be incorporating the body biography practice into their future teaching, but also expressed interest in pursuing other multimodal options. It is important to note that the teachers recognized the benefits of the body biography for all of their students, and not just those identified as gifted. Although they mentioned that funding for supplies was still a challenge, they all concurred that the use of found materials would help to make the application of the body biography more economically feasible with both teachers and students coming together to locate materials.

Multimodal methods of teaching and learning could serve as an opportunity for reluctant readers to experience success in the language classroom, and also a means to assist both ELA and ILP students. Additional implementations of the body biography could move from the English classroom to other subject areas, and could be especially effective where schools practice an interdisciplinary approach to education. For example, in a class that addresses both history and English, the study of a significant figure could be supported by creating a body biography of that individual. As another example, the creation of a body biography could help to take a musical composition from auditory to visual. Still another possibility would involve self-study related to such issues as personal strengths, short- and long-term goals, interests, outside influences among other considerations, which would all be expressed visually, and saved for current and future reference.

The current study of the body biography practice focused exclusively on the teachers’ feedback derived from their involvement in its implementation in their own classrooms. As previously mentioned, for ethical reasons, it was not possible to include photos of their actual body biographies. Future research would benefit from obtaining students’ responses, which could take place either within their respective classes or, across classes, allowing students to learn about what other students have produced. In addition to securing student feedback, data collection could focus on bringing both teachers and students together via such means as follow-up focus groups and daily debriefing sessions in their classes.

As Lewkowich (2019) states, “In contemporary conversation, then, ways of being and becoming subjects of literacy that may have once been considered periphery and oppositional are now regarded as potential sites of individual and collective meaning making” (p. 4). The current study on the application of the body biography in three secondary school English classrooms underscores the importance of extending opportunities of learning beyond more conventional means, giving “...agency of a real kind to the text maker” (Kress, 2000, p. 340). Furthermore, multimodal learning provides a rich literacy experience, challenging linear methods of teaching by emphasizing the relationship existing among materials, methods and process. As a result of their classroom experiences related to the multimodal possibilities of the body biography, the three teachers came to reconsider their instructional agendas with the view to optimally supporting their students as they process and express what they know.

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# Tides that Connect: A Photo Documentary in Haiku About a Writing Teacher Conference Themed Teaching in a Tidal Space: Navigating the Ebb and Flow of Student Learning

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Since 1996, the Two-Year College English Association (TYCA) has provided an additional voice within the National Council of Teachers of English and the Conference on College Composition and Communication. TYCA coordinates work and conferences in the different regions of the United States and some Canadian provinces to share resources, address joint concerns, and learn from others who are teaching introductory writing classes at colleges or universities. As a member and board member of TYCA Midwest, I have attended many outstanding conferences and have come home with strategies and pedagogical tools to implement in my writing courses. I wrote the following reflection in the form of haiku and photography after returning from a TYCA conference.

Scaffolding essays  
always under construction  
welcome to the mess





words to decipher  
destinations to explore  
embrace and breathe words





navigating tides  
that lap into writing class  
poetry happens



remove the clutter  
candy wrappers empty glass  
let metaphor shine





smarter than we think  
occupy composition  
students have a voice



workshops guest speakers  
boat rides and art galleries  
all connect islands





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# Emotions Matter in Learning: The Development of a Training Package for Teachers in Higher Education

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## Abstract

Emotions and the intellect interact and affect the quality of learning significantly, for better or for worse. This is often ignored or seen as irrelevant for teaching practices. A training package for teachers of older students was constructed to support kinds of practice which took emotions into account in planning and the classroom. In the spirit of design research intended to solve a practical problem, the package went through several iterations, each being informed by user evaluations of the preceding iteration. The outcome was a tool to support professional development. Notably and as useful, the process provided insights about diverse students' and teachers' attributes, variation in contexts, package adaptation to accommodate these, and areas of further research.

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**Keywords:** Professional development; Enhancing learning; Teacher/ Lecturer training.

## Introduction

We deceive ourselves if we think our actions are governed entirely by the intellect: emotions play a big role in how we think and what we do. Often emotions are seen as impediments to good thinking, and something to be suppressed or ignored in classrooms (e.g., Cong-Lem, 2023). But, as Mordka (2016) has put it, 'We learn mainly under the supervision of emotions'. While it is true that there are times when emotions can obstruct purposeful thought (Newton & Newton, 2018), they can motivate and support particular kinds of thinking (Newton, 2016). As teachers, regardless of the phase of education or the discipline, we can put emotions to good use.

The consensus is that emotions evolved as an *automatic*, self-preservation system which rapidly appraises situations and prepares us to respond to them. The appraisal assigns *valence* (positive to negative) and *intensity* (strong to weak) to situations, while experience 'names' the emotions as, for example, interest, boredom, or awe<sup>1</sup> (e.g., Mordka, 2016). Some emotions may be strong but short-lived, perhaps lasting minutes, like elation, or perhaps a few hours, like disappointment. Others, commonly called moods, may not be intense but may last for days, like feeling sad. Moods and emotions are commonly described as feelings because they can produce physiological changes which we notice. Anger, for instance, is likely to increase the heart rate and we feel it, while fear may take blood away from the stomach and produce the sensation 'sick with fear'. That is to say that emotions and feelings are not quite synonymous terms. While the emotional system probably evolved on the African savannah and was tuned to its events, it often functions today in very different contexts, one of which is the classroom (Newton, 2016).

## Education and emotions

The role of moods and emotions in learning is a specific area of study with labels like academic, achievement, motivation, or performance emotions. These areas focus on the generated emotions of students and their teachers in the classroom. Students, however, do not arrive devoid of

<sup>1</sup> There are other conceptualisations of emotions, usually shaped to fit particular interests (see, e.g., Cong-Lem, 2023; Parkinson and Manstead, 2015; Scheer, 2009).

emotions, just as they do not arrive with heads empty of the products of cognition. They have lives outside schools and classrooms and these produce moods and emotions which are transferred to the classroom and impact learning dynamics. Some examples will illustrate the effects of this mix of emotions.

### ***Strong moods and emotions***

In daily practice a view of emotions as impediments to good thought is often justified when students arrive with anger, elation, depression, or grief, whatever the cause. Intense emotions may leave little mental room for deliberate thought or make it difficult because the mind keeps turning to the cause of these emotions. Too much anxiety, like other strong emotions, is generally debilitating. High stakes tests, for instance, can have this effect, as can teachers and parents who forever remind students that the rest of their lives depends on the test (Pekrun, 2006). Common classroom events can also precipitate a threat to self and public esteem, as when a mind-numbing embarrassment is generated by public performance. In language learning, for instance, students are often called upon to respond in that language. Fear of it and experience of the embarrassment can induce students to abandon the subject as soon as they can. In other subjects, such as mathematics, some students are affected by the freezing effect of anxiety (Horwitz, 2010)).

But not all strong emotions impact thought adversely. For instance, we often remember emotional events better than others because they make more mental connections (Tyng et al., 2017). An unconscious appraisal of an activity may suggest it has the potential for some reward or goal satisfaction, leading to interest, curiosity, and motivation to engage with it. The reward may be to satisfy a need for, for instance, novelty, competence, achievement, understanding, or affiliation, or to further progress to a career goal. Teachers, particularly those of older students, may neglect this valuable ‘What’s in it for you?’ aspect of an activity.

### ***Moods and moderate emotions***

While too much anxiety often impedes learning in varying degrees if it is not very strong, a little humour can reduce it (Meany, 2007). But a touch of anxiety may make some students perform better when it prompts them to give attention and time to the task. When the promise of reward is fulfilled, a common emotion is enjoyment or even elation. Enjoyment is associated with higher academic performance while boredom tends to lower performance (Camacho-Morles et al., 2021).

There are, however, more subtle interactions. Much of the purposeful thought we want students to exercise falls into two groups (Newton & Newton, 2018). The groups are:

- (i) Analytical, deductive, focused, step-by-step, logical, evaluative thought, and
- (ii) Synthetic, constructive, creative thought and problem-solving.

This is not to say that any task we set students is ever purely one or the other, but a distinction between these kinds of thought is useful for considering interactions with emotions (Newton, 2015).

Feeling a little sad, gloomy, downhearted, or even just calm is known to favour analytical, careful, and cautious kinds of thought because it makes the student inclined to be watchful, careful, and give attention to detail. Some have used a forest as an analogy - in such a mood, people see the trees. While we may not feel it is appropriate to put students in negative moods, we could use emotional contagion to foster a useful calmness by our example. When using an impression with little conscious thought to judge the veracity of fake and real news, people are more inclined to accept fake news (Martel, et al., 2020). This kind of activity could benefit from a mood which favoured careful, analytical thought.

In contrast, feeling a little happy, cheerful, or pleased tends to favour flexible, synthetic kinds of thought because it helps students feel free to make connections, try ideas, be adventurous in thought, even make mistakes and try again. In terms of the analogy, people in such moods tend to see the forest, the whole, the bigger picture, rather than the fine detail. Sometimes, teachers’ actions can be counterproductive. For instance, a group of new students may be given a task needing creative thought

in the belief that it will ‘break the ice’. This would benefit from positive moods, but such students, not knowing each other, are likely to be in cautious moods which reduces the chance of success. A seemingly good strategy then fails.

Pekrun et al. (2023) have constructed a useful taxonomy of ‘achievement emotions’ generated before, during, and after an activity. For instance, there can be hope before, enjoyment during, and pride after the event, all of which are activating and encourage engagement. On the other hand, there may be hopelessness before, boredom during, and disappointment after, all tending to deactivate and discourage engagement. There are also several theoretical studies that highlight the role that emotions play specifically within adult learning, and in particular, transformative perspectives of adult learning. The work of theorists such as Dirkx (2012) and Lawrence (2022) emphasise the importance of affective ways of knowing as being central to learning, whilst brain-based theories of learning also look at the important role emotions play in memory (e.g., Feller et al., 2004) and in shaping behaviours (e.g., Wolf & Stern, 2013).

This serves to illustrate the relevance of emotions for teachers’ work. Teachers at all levels need to:

- (i) be *aware* of that relevance,
- (ii) they should come to *know* what emotions can do for and to learning,
- (iii) they should be able to *take moods and emotions into account* in their planning and teaching, and,
- (iv) they should *see evidence* of useful changes in their students’ engagement<sup>2</sup>.

Accordingly, a project was designed aimed to construct a training package for teachers of mature learners that provides guidelines on the nature of emotion-cognition dynamics with the objective of enhancing their students’ learning. Of course, teachers are also subject to emotions, but this study focused on the learning needs of their students. Readers will be aware that students are very diverse and while training may focus on what is broadly appropriate, some students may have emotional and cognitive conditions which it will not address and for which other approaches may be needed. For example, further work would be needed to ensure that it training accommodates neurodiverse needs, such as those that might appear in learners on the autistic spectrum. Equally, cultural differences in responses may be evident, as in the use of humour to modify a mood (e.g., Zhou et al., 2015).

## Method

At the outset of developing this training package, it was noted that there was likely to be significant variability and complexity when focusing on the nature of the emotion-cognition relationship in learning and teaching. Universities are generally diverse institutions with variation in their student populations, their teachers, resources, and the governance that facilitates or constrains actions. Even within one university, teachers differ in experience, skills, knowledge and understanding, and in their notions of disciplinary norms and practices. This variability needs to be recognised at the outset and there must be a recognition of what Bassey (2001) has called *relatability*. In practice, training packages are rarely used on a one-size fits-all assumption and without some adaptation to suit specific contexts. No such package can be tested in all contexts. There were three stages in the development of this professional development package: (i) Eliciting prior notions of the interaction of emotions and thought, (ii) Constructing the package, (iii) Testing, evaluating and refining the package.

In the first stage, it is considered good practice to be aware of the conceptions and beliefs of the potential learners, that is, university teachers (e.g., Svensson, 1997). These notions were collected and sorted into groups using Marton’s (1981) phenomenographic method. Briefly, this involved face-to-face, semi-structured interviews to collect responses to questions of the generic kind: ‘Do students’

<sup>2</sup> Readers will note that this is a version of the four levels of ‘Kirkpatrick’s Hierarchy’, often used to assess the effect of a training package (see Tamkin et al., 2002). It will be referred to again below.

moods and emotions affect their learning?’ and ‘If so, in what ways?’ Responses were sorted and collated into coherent groups, and each group was given a descriptive title.

Newton (2014) has argued that all teachers should be educated and trained to support the emotion-cognition relationship in their practice. The problem is: how is this to be done? A training/development package is a possible solution. In the second stage, package construction was guided by Mezirow’s well-known and robustly tested theory of adult learning (Mezirow, 1994; 2003). This points out that, ‘much of what we know and believe, our values and our feelings, depends on the context – biographical, historical, cultural – in which they are embedded’ (Mezirow et.al., 2000, p3). Mezirow recognises that adults have pre-existing assumptions and beliefs that shape their meaning-making and interpretation of their experiences. These assumptions and beliefs comprise, for example, values, attitudes, opinions, worldviews, ideologies, and paradigms. For example, transformative learning occurs when adults encounter a disorienting dilemma or a situation that challenges their existing meaning structures and creates a sense of imbalance or discomfort. Critical reflection is initiated through this, leading to a questioning of assumptions and beliefs. Conceptually, this learning theory highlights the importance within adult learning of not only developing new knowledge or skills but also of integrating these within an individual’s worldview and leading to a transformation of identity and perspective. Mezirow (2003) suggests that effective adult learning is underpinned by *Instrumental learning* that constructs meaning through problem-solving and deductive reasoning, and *communicative learning* which engages social and emotional intelligence.

For the third stage, an Educational Design Research (EDR) approach was adopted. EDR is a family of related research approaches (McKenney & Reeves, 2018) intended to develop a solution to a complex problem in educational practice where no clear guidelines exist (Plomp, 2013; Van den Akker et. al., 2006). Its focus is rooted in the development of solutions for real-world contexts whilst simultaneously developing theory through practical application and offering an insight into the process of design itself. Here, this entailed iterative evaluations of the package and adjustment after each iteration. These evaluations included interviews with participants and other teachers of older students, and the application of Kirkpatrick’s hierarchy (see above) to knowledge and, importantly, in its application.

### ***Participants:***

Different groups of participants were involved in different aspects, as summarised in Table 1.

**Table 1:** Participants in the data collection

<b>Level of data</b>	Initial data collection (Phenomenography)	Design evaluation data collection (Questionnaires)
<b>Method</b>	Face-to-face, semi-structured interviews (audio recorded and automatically transcribed).	Questionnaires (numerical and open-ended text-based questions).
<b>Sample size</b>	22	312
<b>Sample population</b>	HE lecturers working within an academic school within a post-1992 HEI in the North-East of England.	HE lecturers working across all academic schools within a post-1992 HEI in the North-East of England.
<b>Analysis/ method</b>	Phenomenography (analysis of nuance, rich description and variation).	Questionnaires focusing on: a) quantitative data analysis of numerical questions (descriptive statistics and data visualisation). b) qualitative analysis of open-ended questions (thematic analysis) considering identification of broader patterns across a wider sample population, identification of contradictions that may arise in relation to the primary data.
<b>Design</b>	Convergent parallel design, complementary data sets.	
<b>Reporting</b>	Primary data set reported, secondary data set reported and then compared and related to final integration of overall findings.	



## ***Ethics***

Research within UK universities is regulated by specific guidelines (BERA, 2018). These require that researchers have respect and regard for participants and conduct research without bias, discrimination and offense to participants' dignity and autonomy. Every attempt should be made to ensure the anonymity of participants. This project was approved by the relevant university Ethics Committee.

## **Results and discussion**

### ***Prior knowledge***

The phenomenographic analysis produced five groups of teachers' notions of emotions in relation to thinking and learning. These were:

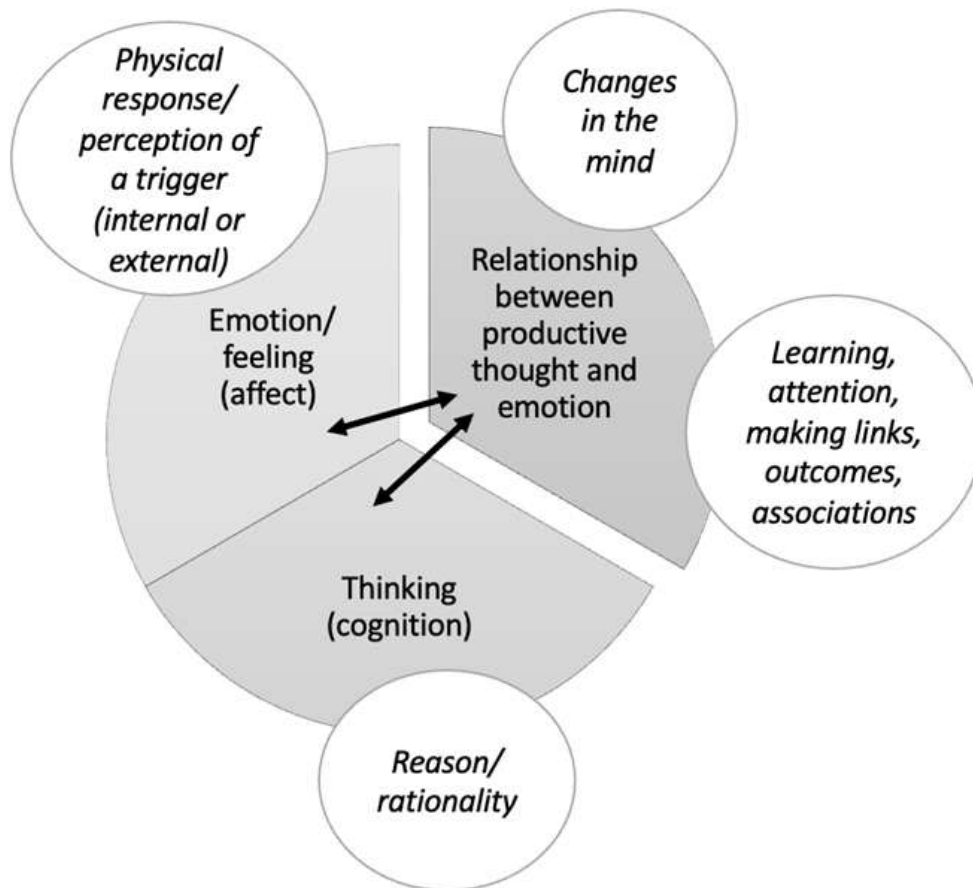
1. *Emotions as other than thinking*: In this category, emotions were seen as having no part in teaching and learning.  
e.g., 'Emotions don't enter into it. I'm there to do a job... there to deliver knowledge and explain it in a way that is understandable.'
2. *Emotions as limiting thinking*. Here, emotions were seen as being present in the classroom but they are impediments to thinking and learning.  
e.g., 'Sometimes I just wish students would be less obsessed with how they feel and just focus properly on their work.'
3. *Emotions as shaping thinking*. These notions accepted that emotions could augment or impede learning.  
e.g., 'I'm constantly aware of emotions in terms of how I respond, I pick up on [student] emotions... I'm constantly seeing what the reaction is seeing what works or what their body language looks like, how closely they're engaging, and I'll respond to that to make sure everyone is comfortable.'
4. *Emotions and thinking as integrated*. These notions go further than those of Category 3 in that there is a deeper interplay between emotions and thought which is wider ranging and more nuanced.  
e.g., '...emotion can be very helpful...it's very much an emotional response when you have a eureka moment - it's not quite happiness, but it's something like relief – a combination of different emotions. Happiness, relief, and satisfaction that you've achieved something.'
5. *Emotions as supporting evolution in thinking*. Here, emotions motivate thinking and learning and can be used to prompt deeper thought through discordant ideas.  
e.g., 'I think it is also important to create a little bit of there being something slightly uncomfortable.'

These groups raised awareness of the wide spread of sometimes opposing views that would need to be addressed and accommodated in the training. There was clearly no single base line of beliefs as a starting point, but the spread would provide a source of Mezirow's (1994) 'disorientating dilemmas' in introductory discussion amongst teachers. Here the realisation that perceptions varied so greatly encouraged teachers to question their own assumptions, ways of working and recognise potential spreads in meaning associated with aspects of practice.

### ***The training package***

The training package was to help teachers of older students create learning environments where emotions and the intellect work together productively (Newton, 2018), recognising that emotions are a powerful force in student learning and are often the reason students choose to learn at all (Immordino-Yang, 2019). The training was to provide a framework and strategies to enhance the

quality of knowledge creation through a conscious and explicit recognition of the emotional facets of their learning environment. Space does not permit a full presentation of the package, but its intention and focus is captured in Figure 1. The package was intended to lend itself to a variety of disciplines and to be suitable for those with different prior knowledge. Illustrative examples of the areas explored within the training package and examples of the considerations addressed in relation to each area are summarised in Table 2.



**Figure 1:** An overview of the relationships that the training package sought to develop.

**Table 2:** Examples of focus areas addressed within the toolkit.

Area of focus	Examples of development within the focus area	Examples of core underpinning literature
<b>Framing the relationship between emotions and thinking within higher education contexts.</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Critical exploration of sector, institutional and subject contexts.</li> <li>➤ A consideration of the specific needs of a variety of adult learning environments (<i>e.g., lecture environments, online learning, practical/ professional learning, self-directed learning</i>).</li> <li>➤ Framing the relationship between thinking and feeling within academic practice and the teaching of adults.</li> <li>➤ Defining the limits in the roles of teachers to create effective links to wider institutional professional/ support services.</li> </ul>	<p>Newton (2016)</p> <p>Immordino-Yang et al. (2019)</p>
<b>Acknowledging and making transparent personal, professional,</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Exploring the academic identities of staff and of students.</li> <li>➤ Unpacking learning related emotions via a shared</li> </ul>	<p>Newton (2016)</p>

<b>and academic frames.</b>	<p>lexicon– making the invisible aspects of the learning environment visible within the learning process.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Considering shared experiences/ stories in conjunction with personal progressive journeys.</li> <li>➤ Promoting reflection and reflexivity in approach.</li> </ul>	
<b>Making explicit productive thinking within the learning environment.</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Naming, defining, and signposting the types of productive thought that students are engaging in within their learning.</li> <li>➤ Exploring the aggregated impact of combinations of productive thought on the overarching outcomes of wise thinking and decision making.</li> <li>➤ Exploring the value of emotional thought.</li> <li>➤ Linking specific types of thought to the emotional climates of learning environments to actively enhance the quality of different types of thought that takes place.</li> </ul>	<p>Newton (2016)</p> <p>Newton &amp; Newton (2018)</p> <p>Immordino-Yang (2015)</p>
<b>Developing a learning environment that supports social and relational aspects of learning.</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Recognising and planning for the <i>stream of affect</i> (within and across courses; through academic advising/ personal tutoring activities, across the wider aspects of learning).</li> <li>➤ Lessening threat and enhancing safety within the learning environment via a focus on building communities and establishing rapport.</li> <li>➤ Exploring the characteristics of specific groups of students within the wider cohort to offer insight into the enhancement of the emotional climate of the learning environment.</li> </ul>	<p>Newton (2014)</p> <p>Quinlan (2016)</p>
<b>Focusing on, and embedding, the emotional design of learning and planning for emotional thought.</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Considering the impact of the physical learning environment.</li> <li>➤ Planning for and mapping the <i>streams of affect</i> within the learning (course, module, and episode) and making this visible.</li> <li>➤ Supporting and enhancing the social and relational aspects of learning (the learning eco-system).</li> <li>➤ Identifying and managing the shaping and impact of activities that may give rise to <i>performance related emotions</i>.</li> </ul>	<p>Newton (2016)</p> <p>Pekrun et al., (2023)</p>
<b>Exploring the leadership and management of the emotion-cognition partnership in learning and teaching environments.</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Embedding a shared vision and a coherent and cohesive approach to the emotion- cognition relationship with learning and teaching (from faculty to course/ module levels).</li> <li>➤ Building communities of practice that actively seek to address but also model the focus on the emotion-cognition relationship.</li> <li>➤ Recognising and considering the emotional labour inherent in the academic role and how this can be acknowledged, supported, and mitigated within working practices, organisational structures/ approaches and via support, mentoring and coaching.</li> <li>➤ Acknowledging the complexity often found in the structures of educational establishments – multiple inter-related services across physical and virtual spaces.</li> </ul>	<p>Mezirow (2008)</p> <p>Wenger (2009)</p> <p>Hökkä et al. (2020)</p>

### **Evaluation**

Survey data indicated high levels of positive engagement with the training package (91.11%, n=41), satisfaction with its structure and content (97.78%, n=44), and with its efficacy (88.89%, n=40). Table 3 provides an overview of key responses against the four levels of Kirkpatrick’s Hierarchy (Tamkin, 2014, see also earlier).

**Table 3:** Levels of learning from the package.

Level of hierarchy	Statement for response	Respondents (n)	Strongly agree & agree (n)	Strongly agree & agree (%)
<i>Be aware of the relevance of emotions in teachers' work...</i>	I found the content and subject matter interesting.	45	42	93.33
	I saw the relevance of this area to my role and my subject area.	45	41	91.11
	The training allowed me to adapt approaches to my subject area.	45	42	93.33
	The training recognised the context in which I am working.	45	40	88.89
<i>Knowing what emotions can do for learning...</i>	The training progressed my theoretical understanding.	45	40	88.89
	I am confident in my ability to use what I learned within this training in my own teaching.	45	39	86.67
	This training has impacted the way I view the relationship between emotions and cognition in my teaching.	45	41	91.11
	This training provided ideas and practical solutions that I could apply to my teaching.	45	42	93.33
	I could apply these strategies in range of contexts.	45	41	91.11
<i>The ability to take moods and emotions into account in planning and teaching...</i>	I have changed the way I approach my teaching because of this training.	45	36	80
	I have applied some of the strategies learned to my teaching.	45	37	82.22
	I have been able to integrate the strategies and approaches with my existing practice.	45	40	88.89
	These strategies have helped shape the way that I view the role of emotions within my learning environments.	45	40	88.89
<i>Evidence of useful changes in students engagement can be seen by teachers...</i>	The professional development has positively impacted the way I work.	45	40	88.89
	I have seen improvements in my teaching following the application of these strategies.	45	41	91.11
	Students have responded positively to the approaches.	45	40	88.89
	These strategies have the capability to positively impact practice widely within my department/school.	45	38	84.44

These responses indicated that most participants reached the higher levels of the Kirkpatrick hierarchy, that is, they put their learning into practice. This is, of course, the goal of workplace learning, and it points to the effectiveness of the package as a whole. Four key themes emerged from an analysis of responses to a text-based survey and evaluative interviews. These are summarised below. These thematic areas provide an insight into the impact of the training and its potential for further development.

### ***Theme 1: Diversity in perspectives and practice***

Participants frequently noted surprise in the wide range of views and perspectives expressed by their colleagues in relation to the role of emotions within learning and teaching: e.g., *'I didn't realise that others saw things so differently to me . . . I made a lot of assumptions there and it's been interesting to see how different views are'*. For some, the training approach was viewed as validating understandings and providing a framework. Others viewed the material as conceptually challenging but beneficial: e.g., *'this is not natural for me . . . and I've had to look at things differently . . . I've enjoyed that... I*

*can change small things to make a difference*'. The responses suggest that engagement moved from a focus on the adoption of immediate practical strategies to a transformation of conceptual outlooks.

### ***Theme 2: Conceptions and absorption into identity***

Participants reported valuing a focus on their personal and professional identities. The frames participants created were often revealed to be nuanced by personal experiences and their specific working contexts. There was a movement from an unconscious to a conscious recognition of the relationship between thinking and emotions so that what had been unseen became planned and deliberate: e.g., *'I think I did a lot of this [the toolkit] already and it comes quite naturally but I didn't really plan it or talk about it, and I didn't get as much from it as I could...'*. For some, the training offered an alternate perspective on the practicalities and structures of their working environment: *'this is a way of meeting the emotional needs of our students in education in a defined and boundary-ed [sic] way'*.

### ***Theme 3: Growth through professional development***

Participants expressed their own emotional response to the training as being linked to an increase in confidence which supported ownership, autonomy and adaptive decision making: *'I found the focus was not on telling us what we should do but on giving a structure to help us make choices... this gave me confidence'*. The training was noted to encourage reflection and provide a structure through which participants could explore their often, intuitive beliefs in relation to their practice. Instinctive approaches were moulded productively and given direction, solidity, and a defined theoretical grounding: *'my gut reactions and my feelings in my classroom have been given some structure and grounding... it's made me more controlled and aware...I'm not as reactive'*. Participants also reflected now had a vocabulary helped them become more confident in engaging with students in: e.g., *'discussions with students about their academic emotions which I didn't previously have a vocabulary for'*.

### ***Theme 4: Institutional and structural challenges***

Potential challenges to implementation of the training were highlighted, mainly linked to identified constraints within courses, departments, and institutional practices around the impact of an increased focus on specific metrics, institutional strategies and the availability of time and space: e.g., *'What I worry about is that the institution itself does not value things like this and is more interested in metrics and what things look like externally'*. In many ways, the emotional labour created by institutional policy was conceived to be more challenging to navigate than that created through the situational and relational aspects of teaching, e.g., managing the complex needs of students. As one participant stated: *'teaching comes as a relief from the politics'*.

The evaluation of responses to the training package demonstrated that:

- There was a movement from an unconscious (instinctive and reactive) to conscious (planned and considered) recognition of the relationship between thinking and emotions within learning; *'A lot of it [the training] is making conscious the unconscious and taking time to plan what can be planned rather than just rely on instinct.*
- Teachers recognised student responses to the implementation of training as positive. Teachers noted that learning benefited from the different avenues of discussion that arose: *'Students have responded well, and I have become much more open about the way I discuss academic emotions within my sessions and about the way I discuss different thinking skills and what these look like'*.
- There are benefits to offering a framework for teachers, defining boundaries, and providing a lexicon and strategies through which the intersection of the pastoral and the academic facets of roles and experience could be managed. This was of relevance to those coming into teaching from professional, vocational, or alternative sectors.
- Teachers saw that there is a diversity of perspectives in relation to the role of emotions within learning and this led to assumptions being challenged. This encouraged communities to be built which were reported to have a positive impact on the way individuals view themselves, work with their peers, and the way their students engage in their learning.

- There was evidence of transformational changes in teachers' beliefs. Focusing on the emotional aspects of learning may also be beneficial in fuelling a broader transformation in how education is perceived.

Taken together, we felt that the evaluation undertaken supported the approach to the construction of the training package, namely, an elicitation of prior knowledge, guidance from an adult learning theory, and the application of the iterative practices of design research. It does not, of course, mean that other approaches are ineffective, but we can, at least, recommend this one.

## Wider application of the training package

Interestingly, participants spontaneously saw ways in which the package could be adapted to suit more specific contexts. For example, one said: *'I can see this becoming something we could adapt to certain parts of our course.'* Opportunities were taken within the project to add breadth to the context in which it has been tested and consider its relatability (Bassey, 2001) to other settings. Field-testing took place with a broad cross-section of staff/faculty from various subject backgrounds. Likewise, the test setting can be viewed as representative of several similar higher education institutions. Within the testing of the package, appraisals of the training materials were undertaken by external experts who have suggested that the content, approach, and strategies presented could be applied to other educational environments. For example, it was noted that: *'the toolkit could be used in most educational settings, not just HE [Higher Education]'* and it *'has relevance beyond the UK education system'*.

There are some limitations to the approach taken. The theoretical basis for the training is detailed and wide (Newton, 2014) and the training itself was therefore intentionally broad. Going forward an exploration of specific elements of this whole may offer additional insights whilst further application across varied contexts and via different modes of training delivery would add nuance. The evaluation undertaken focused on interviews and surveys conducted with staff who had engaged with the training package and relied on self-report. A consideration of the impact of the training package directly within practice (for example, through observation or via exploration with students) would be beneficial. In addition, further work should now be undertaken to explore the ways in which training such as this can be dovetailed with wider institutional structures.

## Some conclusions

Our educational environments are innately emotional yet all too frequently the impact of the emotions of students is overlooked. Yet thinking involves emotions and its quality and the wider experience of learning can be enhanced by recognising this and putting it to work within the classroom. This project demonstrated that it is possible to offer successful professional training on this subject that facilitates belief development and transformation and the application of new skills for teachers of mature students. This was achieved by applying the conceptual framework provided by Newton (2014), and by building the practical approach upon the foundations of context and the conceptual starting points of teachers.

So much workplace training just amounts to a transmission of information, perhaps with an assessment of facts acquired. We felt that this does not go far enough to foster understandings, reflection, and practice in applying new knowledge in contexts of personal concern. We found Mezirow's guidance in adult learning useful in the initial design with the opportunity for transformation initially built around the wide-ranging conceptual starting points of teachers. Subsequent development of the training package was, of course, based on the pragmatic evaluations of each iteration

We felt that outcomes of the evaluation of the package indicated its general effectiveness in changing practice, teaching beliefs and behaviours relating to intellect-emotion interaction. A focus on the area became more consciously considered within the practice whilst it provided a basis from which confidence could be built and perceptions explored or challenged.



Nevertheless, we should draw the reader's attention to the diversity in teachers' personal attributes. Just like students, teachers are diverse, and we cannot expect all to be entirely at ease with emotion or to develop their response the intellect-emotion relationship in predictable ways. Most teachers have been through an educational system concerned only with the intellect, in some cultures, emotional expression may be suppressed, and some teachers may be mentally inclined to avoid them. Any training package addressing the interaction is unlikely to produce the same outcome for all, and some may develop expertise more slowly than others. This serves to emphasise the importance of Michael Bassey's (2001) principle of relatability. The audience is all, and trainers need to relate what they do to reflect trainees' prior knowledge, personality, and neurodiversity. Further research may be able to make recommendations for diverse applications of the package.

This study focused on teachers' responses to students' emotions. We should not, however, forget that teaching is also emotional labour and frequently shaped by internal organisational priorities and external drivers. Research often focuses on matters of teacher stress and burn-out, but an exploration of the effects of teachers' own intellect-emotion interaction in the classroom could be fruitful, and point to another valuable provision in teacher preparation. Wider than that, and potentially more constraining, are institutional attitudes to education particularly when seen as a commodity that packages knowledge for sale. Extending this the relationship between the attitudes of the organisation and the perceptions of the teachers who operate within them are also of relevance. Research which explores the impact of diverse institutional cultures, attitudes and expectations on educational practices would be useful.

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# Developing Talent Not Privilege: An Exploration of the Vulnerable-Resilient Vessel within the Everyday ‘Student Journey’ at an English Arts University.

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## Abstract

To celebrate the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the *International Journal of Talent Development and Creativity*, I return to the vision of the publication, by understanding what it means to develop talent and creativity in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. This paper celebrates the development of talent in the context of an arts education for neurodiverse students. Often talent is overlooked in pedagogies of neoliberalism, as the ethos for universities favour the market forces of competition and survival. In particular, post-1992 universities, face fierce competition for students due to market saturation. Students’ needs have been forgotten in unethical recruitment practices that are disguised as increased access. Unfortunately, it is to the detriment of welfarism and what bell hooks terms ‘the care of the soul’. This paper partly explores the current milieu, at university to contextualise the tenacity, resilience and vulnerability of those working and learning. Here talent and development are encouraged in young people, who have hitherto been marginalised and disadvantaged. It celebrates the successes, facilitated in part by the mediation of a small team of study skills support workers, including the author. Accordingly, a feminist approach engages auto-ethnography, and psychosocial spaces of the imaginary. Borrowing from the oeuvre of *Feminism, Adult Education and Creative Possibility: Imaginative Responses*, woven within the threads of this theory are small vignettes, art and poetry by one study skills support worker and the author. Speaking from the lived experience of being a child from a working-class background who is neurodiverse, I understand what it means to be marginalised in the English system of education. From the experiences of the support worker and me, this paper explores the ‘student journey’ within the context of inclusion in higher education, followed by an exploration of creative practices and reflections.

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**Keywords:** talent development; creativity; study skills; support worker; vulnerability; resilience; autoethnography; everyday; vessel.

## Vessels vulnerable; resilience revealed.

Vessels vulnerable, small, fragile.

Receptacles malleable, delicate.

Naked, clay ready to be shaped:

Painted in pictures of patriarchy;

Glazed in moulds of naked muses;

Fired in the furnace of misogyny.

Glazes glossy, reflecting back. Back

To empire, taken for granted truths.

Knowledge filled up, packed, pushed,

Squashed in, patted down. Confined.

Contained. Knowing no different,

Impermeable to the imaginary.

Once hidden, twice shy, put aside,

Inside, on the side, on the shelf,

Forgotten. Of no consequence.

Vessels knocked over.

Seeping.

Knowledges trickling.  
Dripping.  
On the cold stone slabs.  
Spilling.  
Soaking into the cracks.  
Oozing.

Unconfined.  
Uncontained.  
Unruly.  
Culture untethered.  
Unrestrained.  
Transformations taking space.  
Imagine, agency attained.  
Being accepting of change

Vessels smashed. Look! Hurts healed,  
Moulds broken: possibilities revealed,  
Pieces scattered: mosaics made,  
Beauty woken: golden mends remain,  
Lacquer threaded: cracks displayed.  
New pictures collaged: creatives played,  
Talents developed: identities crafted,  
Vulnerability shared: resilience grafted.  
Vessels re-seen: old wounds repaired,  
Strength renewed: courage declared.

(Hayward, 2023)

## Introducing the vessel's journey

As a child often I was, and with affection, called a 'bookworm.' Worming my way, into and through stories, being immersed, absorbed, eagerly consuming the lives of the characters. This was to forget the ordeals and torments of my school life, for a time at least, as I escaped my persecutors. Clark et al (2008, p.65) elegantly clarifies the significance of stories: 'stories draw us into an experience at more than a cognitive level; they engage our spirit, our imagination, our heart, and this engagement is complex and holistic. Good stories transport us away from the present moment'. I needed to be transported, to a place of safety, where my damaged psyche and wounded soul could be repaired. The act of repair was visceral; I could feel the pain leave my body as I read with fury. The act of reading was an addiction and maybe this was why my mum made the observation: "You always have your head in a book." She must have forgotten that I could not read until I was eight, and the word "always" felt premature. For most of my childhood and much of my adult life, I did feel vulnerable. My affect was, in a traditional meaning of the term, exposed, scared, helpless.<sup>3</sup> In this paper, and as the poem illustrates, I lay bare small pieces of my story to you, the reader, as I weave the intersections of vulnerability and resilience with a neurodiverse (dyslexic), working-class learner identity.

In the first stanza of the poem, there is little intersection of resilience until the traumas of being dyslexic were confronted. This confrontation took place ten years ago, but even now, the embedded struggles of traumas past resurface, and on occasion I am still that vulnerable, scared, lonely child. Yet that traumatic lived experience has developed a resilience and strength. For I am not part of patriarchy's Western-Eurocentric 'revenge economy' (Hoult, 2015, p. 110), instead, I seek to support

<sup>3</sup> On proofing the draft for this paper, I realised that I had typed scarred for scared. This led me to consider the trauma of literacy difficulties as scars and wounds upon the psyche.

and care for students' well-being by exposing my vulnerability. In this way the vulnerable body takes strength from the confession (Frosh, 1997) of not masking or passing as the all-knowing vessel, filled up to the brim with knowledge, ready to reproduce an identical vessel to all the other vessels on the shelves (Freire, 1970). On the learning journey, I argue that resilience-vulnerability is positioned to resist and challenge the sameness of patriarchy's imperial, colonial educational systems (Cixous, 1986; Mohanty, 2013; Smith, 1999; Ahmed, 2023). Visualised in the poem is Freire's vessel-student, shifting to critical thinking, where the moulds of reproduced discourses are broken. In breaking the yoke of class, gender and racial privilege, critical pedagogies facilitate actions to social justice, empower change and develop talent and creativity (Magro, 2022; Freire, 1973; hooks, 1994).

By borrowing from Liz Houlst's (2015) understanding of resilience as symbiotically linked to vulnerability, resilience-vulnerability is seen as intersecting rather than as binary oppositions. Accordingly, I understand the positioning of the student as oscillating between vulnerable-resilient. Her conceptualisation is drawn upon to enable ways to develop talent and creativity in people, not of a privileged background. Strength is found in the ability to be vulnerable, and resilience is felt in the ability to bounce forward' into something both familiar and new' (Walsh, 2011, p. 85). With the help of Walsh's creative understanding of resilience, I am able to disrupt and problematise the generalised definitions of resilience, that is 'the ability to bounce back from adversity, frustration, and misfortune' (Ledesma, 2014, p.10). This over-simplification is a limitation of resilience theory, as is its saturation into most, if not all disciplines, creating a plethora of definitions. Accordingly, a systemic literature review is beyond the scope of this paper. However, a major contributor to resilience theory was Norman Garmezy. He understood resilience to be attributed to the internal and external conditions of individuals, their personal qualities, kinship and community (Garmezy, 1992).

Drawn upon in this article are the experiences of Carole and I to explore the hauntings of past traumas, revisited in the vulnerable spaces of the conscious. This is to understand how we are resilient members of a collective community, making 'transformations' possible for us and our students (Helmick., 2022). For adversity invites 'windows of opportunity to transform' (Berkes and Ross, 2013, p. 9). Being set back is to learn as students and researcher to move forward.

## **Contextualising our collective communities**

Oppression and domination are confronted by us, a small group of artists, once working as support workers at the University for the Creative Arts in Rochester, England. Working in Student Services we identified, as what Clover (2010) terms, 'artists as educators' to create solidarities and coalitions in critical and self-reflective approaches to new knowledge production and pedagogies (Freire, 1973; Cruz, 2019). Most of us, entering the academy as artists, undertook a degree in the creative arts, to become educators and in this positioning, we were motivated to mitigate the trauma of our own education. I experienced many situations where learning was difficult and painful. Accordingly, this paper weaves my experiences, as a vulnerable-resilient student educator, and my journey with that of my friend and colleague, Carole Hatfield. Carole's contribution to this paper is significant as it facilitated my conceptualisation of the repaired vessel as a metaphor for the traces of developing talent and creativity. Carole (in Hayward 2019) made this observation, suggesting that vessels contain the remnants, hauntings, the traces of new knowledges, the mysteries and secrets yet to be revealed.

"I quite like vessels because there is, something inside, well also I'm a vessel. There's something about the form and the shape; I like vessels, be it teapots, cups, pots, bowls, anything that can hold something, because it can hold something secret, ... it could hold nothing, or fresh air".

As collaborators we share our practices as resilient-vulnerable study skills tutors, who began as first-generation degree, mature students. As a collective community of resilience-vulnerability we use our 'community resources' to support others in an environment characterized by change, uncertainty, unpredictability and surprise" (Magis, 2010, p.401). I reflect upon our experiences to make recommendations for students who may be struggling to breathe in the academy as thirsty fish out of water (Reay, 2020, 2017; Bourdieu & Champagne, 1999; Wilson, & McGuire, 2022)



## Vignette of vulnerability

And I was thirsty, as reading opens whole new worlds into which I could journey to water my parched body, to forget the enduring dry, hellish school days. Stepping onto the path, from the school gates to go home, I walked into nightmares of Beelzebub's making. Still, the stuff of *my* dreams-nightmares is tangible, and life may seem fleeting as Shakespeare (1611/1983) eloquently visualises in *The Tempest*, but my living and dreaming realities were merged into a cycle of trauma. In my attempt to get to the safety of my home two miles away, I ran the gauntlet nearly every weekday for six long years. In that Renaissance military tradition of administering corporal punishment, the guilty ran the gauntlet, which consisted of trying to sidestep two rows of tormentors. My tormentors were the school bullies on the left and the traffic, mainly buses from the road on the right. And there I was running down the middle; more often than not my punishers delighted in the anticipation that I should be trampled underfoot. Those huge metal horses dressed in blue and yellow caparisons, were so close I could feel their breath on my neck as they galloped past and dust from their hooves landed on my frumpy, brown Clark's school shoes.

My schooling was felt in a heightened sense of existence, much like the depiction in *The Garden of Earthly Delights* by Hieronymus Bosch (1490-1500) (figure 1). In particular, the demise of the knight resonates, as the etymology of gauntlet, the gloved hand of a knight, merges its meaning with running down the line. In the image the knight is depicted being devoured by two differing groups of monsters on either side; a detail of which is included in figure 1b. Ironically, in these psychological and physical spaces of danger, I learnt to read. The power-knowledges of reading enable access to worlds of possibilities and sanctuary. Liz Hault movingly explains this as she weaves the warp and weft of resilience-vulnerability together:

“We need help from books if we are to find that remote and desert place where resilience and vulnerability operate, not as binaries but as each other's nucleus, so that the knowledge and near memory of what it feels like to be hurt is core to one's understanding of resilience, and the knowledge of one's ability to repair is core to our experiences of vulnerability” (2015, p. 107).



**Figure 7:** Hieronymus Bosch, *The Garden of Earthly Delights* (1490-1500)



**Figure 1b:** Detail Knight devoured by monsters

My ability to repair took many years. My trauma began as an illiterate child. Freud described ‘trauma’ as ‘any excitations from the outside which are powerful enough to break through the protective shield ... the mental apparatus from being flooded with large amounts of stimulus which have broken in and binding of them’. Cathy Caruth in her reference to Freud’s *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920/1955), accepts the later usage of this term to mean, ‘a wound inflicted not upon the body but upon the mind’ (Caruth, 1996, p.3). Not being able to read, did wound my psyche. I was a ‘pretender’, passing as literate; an ‘outcast on the inside’ (Bourdieu & Champagne, 1999).

In the UK in the 1970s, the whole word reading method was in vogue and relied upon memorising whole words, known as the look/say approach (Parker 2021). An example of which can be seen in the Janet and John books; still available to buy. The whole language, ‘Real Books’, came next. There was no instruction given, as the books were highly illustrated. The alternative method phonics, being a casualty of the ‘reading wars’ (Castles et al 2018), lost the battle. For Goodman (1986, p. 371), the ‘expert’, said ‘[m]atching letters with sounds is a flat-earth view of the world’. Accordingly, I was caught in the middle of the whole word/ whole language reading methods which opposed the phonetic approach. According to the co-founder, Ken Goodman (1986), children could understand the context and read for themselves. Reading would come naturally, achieved with access to a plethora of storybooks and a supporting adult. In an email conversation with Carole, she said:

“There were many similarities with my childhood and although I did learn to read at school - younger than you - I don’t remember much encouragement in the home for reading - no bedtime stories, no books bought for me and so on. The first books I remember receiving were in a boxed set of *The Little House on the Prairie* from a friend for Christmas when I was ten! I lost myself in drawing and making things” (July 2023).

Unfortunately, neither I nor Carole had the privilege of an abundance of books, nor to borrow the adage, ‘the guide on the side.’ In agreement with Harju-Luukkainen et al (2022, p. 182) ‘not all

parents are equipped with equal possibilities to support their child, and here expert skills are needed from the educators ... [as] socio-economic hardship puts children in an underprivileged position.'

To continue with my journey, at the age of eight I finally had to 'confess' to my teacher that I could not read; at regular intervals over three years, I stood in line at Mr King's desk for the reading assessment/test. First in line was Andrea, she read aloud to the teacher, and then it was my turn. One day, she read three sentences in a row. 'Well, that was it,' I thought to myself. Not being able to recall and recite three sentences, I had to admit to my failings. The 'game' was up, my vulnerability exposed (Foucault, 1988). Unbeknownst to me at that time, I was neurodiverse and so began the humiliation, fear, guilt and shame of being 'included' as a child that needed extra help. Now I realise that my acquisition of knowledge was embedded in a self-regulation of reproductive education. I was a vessel that needed filling up, in the vein that bell hooks and Paulo Freire critique in their writings (hooks, 1994; Freire, 1970, 1973). To fill up to the level of those vessels who could read, memorise facts and become a productive member of society, my punishment was extra literacy lessons. Already, my peers were 'disciplined' in the game, readied to be controlled by the privileged. So began my instruction: laminated flash cards were presented to me and ironically, I learnt synthetic phonics. I was the child who used up the limited staffing resources as I needed 1:1 tuition. Learning in this context, every lunch time, I later understood that my 'identification, access to power and ... taken-for granted elements of society ... define where different identities are located within the broader social structure' (Stuart et al 2011, p 491).

Unfortunately, still much of the UK's educational system is entrenched in the banking system of knowledge and this requires the ability to retain vast amounts of facts and to reproduce them in exams. These reproductive knowledges were clearly in production and my education was very much in the vein of rote, reproductive, boring, uninspiring knowledge acquisition. I did pass some exams, and to continue with the analogy, the vessel was filled up to the rim. Accordingly, after compulsory education, I continued into the 6<sup>th</sup> form and at eighteen there was no more space left to memorise all the facts required for A levels; I failed those exams. Later, I remember as a mature student, the first text I was given to read and study, was Dicken's novel of 1854, *Hard Times*. As soon as I read the opening sentence, I thought that my own compulsory education was not that far removed from Victorian times - nothing had really changed. The opening of *Hard Times*, still echoes with me:

“‘NOW, what I want is, Facts. Teach these boys and girls nothing but Facts. Facts alone are wanted in life. Plant nothing else, and root out everything else. You can only form the minds of reasoning animals upon Facts: nothing else will ever be of any service to them. This is the principle on which I bring up my own children, and this is the principle on which I bring up these children. Stick to Facts, sir!’” (Gradgrind, in Dickens, 1854/1993: 3).

Disappointingly, thirty years on, I am reminded of this banking model, since being constrained to the regurgitation of facts, my students express their frustrations with their education. Yet there are ways to teach differently, drawing upon the interests and motivations of the students, discussed later on in the article. Enlightened, rational reasoning was instilled in our malleable minds to ensure an adherence to individualism. Then the onus of the failings of the underprivileged is a lack on their/my part, not that of the State. Personal responsibility was the discourse in *Hard Times* and my childhood in the 1970s, which severely escalated in the 1980s and onwards. Not being functionally literate would have defined a subjectivity as a child not able to fulfil my parents' aspirations to be something better than working class. They understood the discourses of social mobility especially with Thatcherite rhetoric shouting the advocacy of individualism, capitalism, and a fervent encouragement to own property. Thatcher (1975) states that the means to achieve these 'desires' was by developing talents via education:

“that human progress is best achieved by offering the freest possible scope for the development of individual talents ... For many years there has been a subtle erosion of the essential virtues of the free society. Self-reliance has been sneered at as if it were an absurd suburban pretention. ... The desire of parents to choose and to struggle for what they themselves regarded as the best possible education for their children has been scorned”.

My father extolled this ethos of individualism and self-help, and in our household he amended the Biblical phrase: 'God helps those who help themselves' to 'I will help you if you help yourself'. But to become literate was not easy. Education was a site of complex political and psychosocial issues in my family as the transgenerational legacy of dyslexia left traces in the social and cultural experiences of our lives (Hayward, 2019). My mother left school at fourteen and developed her talents as a seamstress. She lacked the ability to read and write due to the failings of the educational system. My father played truant from a very young age and 'got in with the wrong crowd of older boys'. Standing before the local magistrate at fifteen, he was given the choice of going to borstal or joining the Merchant Navy. He chose the latter, became a cabin boy and learnt to read and write, whilst aboard ship. My father managed to mitigate a life of crime and imprisonment but this is not the case for many.

Unfortunately nearly 60% of adult prisoners have a literacy level below that of an eleven year old (Ministry of Justice, 2021). This is well below the general population as identified by the National Literacy Trust (n.d.): '1 in 6 (16.4% / 7.1 million people) adults in England have very poor literacy skills'. The Trust makes a poignant point: 'Adults with poor literacy skills will be locked out of the job market and, as a parent, they won't be able to support their child's learning.' This is the result of the literacy crisis and those who are not privileged may require help. Seeing the serious nature and implications of the situation, my mother took a cleaning job to pay for a private tutor. She came every Saturday morning for an hour. So began the lessons with the tutor who taught me to read in context and with meaning. We began with Dickens.

This was the first time that Dickens came into my life. Although his work was, and still is, part of the West's literacy canon, it is highly problematic. There are many contradictions in his novels and personal life, illustrating elements of misogyny, racism and xenophobia. For example, he is an ardent proponent of the 'Angel of the House', whilst supporting and encouraging women to contribute to his journals; he recruited prominent writers such as Harriet Martineau, Elizabeth Gaskell and Eliza Lynn. Furthermore, he was a committed social activist, a political journalist, and he had a profound talent for storytelling. As an astute storyteller, his visual descriptions of the everyday are embedded in my memory. At this time, I was introduced to *Great Expectations* (1861). It seemed an inappropriate book for a child unable to read. Yet it was apt in terms of the content, as it gave an insight into the education and literacy development of the characters of the book and therefore it was a relatable text. The text is a metaphor for the hierarchical nature of learning; Pip attributes his success to Joe, being taught with love, in a father/son relationship that draws on the apprenticeship model. This contrasts with the abuses of the formal education in *Hard Times* and the education I received at school. In much the same way Pip receives instruction from Miss Havisham, I was instructed. Critical thinking was not on the curriculum. Thus, some forms of knowledge production have value and worth over others.

I remember the formal lessons provoked much anxiety. I felt thick, stupid, as though there was something wrong with me. I thought I would never be able to read and write. It was emotionally challenging, a struggle. I much preferred a visual way of accessing knowledge, but to be able to 'read' visual cultures was not enough to function in 1970s Western society. To be literate was the requirement. In most societies being literate was and is a necessary cultural capital. My parents being aware of this, bought me the Collins Encyclopaedia when I was nine. Still not a proficient reader, I used a visual technique to increase my understanding by looking at the pictures in the book. Intrigued and curious it sparked a passion for exploration, for the discovery to detect the message(s) behind the images.

Time and again I went back to one image, Dali's *Soft Construction with Boiled Beans (Premonition of Civil War)* (1936), figure 2. I wondered why a painter would want to create such a grotesque image. As a child I had not seen anything like this before. Thus, on the margins of becoming a reader, I understood the power of visual cultures. Even as a child I felt the power in that image. On reflection, I now realise the ways in which the language of visual culture can move the viewer, I feel that my illiterate self was open to the emotions conveyed by Dali's depiction of the grotesque trauma of the horrors of war. As a child of the 1970s I had not been saturated with the prevalence of multi-media that is now the norm of visual cultures in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Accordingly, my experiences were



not so far removed from my illiterate ancestors of times past. They were instructed by the power/knowledges of religious visual language. The emotional impact of such imagery is palpable, made to move the soul and affect the viewer. Even as a child, this I understood, and desired the talents to make creative possibilities available to me. I wanted to use creative talents to communicate powerful messages.



**Figure 8:** Dalí, *Soft Construction with Boiled Beans (Premonition of Civil War)*, 1936, oil on canvas, 100 x 99 cm, Philadelphia Museum of Art

By understanding the power and significance of visual aesthetics, the language of visual culture, it explains why those of privilege need to make the study of the arts unattractive to marginalised groups. The cultural elite do not want their canon destabilised and surely by developing the creative talents of the under privileged this would happen. Therefore, those students are left by the wayside in pedagogies that are to be consumed, as the capitalist beast feeds from the breast of the privileged. For the working class, women, disabled and people of colour are fed the scraps from the master's table at his discretion. However, rammed down our throats is the notion that the only courses fit for our consumption are those that secure employment, nursing, teaching, STEM, neither humanities, nor the creative arts are easily accessible. For turning that table would make obvious the depiction that our cultures are not valued in society.

## Reimagining the vessel

Nevertheless, there are those of us, who are challenging the status quo by understanding what it means to develop talent and creativity in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. With the advancement in technology, it is not necessary, as I did, to spend hundreds of painful hours remembering mathematical formulars and obscure spellings. All that time, energy and frustration taken in those pursuits, can be used to develop critical thinking. What is of importance is to understand how to live in a peaceful world that takes care of the planet and globally vulnerable. As artists as educators, we have a responsibility to nurture talent not privilege, by exploring with our student's creative approaches to learning.

So, what might this look like? Carole and I encourage the students we support to use their experiences in the everyday, their interests and emotions to facilitate a motivational and inspirational affect. To research what is curious to them, to encourage them to create work that produces new meaning making. As artists both Carole and I use our experiences in the everyday as examples to produce 'different', subjugated knowledges and in doing so position ourselves as educators and practitioners of the arts (Foucault, 1980). These subject positions are visualised in the conceptual processes of the artworks, often learning new techniques as we go, improvising on our creative journey. That creative journey often takes a path which is unexpected and non-linear. An example of which is visualised in the poem I wrote to open this paper: Beauty woken: golden mends remain. / Lacquer threaded: cracks displayed. /New pictures collaged: creatives played.

The lines of the poem were conceptualised a few years ago when I was tutoring a study skills session with a fashion student on 'how to analyse an artwork, figure 3. She was required to research ten artists and their work. The template I created can be adapted, substituting the image for any media and arts discipline to the interests and motivations of the student and then adapting the formal elements to suit. However, this session was not going to take place until we had addressed why she was distressed. The student wanted to talk about her grandmother who had recently passed away. We had a conversation about her feelings and memories describing how she would visit her grandmother and have tea from a teapot. This story led me to suggest the fashion designer and print maker Mary Katrantzou and the Fall 2011 Collection: Ming Vases, Faberge Eggs, and Other Tchotkes (Katrantzou, 2011). We both reminisced about nostalgic childhoods, having tea from a teapot in a cup with a saucer. I supported the completion of the research template using the images she found.

The tracings of our stories were still with me when I asked for a cup and saucer for Christmas in the style of Royal Albert Bone China, Old Country Roses Collection, 1962. This was an object that connected me to my past and I was excited to use it at work. However, on the first day I dropped it and smashed the saucer and the handle. Carole could see how upset I was and said she could fix it for me using the Japanese art of Kintsugi. Using gold lacquer, the breakage is repaired with an obvious join, which is made part of the object's history, rather than trying to hide the crack. Once Carole did the repair, figure 4, I decided to transform its function, as a container to hold jewellery. The art of Kintsugi is an embodiment of the broken vulnerable, fragile vessel, transformed once repaired. The pieces are put back together, the wound, the trauma is healed. Strength is visualised in the repair and here the experiences and significance of the everyday became apparent. Revealed in the found objects around us are new knowledges, inspiration and creativity. The creativity in the making process and the production of new stories, reveals the secrets and emotions that are significant. The importance of the everyday impacts the narratives of our art, an example, of which occurred during my interview with Carole for my doctoral study. We decided to sit in her garden because she wanted to peg out her washing when something fell from a tree. In this serendipitous space I said:

"Oh, what was that? (Interviewee: 2016: 38.00)

It's a beechnut, an empty shell; it's rather pretty, isn't it? Look – it's rather nice. It's another empty vessel, isn't it? I might use that. I'll keep that now, I'll take that (Interviewee: Eve, 2016, 38.25).

so, you use found objects? (Interviewer: 2016: 38.30).

yes, I love finding things and making things with a bit of old something, also with clay. ... It's soft, (we take turns holding the beechnut), so if you look at it, it's soft, smooth on the inside, but look at the outside. It's deadly" (Interviewee: Eve, 2016, 38.55).

ALS Essay Workshop:  
Bev Hayward

### How to analyse an artwork

What is it? (Subject)  
What is it made from? (Media)  
What do you think of it?



**Formal elements:**

- Rhyme
- Colour
- Texture
- Pattern
- Movement
- Proportion
- Juxtaposition
- Shape/ silhouette
- Balance

How does it make you feel?

Is it figurative or abstract? Why?

### Context

Historical context (date). Movement

Political/economic/religious (where is it situated in society/culture)

Contemporary relevance. Relate to your practice

Info for referencing

Figure 9: Scaffolding activity to generate ideas and research: How to analyse an artwork, by Bev Hayward





**Figure 10:** Royal Albert Bone China, Old Country Roses Collection, 1962, Kintsugi repair by Carole Hatfield. (photographed by Carole Hatfield).

This experience was incidental, unexpected, Carole's use of the everyday in knowledge production is creative, intuitive, innovative. It is often these experiences that are overlooked in a neoliberal agenda, as having no value. For the onus is placed upon researching 'great' artists: cutting and pasting the 'master' pieces in a sketchbook. Unfortunately, often the reading lists and project briefs are written in a way to reproduce the same and deny access to the marginalised groups. They are only accessible to those of privilege, to those 'in the know.' For many of the students we support, the use of academic language and books, especially theoretical books used for research, are the cause of much anxiety. Failure at school, due to limited reading and writing skills are presented to the support workers, as we try to care for extremely stressed and vulnerable students. We, the support workers are aware of these anxieties, as some of my colleagues and I have experienced extremely negative learning experiences. If only some simple inclusive pedagogic practices had been put in place, it would have negated those experiences. For example, it is important to take the time to have a conversation and getting to know the student and their interests. However, often the enjoyment, the love, has been lost, as an arts education has become a market in which the learner must quantify their creativity. If researchers and students are not given the time and space to get lost in those everyday moments, then 'secret' knowledges such as that which Carole shared with me, are not considered to be significant. Figures 5, and 6 show a sample of the diversity of vessels made by Carole that contain those secrets yet to be revealed.

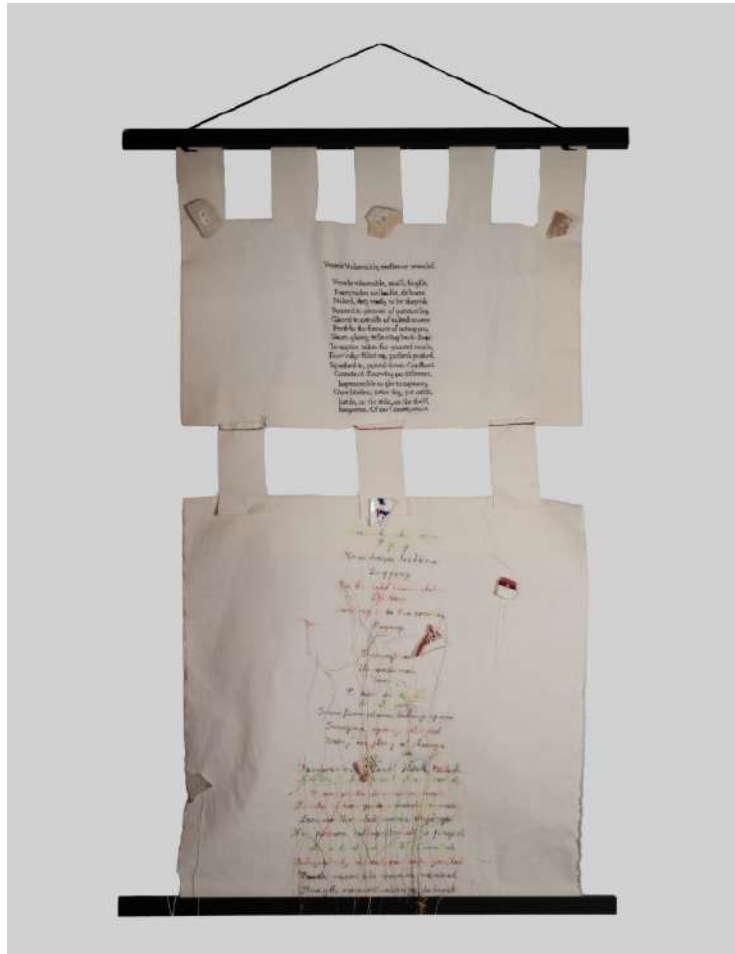


**Figure 11:** Carole Hatfield, *Ceramic Vessels*, 2007. (photographed by Carole Hatfield)



**Figure 12:** Carole Hatfield, *Felt Vessels*, 2007 (photographed by Carole Hatfield)

Therefore, observation in the everyday is an approach to facilitate an inspiring experience that is embodied in art. Often learning and teaching is having the ability to listen and understand the motivations of our students to explore what is available, relatable and of value to them. ‘Teaching should energize, engage, and enlighten. Teachers in this context are co-investigators with their students; they are visionaries, challengers, advocates, artists, mentors and facilitators of learning’ (Magro, 2019, p. xvii-xviii). In this context, the vessel, once broken, figure 4, is recreated with confidence and self-awareness, figure 7, to think critically about their practice as artists, and we the ethical collaborators are encouraging of their active engagement.



**Figure 13:** Beverley Hayward, *Vessels Resilient - Vessels Vulnerable*, calico and silks, 2023. (photographed by Bev Hayward)

### **The journey continued.**

The intension is to encourage and support those students that find learning a struggle. To ensure that they do not give up on education, but to continue as vulnerable-resilient artists. In a community of support and encouragement a democratic pedagogical experience can be fostered to nurture talent development, to help each other through challenging times. Only recently have I had the confidence to speak out about my own literacy difficulties, but in sharing my experiences, I feel I have fostered a more authentic approach to teaching. In finding my own voice and telling my story, I hoped to facilitate a democratic approach to enable learners to feel comfortable to tell their stories and be successful in their/our lifelong learning journeys. This is voiced in my poem and visualised in the artwork's format of the two poems. As learners, we can move from the banking vessel to a kintsugi journey of strength and opportunity.

Thus, as a collective of caring ethical practitioners, we have a responsibility to make learning fun, enjoyable and exciting (hooks 1994), to develop talent and create identities, and most importantly to encourage transformations from the reproduced vessel to new pictures collaged from repaired pieces, reassembled to create dazzling, striking mosaics. Learning should not be a cause of suffering and a means to pathologise, marginalise and wound (Magro, 2019). Accordingly, by recovering feelings and remembering repressed 'hurts' (Hayward, 2021), lived experiences are accessed and reflected upon. This is to facilitate creativity in what I anticipate and hope to be an easier journey for those students in our care (hooks, 1994, p.16; Hayward, 2019).

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## About the Author

**Dr. Bev Hayward** is an Associate Lecturer at Birkbeck College, University of London. She teaches on the master's programme in Education, and Social Justice. Being neurodiverse and working-class, often she was marginalised in the UK educational system; accordingly, by exposing her vulnerabilities, she hopes to foster a transformative and democratic pedagogical student experience. During her PhD in Education, Transformation and Lifelong Learning, she employed a creative approach to explore creative arts-based practices. She is a poet, writer and embroider and is interested in the artist as educator. These mixed methods are drawn upon in her current body of work, which seeks to expose the state's unjust practices in forced adoption.

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# Implementation of the Schoolwide Enrichment Model in Italy: A Three-Year Study

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## Abstract

In this article, we describe the positive outcomes emerging from a three-year implementation of the Schoolwide Enrichment Model (SEM) in the first Italian implementation of the model. Both students and teachers benefitted from the positive experience of the SEM educational approaches to talent development which provides an educational experience that other Italian and European schools may wish to adapt to promote talent development. The SEM benefits all students with some forms of enrichment and simultaneously provides educational opportunities for academically talented students in Italy.

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**Keywords:** Schoolwide Enrichment Model (SEM); talent development; positive change; creative productivity; Italy; Renzulli Learning System (RLS).

## Introduction

The field of gifted education is based on the universally accepted reality that some learners demonstrate outstanding performance or potential for superior performance in academic, creative, leadership, or artistic domains when compared with their peers (Renzulli & Reis, 2014; Renzulli et al., 2021). This widely accepted concept suggests the importance of exploring diverse approaches and models focused on nurturing the talents and abilities of students within the educational system in Italy. Talent development is a well-recognized and addressed issue in numerous European Countries and emerging nations, and there are a variety of methods used to identify gifted individuals. In Italy, specific measures aimed at promoting the development of gifts and talents among Italian students have not previously been implemented. During the past four decades, Italy has directed its human and financial resources towards developing programs, tools, and teacher training to meet the educational and emotional needs of students with disabilities, neglecting the educational needs of gifted students. The Italian educational efforts have primarily concentrated on remediation, aimed at elevating the performance of low-achieving students to a proficient level, rather than providing opportunities for students with exceptional abilities to realize their untapped high potential. In theory, all educational endeavors should help learners realize their potential and develop their talents. Achieving that goal and differentiating regular curriculum to meet the educational needs of high potential students demands highly professional training based on the knowledge of gifted education pedagogy, including the strategies described in this article.

A body of research suggests that, when not properly challenged, academically gifted students perform poorly in school and may be at risk for dropping out of high school (Reis & McCoach, 2000). Unfortunately, high ability students are regarded in Italy as part of a privileged group that will succeed without additional support. As a result, Italy lacks an agreed-upon definition of giftedness, instructional resources, including training courses on gifted education and talent development, as well as best practices in gifted education.

Recently, two Italian legislative initiatives, Bill n. 180 and Bill n. 1041 have been presented to correct this absence of gifted education opportunities. These two bills may set the stage for a bill to become law, as the text must be approved by both the Chamber of Deputies and the Senate. Indeed, equity in education requires that each student be provided with services and instruction commensurate

with the student's individual needs. This implies the need to expand opportunities and services for Italian gifted and talented students making use of equitable identification methods and then building programs which empower all gifted learners. Several European provisions, which Italy has not yet enforced, suggest that different education models should be adopted in Italy to meet the diverse educational needs of children with high cognitive potential. The European educational trend leans toward endorsing an inclusive approach. This approach is designed to address some of the historical criticisms leveled at gifted education, which has been accused of creating "elitist" educational pathways for gifted children. The approach being considered is the Schoolwide Enrichment Model (Renzulli et al., 2021), one of many programs designed to meet the intellectual, social, emotional, and educational needs of students with gifts and talents as well as high potential. This approach has a robust body of research (Reis & Peters, 2020) to support its use as a pedagogical framework specifically designed to extend the pedagogy of gifted education to all students by providing various levels of opportunities and enrichment to all students, promoting the philosophy of inclusive schoolwide enrichment. This model aims to provide every student with the *opportunities, resources, and encouragement* required to fully develop the student's individual potential. Extensive international research highlights the positive impact of research-based talent development programs on all children, fostering the development of their gifts and talents.

The SEM has been adopted by thousands of school districts in the USA as well as around the world and been successfully implemented in numerous school districts across the United States and worldwide (Reis & Peters, 2020). It has recently been introduced into the Italian school system as also described in this article, demonstrating its adaptability in the Italian education system as well as its inclusive approach, as all students participate in SEM activities (Milan & Reis, 2020). Italy abolished special classes in 1971 (Law 118/1971) to promote full integration for pupils with disabilities. It is unlikely that Italy's education system, at this time, will widely establish gifted programs for identified students or special classes for highly able students. The implementation of the SEM in Italian schools aligns with the inclusive approach recommended by the European Community and the Italian education system as SEM activities are offered to all students at school. It promotes talent development for all students, including those who are twice exceptional, while also providing intellectually challenging opportunities for highly capable and talented students. The SEM approach and its multi-criteria identification system help address the absence of a national identification system in Italy, fostering equity and opportunity for talent development among all Italian students. For example, at the Salesiani SEM School, some families submitted a formal evaluation produced by private psychologists but the school in Varese, based on the training with the SEM, also offered differentiated instruction to highly able students who were not formally identified by professionals outside the school. The involvement in SEM activities can help to reverse underachievement, provide equity of opportunity, bring enrichment to all students, and prevent students from dropping out of school. This article describes the initial implementation of the SEM in Italy.

## School Enrichment Model (SEM) implementation in Italy

The SEM enriches students' learning experiences with creative activities that enable them to explore their skills and talents in several components including Talent Portfolio development, Curriculum Compacting, and various enrichment opportunities. The SEM was implemented for three years at Salesiani School located in Varese, Italy that serves middle school students. All students in the school were involved in the implementation of the SEM at Salesiani school, as summarized in Table 1 below.

**Table 1:** Students involved in the SEM programme.

	6 <sup>th</sup> grader	7 <sup>th</sup> grader	8 <sup>th</sup> graders	TOTAL
1 <sup>st</sup> Year	54	54	53	161
2 <sup>nd</sup> Year	58	57	58	173
3 <sup>rd</sup> Year	58	58	58	174

The implementation at this school initially focused primarily on Enrichment Clusters. Additional components, including Curriculum Compacting, were subsequently adopted, as well. In future years, additional SEM components will also be included in the school program.

### ***Enrichment clusters***

Enrichment clusters play a pivotal role in the SEM approach, as they emphasize the acquisition and cultivation of practical skills while providing students with the opportunity to actively engage in real-world activities, with the ultimate goal to create an original product or service to be presented to a genuine audience. Enrichment clusters are cross-disciplinary, non-graded groups of students who share a common interest or passion. These groups convene on a weekly basis during a designated space and time within the school timetable to pursue their shared interests. Adult support is provided in the form of a mentor who possesses a particular interest in the subject matter and brings a certain level of competence and experience to guide and facilitate the group's activities.

### ***SEM tools***

The SEM has several tools that help to implement it and during the process at Salesiani School, many of these were used. Professional development was used to provide the staff at Salesiani school with training to use both the Renzulli Learning System (RLS) (<https://renzullilearning.com>) and the corresponding Cebece Test of Creativity (CTC).

The Profiler, part of the SEM and RLS, is a software tool that creates a customized profile for each student, identifying their academic strengths, interests, learning styles, and preferred modes of expression. This profile serves as a guiding compass for the next step, which involves a differentiation search engine that scours through thousands of resources that are specifically tailored to each student's unique profile. The RLS is a research-based enhancement of SEM, as outlined by Field (2009), is an innovative online enrichment program that streamlines the process of individualized and personalized education, relieving teachers of the extra work it typically entails.

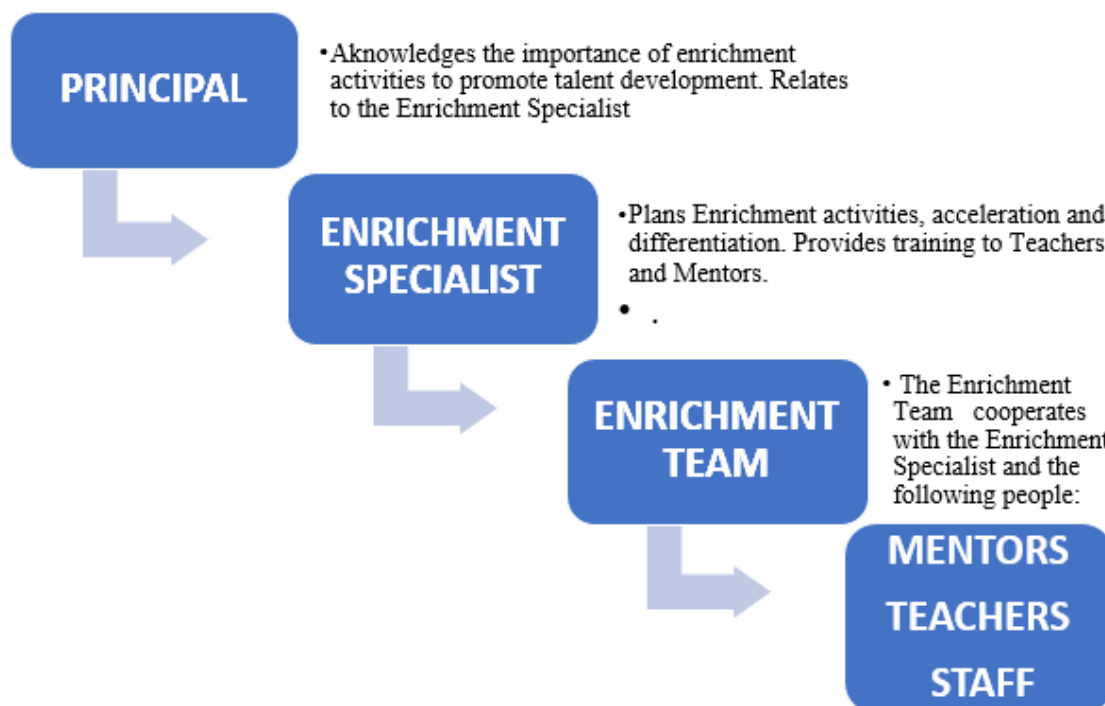
The RLS database includes thousands of meticulously reviewed, age-appropriate, and child-safe enrichment opportunities. This database is consistently monitored, updated, enhanced, and expanded. With RLS, students learn alongside their peers of the same chronological age while receiving content that matches their academic age. This approach is also beneficial for classroom teachers, as they may rely on these resources to prepare appropriate and engaging learning materials for advanced students. Additionally, the RLS has been translated into Italian by the first author to serve Italian students.

The latest addition to the Schoolwide Enrichment Model using Renzulli Learning is the CTC. This test is specifically designed to assess the creative potential of individuals of all age groups, with a particular focus on underrepresented populations. The CTC evaluates creativity using measures of fluency, flexibility, originality, and elaboration. It's worth noting that the CTC is integrated into the Renzulli Learning platform, enhancing its accessibility and utility for educational purposes.

The Renzulli Scales for Rating the Behavioral Characteristics of Superior Students (SRBCSS-R; Renzulli et al., 2002) are a teacher nomination instrument appropriate for use as one measure in the identification of gifted students. These scales are widely recognized and are recognized as a commonly used tool for identifying gifted children in the United States (Westberg, 2011). The Renzulli Scales asks teachers to rate children in comparison to their peers on a host of these observable behaviors. Students who score well on the scales are more likely to be gifted. Using a tool like the Scales, a school can narrow the number of students who will be fully evaluated for a gifted program. Recently, they have been translated and validated for use in the Italian educational context. To accommodate the inclusion of high ability students in classrooms, the SEM also incorporates a variety of within-classroom strategies such as curriculum compacting (Reis, et al., 2016). Compacting is used to provide more challenging learning experiences for talented youth, designed to help students to fully realize their potential.

**Implementation of SEM**

In SEM programs, teacher training is a fundamental requirement and having specialized and trained personnel is key to success, particularly enrichment or gifted education specialists. Professional development in the SEM was provided to the faculty by the first author and then, an Enrichment team was organized to collaborate in planning future activities, including the allocation of financial and human resources to support enrichment initiatives and activities. These meetings and collaborative efforts were crucial for the successful implementation of this talent development programs within the school.



**Figure 1:** SEM organization at Salesiani Middle School.

The chronological steps for implementing SEM activities were as follows:

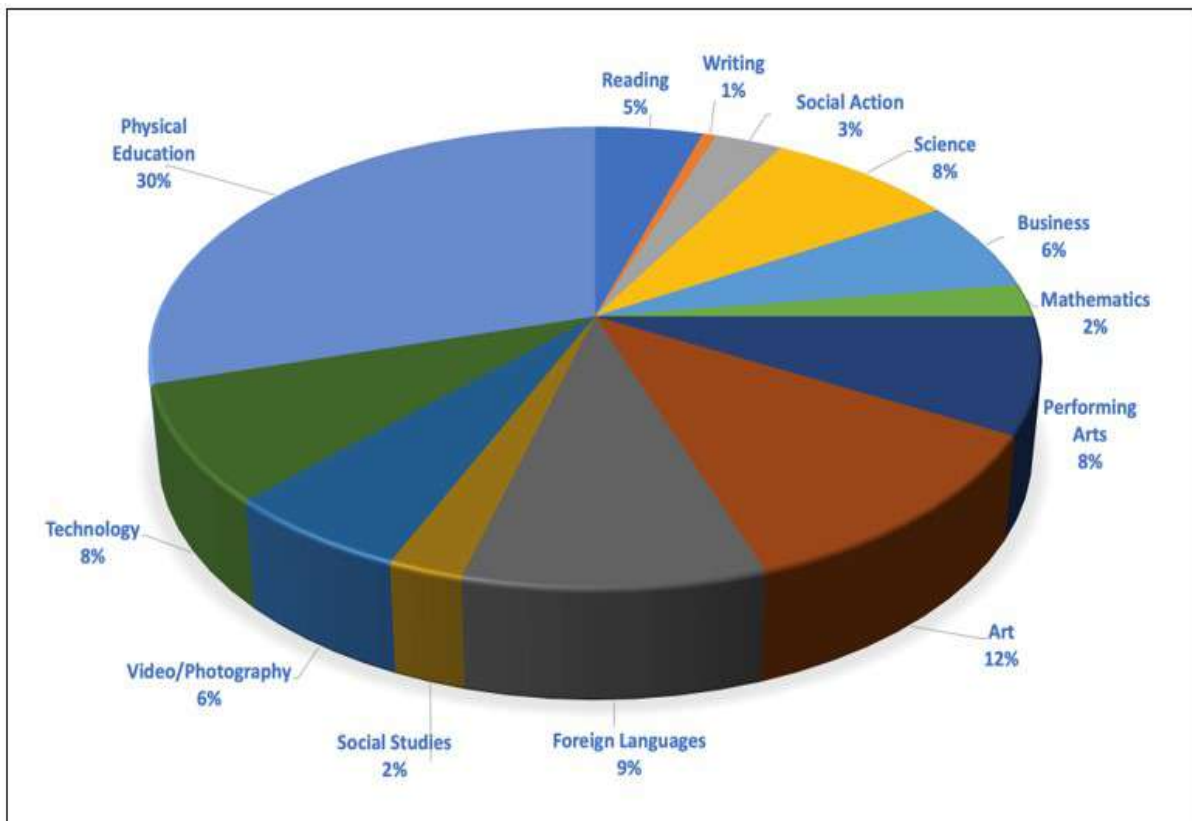


**Figure 2:** Steps in the implementation process.

### ***Six steps to implement enrichment clusters***

Enrichment clusters provide students with valuable opportunities to explore their individual interests and nurture their talents. A key feature of enrichment clusters is their non-graded nature: students come together based on shared interests and collaborate to create a shared product or service. Given that these common interests form the foundation for interest grouping in enrichment clusters, assessing and understanding students' interests has been given a high priority to effectively tailor and structure these clusters.

In the first step, all students' interests were assessed, using the Renzulli Learner System, which provided a comprehensive survey of students' interests, learning styles, and modes of expression. In the figure below is summary of all students' interests.



**Figure 3:** Summary of students' interests in 2022-23.

Step 2 included identifying a time, schedule, and place for enrichment clusters to be implemented. These took place from March to May, with a weekly duration of two hours. Step 3 included the identification of all facilitators of the Enrichment Clusters, and in Step 4, they were provided with a brief training course to explain the fundamental principles of the model. In Step 5, students were registered by placing them in clusters of their choice in which they had a personal interest. Step 6 included a celebration of all Enrichment Cluster successes in an event designed for students to showcase and share their products and services with an authentic audience.

### ***Enrichment clusters arranged in three years***

As stated by the authors, the SEM goal is that “schools should be places for talent development” (Renzulli & Reis, 2014). Students enrolled in the clusters they were interested in, as they perceived clusters offered them the opportunities to explore interest areas that are not typically covered in the regular school curriculum. These hands-on activities are more dynamic compared to the passive learning often associated with traditional classroom lessons. Moreover, participating in enrichment clusters enabled them to discover their classmates' interests and talents that many were previously unaware of. The titles of clusters offered during the three years are included below.



Figure 4: School year 2020-21: 15 enrichment clusters.

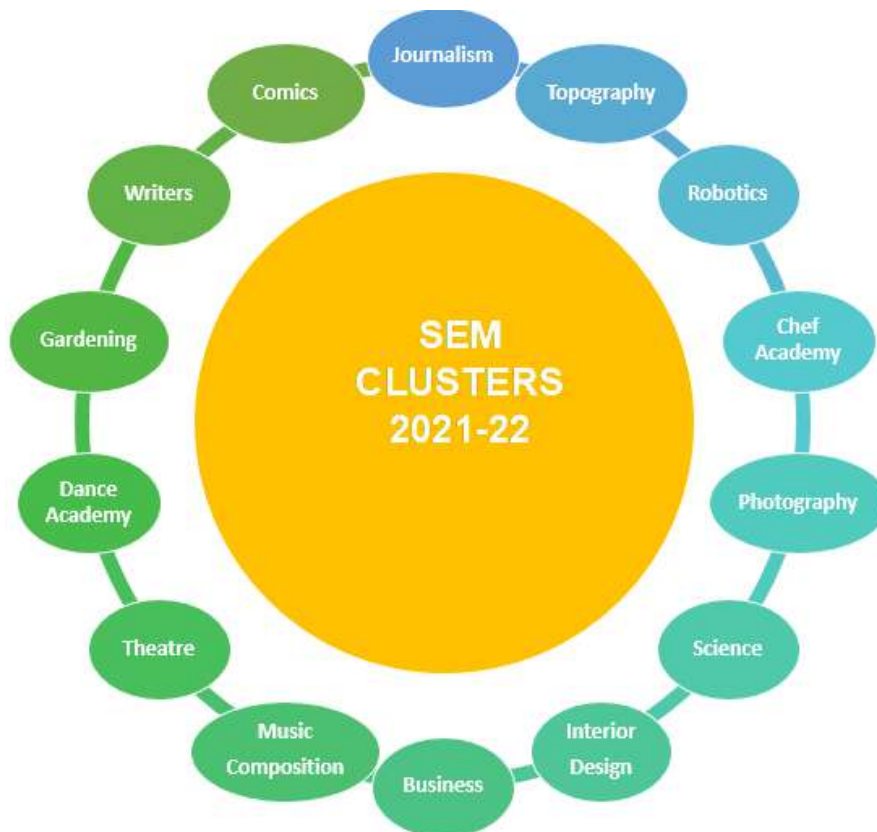


Figure 5: 14 Enrichment clusters in the school year 2021-22.





**Figure 6:** 15 Enrichment clusters in the school year 2022-23.

### **Curriculum Compacting**

Curriculum compacting is one of the major service delivery practices in the SEM. This differentiation strategy can be used in any curricular area and at any grade level to make appropriate curricular adjustments for highly able students. This practical differentiation tool provides teachers the possibility to streamline the grade level curriculum for high-potential students to enable time for more challenging and interesting work. Teachers at Salesiani school were specifically trained to first define the goals and outcomes of a teaching unit, secondly to determine and document the students who already mastered most or all or most learning outcomes, and finally to provide replacement strategies for material already mastered, making a productive use of the student’s time. For example, the math teacher designed highly challenging and interesting math activities for a mathematically highly able student who experienced boredom in the regular math class and wished to be accelerated and enriched in his strength area.

### **Professional responsibilities and ethical commitments towards giftedness**

The SEM model has been implemented in hundreds of school districts across the USA and around the world and has demonstrated effectiveness under widely differing socioeconomic levels and program organization patterns (Reis & Peters, 2020). Moreover, research in the research literature show highly favorable results for underachieving gifted students when the Three Ring Conception of Giftedness and the Enrichment Triad Model are used as a direct intervention for counteracting underachievement (Reis & Peters, 2020). Italy has one of the highest dropout rates in Europe, according to the CENSIS (2022) 56<sup>th</sup> Report on the social situation of the country. The collective body of related research shows a longstanding gap between the schools in the North and in the South of the country. Despite some improvements in school dropout rates recorded in recent years, much remains to be done. In Italy, an average of 26% of students fail to achieve their high school diploma, with maximum peaks of 30.7% in technical institutes. In the South, 31.9% of young people aged between 18 and 24 do not either study in school or work, which puts them at risk of joining organized crime.

The implementation of the SEM may hold the potential to address and reverse the underachievement of many high potential and gifted students due to the absence of a differentiated curriculum tailored to their educational needs. The SEM focuses on personalized and inclusive education, contributing to higher engagement of all students, offering them opportunities to explore and develop their talents, ultimately leading to improved academic outcomes and reducing dropout rates (Reis & Peters, 2020). The SEM focus is on offering equitable enrichment opportunities to all children. Due to the absence of a national identification system for gifted and talented students, only a small number of gifted students are officially recognized as such. Considering that the Italian school system has made extraordinary efforts to guarantee equity to students with various types of disabilities, the SEM may help to guarantee educational opportunities to 2e and highly able students who until now, constitute an underrepresented and under-served populations. Aptitude testing, commonly used for identification, can be costly, and not all Italian families have the financial means to seek private counseling. As a result, ensuring equity in the identification of highly able students becomes a priority. In this context, The Renzulli Rating Scales can serve as valuable instruments for screening students, and their identification may help teacher serve them, either differentiating their curriculum, providing enrichment opportunities, as well as acceleration within self-contained classrooms. These opportunities are essential for highly able students, addressing the need for a more inclusive and equitable approach to gifted education. Indeed, teacher rating scales have been commonly used to identify students for gifted services for decades, including students from underrepresented populations (Peters & Gentry, 2012), low socioeconomic groups (Beecher & Sweeny, 2008; Reis & Morales-Taylor, 2010), and from rural, low education communities (Azano et al., 2017).

Finally, the work to implement SEM schools in Italy underscores the potential for change when adequate gifted and talented (G&T) training and professional development is provided to teachers, even in the absence of national norms and guidelines on gifted education. In this context, the responsibility of an SEM specialist is to extend the use of the SEM by inviting educators to visit Salesiani SEM school. Over the past three years, Salesiani school in Varese has welcomed numerous groups of Italian teachers, including teachers and administrators from abroad, who had the chance to observe how enrichment programs are organized.

## Impact of the SEM implementation on creativity

The SEM implementation had a positive impact on the enhancement of enrichment and the development of creativity in the school. Creativity holds an important place in education, career development, and is a highly valued trait sought by employers in various fields. According to Forbes, creative thinking is a skill that is sorely needed in all professions and tapping into and building one's creative thinking skills is an absolute necessity. As the World Economic Forum's Future of Jobs Survey (2023) reported, approximately 73% of surveyed organizations rank creative thinking skills as top priority in the future. The SEM promotes educational environments in which creative thinking skills are encouraged and developed, contributing to a growth mindset culture that enable continuous improvement. As Dweck (1999) demonstrated, students who believe their abilities are malleable and can be improved with dedicated effort are more likely to attempt challenging tasks and persevere more in face of difficulties than students who believe that abilities are innate. This is also true for creativity, and the ultimate goal of SEM programs is to foster *creative productive giftedness*.

Within the context of SEM activities, one of the principal objectives is to foster students' creativity. The positive outcomes resulting from the implementation of SEM in this school were visible, as all clusters produced original products that were shared with an authentic audience, employing the approach, tools, and techniques of young investigators. Assessing creative ability can often be a costly and time-consuming process, as many widely used assessment tools are paper-based and require manual scoring. In this implementation of creativity levels at this Salesiani School, pre and post creativity scores were examined using the CTC, which calculated average and deviation standard scores. To investigate the effectiveness of the Schoolwide Enrichment Method pedagogy with the implementation of Enrichment Clusters on student's Creativity, we used the CTC in the RLS as a pre and post assessment of creativity investigating the use of Renzulli Learning and enrichment clusters.

The CTC is a web-based assessment tool designed to evaluate creative potential in students. It measures four key aspects of creativity: fluency, flexibility, originality, and elaboration. This digital format offers several advantages over traditional paper-and-pencil creativity assessments. First, the CTC addresses the limitations of cost and time associated with conventional creativity evaluations. Many existing instruments require manual scoring, making them resource-intensive for schools. The CTC's online platform streamlines administration and scoring, reducing costs and facilitating wider implementation. Second, the CTC eliminates language barriers by employing non-verbal stimuli, making it suitable for students with diverse backgrounds and linguistic abilities. Additionally, the web-based format minimizes technological requirements, requiring only basic internet access and a user-friendly interface. Traditional methods of identifying gifted students often overlook individuals from low socio-economic backgrounds. These methods may rely on standardized tests that can be culturally biased or influenced by educational disparities. The CTC addresses this equity gap by offering a culturally neutral assessment that can uncover hidden talents in a broader student population. In conclusion, the CTC emerges as a promising tool for educators seeking to identify and nurture creative potential in students. Its digital format, cost-effectiveness, and non-verbal nature position it as a valuable addition to gifted and talented programming, particularly for promoting inclusivity within diverse student populations.

Students participated for approximately one academic year ( $381 \pm 54$  day). The total population of students who participated the study was 154 in grades 6, 7, and 8. The mean time difference between the first and the second test was slightly more than one year. In Table 2, the mean creativity percentiles in each dimension of creativity included in the test is reported, as is an overall creativity score of the students in the SEM Italy group.

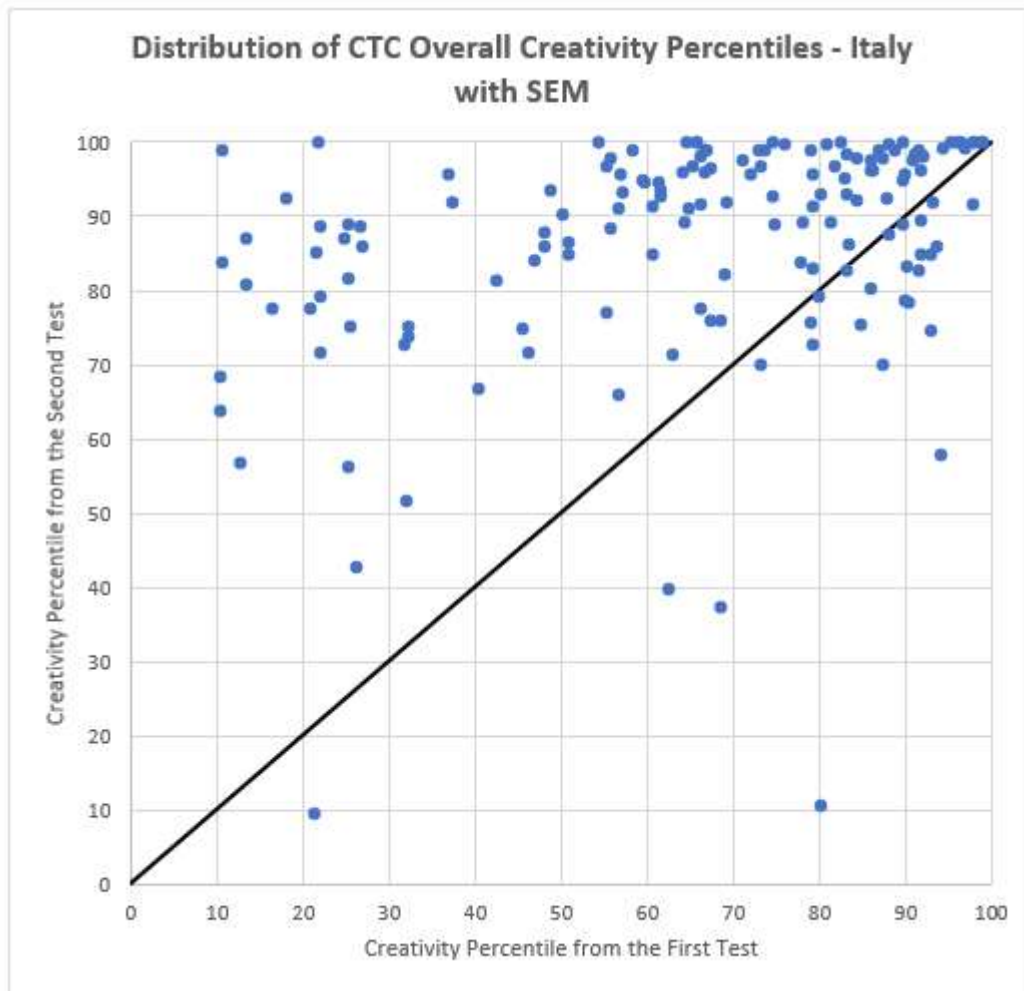
**Table 2:** Mean creativity percentiles in each dimension of creativity.

Italy SEM	Fluency percentile	Originality percentile	Elaboration percentile	Flexibility percentile	Creativity percentile
<b>First Test Mean</b>	59	56	48	74	65
<b>First Test StDev</b>	30	31	32	28	25
<b>Second Test Mean</b>	86	74	82	93	86
<b>Second Test StDev</b>	20	26	21	16	15

All four reported creativity dimensions of creativity (fluency, flexibility, originality and elaboration) and the overall creativity percentiles increased significantly in the SEM group. The mean fluency percentile of the students increased from the 59<sup>th</sup> percentile to the 86<sup>th</sup> percentile, a 0.9 standard deviation increase. The mean originality increased from the 56<sup>th</sup> percentile to the 74<sup>th</sup> percentile, an 0.6 standard deviation increase. The mean elaboration increased from the 48<sup>th</sup> percentile to the 82<sup>nd</sup> percentile, a highly significant 1 standard deviation increase. The mean flexibility percentile increased from the 74<sup>th</sup> percentile to the 93<sup>rd</sup> percentile, a 0.7 standard deviation increase. And finally, the overall Creativity percentile increased from the 65<sup>th</sup> percentile to the 86<sup>th</sup> percentile, an 0.8 standard deviation increase.

The development of creativity in the Italy SEM group is displayed in the following graph. As is depicted below, the majority of the students were above the  $x=y$  diagonal line, indicating an increase in their overall creativity scores.

Although a control group was not available in Italy, we were able to access the anonymized data of 104 students from the United States that have been given the test twice in the same time frame, about a year apart. The majority of the students are from New Jersey and Texas, and with some students from Utah, Pennsylvania, and Ohio. These students did not have access to the SEM pedagogy and continued their regular school curriculums.



**Figure 7:** Distribution of CTC overall creativity percentiles in the Italian SEM school.

The following table summarizes the mean creativity percentiles in each creativity dimension and an overall creativity score of the students in the United States without a SEM pedagogy.

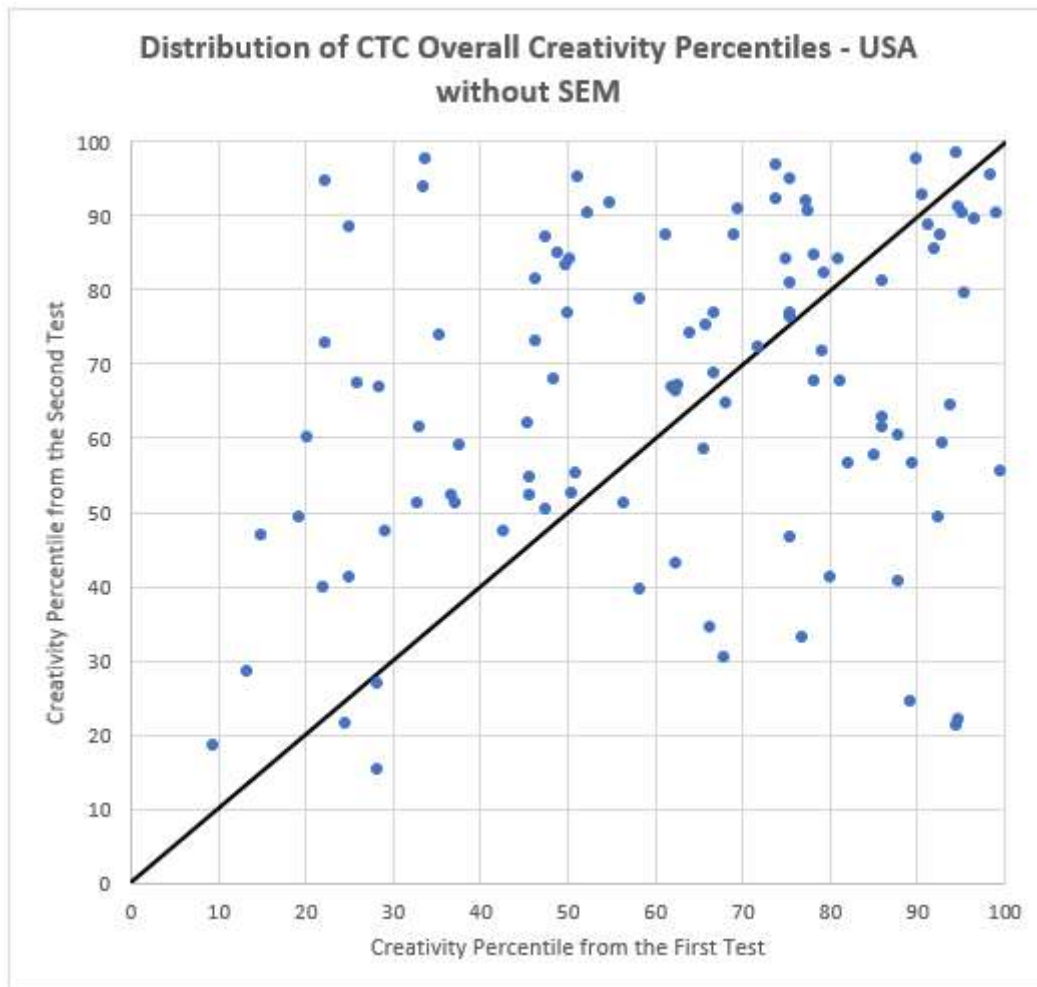
**Table 3:** Mean creativity percentiles in US Schools Sample without using SEM pedagogy

American not participating in SEM	Fluency percentile	Originality percentile	Elaboration percentile	Flexibility percentile	Creativity percentile
First Test Mean	59	55	48	67	63
First Test StDev	29	30	29	30	25
Second Test Mean	55	66	50	71	67
Second Test StDev	28	26	28	27	21

As summarized on the table above, there is no significant discernible change in the creativity dimensions in the group without SEM pedagogy, with a slight decrease in the Fluency percentile.

To view the individual change of creativity percentiles in the USA without SEM group, please refer to the following graph. As can be seen on the graph below, the students are distributed almost equally along the  $x=y$  diagonal line indicating that there is no discernible shift between the first and second test in their overall creativity scores. While some students increased their overall creativity percentiles, other students decreased their percentiles during the year.

This data suggests that implementing the SEM has positive impact on creativity, as measured by this assessment, for students participating in an SEM program in this school.



**Figure 8:** Distribution of CTC overall creativity percentiles in US sample without SEM

### ***Project Impact on Students' Motivation***

The core of the Schoolwide Enrichment Model is the identification and nurturance of student interests and creativity, as talent flows from interest development (Renzulli & Reis, 2014). All students can develop interests and in some students, interests become the path to talent development. During this three-year implementation, all students in the first Italian SEM school become more excited and engaged in what they were learning as they freely choose to participate in activities that align with their personal interests. It was gratifying for both teachers and parents to discover how the participation to enrichment activities served as a hook to keep engaged some high achieving and talented students who experienced boredom during some traditional schooltime. Enrichment clusters also provided all students at Salesiani School opportunities to discover and explore *their* natural talents and abilities, helping them to find a niche on which to build a successful school path and hopefully career in the future. Clusters may also help to prevent some of the traditional behaviors that prevent teenager from living up to their potential. For example, one student discovered a passion for classical music he was not aware of, and in just three years he learned to play both piano and violin at a proficiency level that allowed him to participate in important public concerts and then possibly enroll in a prestigious conservatory. Other students demonstrated to have a particular attitude in performing arts cultivating their passion for drama even outside the classroom. A 6<sup>th</sup> grade student enrolled in a photography cluster learned that he possessed an eye for photography and also came to realize that photography is a powerful form of visual communication that helped him give voice to his emotions. This intrinsic motivation and self-directed choice significantly contributed to the success and effectiveness of the SEM at Salesiani school. The research shows that when enrichment is working well, students not only like school better, but also show improvements in school achievement (Reis &

Peters, 2020; Reis & Renzulli, 2003; Renzulli & Reis, 2014). Thus, in this school, the SEM pedagogy appears to suggest that reversing the underachieving process may be possible.

### ***Discussion of the SEM project impact on students, faculty, and community***

One of the significant benefits of SEM Enrichment activities was that Salesiani Middle School students were exposed to a wide array of interests and subject areas that may not typically be covered in the regular curriculum. This exposure provides a valuable orientation service, enabling students to explore and discover subjects that could significantly influence their academic and professional choices in the future. The Schoolwide Enrichment Model was designed to address some of the challenges teachers face in overstructured learning environments and the many outside regulations that have been imposed on them. (Renzulli & Reis, 2014; Renzulli et al., 2021). It offers an “infusion-based approach” that examines the regular curriculum and explores opportunities and strategies to inject enrichment experiences into all prescribed topics (Renzulli & Reis, 2014; Renzulli et al., 2021). But unlike many G&T theories, the SEM was capable of translating theory into practice, providing educators with highly successful best practices and tools.

There are no quick fixes or easy formulas for creating schools based on a talent development philosophy, so flexibility was crucial to ensure the success of the SEM program because no predefined plan or set of procedures can accommodate the diverse variations that exist at the local school level. Not all SEM schools are alike and although SEM offers general guidance to accomplish an agreed upon mission and set of objectives, the specific activities educators at Salesiani school choose to implement their program, ultimately crafted their own SEM customized programming model.

The SEM includes a RLS toolkit that empowers teachers to provide more personalized and enriched educational experiences. Given that Italian teachers may not be aware how to differentiate instruction for gifted learners, access to the extensive database of 50,000 enrichment activities within the RLS was highly engaging, enriching the highly prescriptive material to meet the unique needs and interests of their gifted students. The implementation of the SEM at Salesiani School demonstrates its ability to foster positive attitudes toward special programming for gifted students within the Italian community. It also brings about positive changes in attitudes among teachers, students, and parents regarding gifted and talented education.

The SEM activities extend beyond the classroom and actively involve the community, enlisting mentors and facilitators who not only share their passion with students but also bring their real-world expertise and tools into the learning environment. This educational process creates a positive osmosis, promoting the development of an educational and educating community that encompasses families, schools, and the broader community, profoundly impacting student success. This collaborative approach contributed to the building of a stronger and more sustainable society that honors cultural diversity and promotes mutual respect.

As a result of SEM success at Salesiani School, the SEM is gaining popularity in Italy. More and more teachers and principals are showing interest in the model. In September 2023, the first Bilingual Elementary and Middle School in Milan adopted the SEM. The main promise of this budding field of teaching and learning in Italy will hopefully urge Italian institutions to promote a school reform that will enable Italian educators to meet the educational needs of gifted learners and to build a more inclusive and equitable school system.

### **Discussion of the future of the SEM and conclusion**

The three-year experience underscores the challenges posed by the absence of state regulations on talent development programs, which may hinder efforts to bring about change in Italian schools. A significant issue that emerged during the implementation process was the general lack of understanding of the goal of gifted and talented Education. The community in general considers that human and financial resources should be primarily directed toward supporting disabled students. As a result, Salesiani SEM school encountered difficulties in finding mentors willing to volunteer to offer



their time and expertise to enrich the school experience of students. This points to the need for greater awareness and recognition of the value of gifted education and talent development in the Italian education system and society at large.

The scarcity of professional training in gifted education is another urgent concern in Italy. With this respect, the Salesiani School took proactive steps to be at the forefront of education as the first author provided its teachers with training in gifted and talented education and on the Schoolwide Enrichment Model. Furthermore, Salesiani School recognized the need of a dedicated professional figure and all enrichment activities. This commitment to training and specialized guidance demonstrates the school's dedication to foster students' talent development and meeting the unique needs of gifted students within the Italian educational context. With this respect, a specialist in gifted education plays a key role in implementing a gifted and talented model, adhering to recommended structures and processes. Indeed, implementation fidelity is a potential moderator of intended benefits of any educational strategy (Brigandi, 2019).

The successful SEM implementation at Salesiani school suggests that once the concept of talent development becomes more widely accepted and recognized, several positive outcomes ensue. Students can become more enthusiastic and engaged in their learning, parents discover increased opportunities for involvement in various aspects of their children's education, teachers begin to tap into a wider array of resources to enrich their traditional teaching methods not only in their enrichment clusters, but also in their regular curricular classes. Administrators also began to make decisions that have a positive impact on learning outcomes, aligning with SEM pedagogy.

This enrichment educational journey began five years ago and achieved a series of educational innovations focused on developing teaching and educational strategies and methodologies for the identification and talent development of students with high cognitive potential. In order to continue this work, additional training and professional development for teachers are needed, as is making use of the interventions of specialists of national and international standing. This SEM implementation holds significant value, as it can result in a wave of innovation that can potentially result in positive changes in the Italian educational system. If implemented, the SEM can provide the necessary resources, encouragement, and opportunities for Italy's talented students and to fully develop their potential.

We hope this research may encourage educators in Italy and other European countries to adopt a global talent strategy, bringing a fresh impetus to the SEM talent development approach that may help identify and develop students' gifts and talents by elaborating and implementing comprehensive enrichment and talent development strategies that will contribute to growth, equity and excellence, leaving no student or country behind.

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**Paola Maraschi**, graduated in Italian Literature at the Catholic University of the Sacred Heart in Milan in 1992. Since the nineties, she has continued to pursue her training on learning disabilities and inclusion. In 2000 she obtained the degree to teach Italian and Latin in Italian Schools. She taught Italian and Latin for more than twenty years.

In 2013 she became principal at the Salesian school A.T. Maroni in Varese where in 2019 she also took on the role of director of the Salesian Opera. As principal at the Salesian school, over the years, has been responsible for innovating the school by introducing the most updated teaching

methodologies, and when she realized the potentiality of the SEM pedagogy, she undertook the 5-year path to become the first SEM school in Italy under the guidance of Dr Milan.

# Teaching Strategies and the Role of Creativity in Gifted Education: Perceptions of Students, Families, and Educational Professionals

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## Abstract

The role of creativity in teaching gifted children is essential for gifted students to develop their high abilities and creative potential. Teaching and fostering creativity and creative thinking within other academic domains can provide opportunities for excellence and achievement within students' talent development and interests. This manuscript aims to highlight research participants' perceptions of teaching strategies and the importance of creativity in the development of gifted students. These perceptions were captured utilizing a qualitative, case-study design approach whereby the data was collected through semi-structured interviews and observations, and these data were analyzed through an exploratory analysis approach. Findings revealed that the perceptions of the selected participants (three gifted students, two mothers, five teachers, two principals, and one educator) are in line with the recommendations of experts in the field of creativity and giftedness. Implications for educators are discussed, including creating an environment that is responsive to the needs of gifted students and their creativity and cultivating a psychologically safe school space, that promotes the development of creative potential.

**Keywords:** Gifted; creativity; talent development; teaching strategies.

## Introduction

From a historical context, many gifted and talented children remain unidentified and or underserved, preventing them from fully developing their high abilities and talents (Ford et al., 2018; Gagne & Gagnier, 2018; Kane & Silverman, 2014; Pfeiffer, 2015, 2016; Piske & Kane, 2020; Renzulli, 2003, 2016). A critical component of gifted programming is the services provided to gifted children.

The more comprehensive definitions (Kaufman & Sternberg, 2008) consider several domains beyond cognitive capacity in their components, including creativity, leadership, motivation, artistic and interpersonal skills, emotional processes, and variables associated with personality and social contexts. However, one of the most important challenges in this thematic is a disproportionately great emphasis on academic giftedness's cognitive facet. Consequently, other aspects, like cognitive ones, have been valued (Jones et al., 2016). Within this model, creativity has contributed, in a significant way, to the broader view of giftedness (Angela & Caterina, 2020; Kaufman et al., 2012; Lubart et al., 2019; Piske et al., 2016a; Sorrentino, 2019).

Creativity has been defined as the interaction between aptitude, process, and environment, through which an individual produces a product that is perceived, within a social context, as new and valuable (Plucker et al., 2018). It is considered a skill present in all people, at least as a potential, which can manifest itself at different levels and domains, being understood as a multidimensional

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construct (Kaufman & Beghetto, 2009), being linked to better physical health, well-being, resilience, and motivation (Paik & Gozali, 2020).

A positive contribution of creativity to academic and social outcomes has been shown in the education context. In response, several countries have emphasized the development of students' creative potential in their education policies. Consequently, scholars, educators, and administrators must be capable of understanding, evaluating, and developing creativity in educational settings (Hernández-Torrano & Ibrayeva, 2020). The Partnership for 21st Century Skills (P21), the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), and Assessment and Teaching for 21st Century Skills (ATCS) have attempted to prepare students for the future, considering that creativity plays a significant role in individual 21st century skills (Arabaci & Baki, 2022).

In view of this characteristic's relevance for this phenomenon, it is noted that it has been included in several giftedness theoretical models. In Gagné's Differentiated Appropriation and Talent Model, creativity is understood as one of the domains of endowment or talent (Gagné, 2013), Sternberg's Triarchic Theory of Intelligence recognizes the existence of creative type intelligence (Kolligian & Sternberg, 1987; Sternberg, 2003, 2005), in Renzulli's Conception of the Three Rings, creativity is highlighted as one of the three main components (Renzulli, 2012, 2014). In this model, specifically, creativity represents a specific type of giftedness: creative-productive, which is associated with curiosity, problem-solving, and characteristics of creative thinking, oriented to a real problem (Pfeiffer, 2013).

The importance of the presence of creativity in the definitions of giftedness and, consequently, in the processes of identifying these behaviors, can be realized, and justified. Kaufman et al. (2012) state that creativity tests can contribute to a deeper understanding of the characteristics of gifted individuals, and should be included in general evaluation processes of this population. However, identifying students with creative giftedness continues to face many challenges. Among them, the still small number of institutions that include creativity in their definitions of giftedness, includes their evaluation processes (Ridgle et al., 2020).

To what extent does the program offer adequate services can be measured by the perception and satisfaction of its stakeholders. In this sense, this paper sought to investigate the perceptions of gifted students, the families and teachers of gifted students, principals/directors, and an educator. To clearly understand their perception of the services offered, the researcher considered questions regarding teaching strategies and the role of creativity in these gifted students' education.

We know that the creativity development is critical in a child's education (Amabile, 2018; Besancon & Lubart, 2008; Plucker et al., 2018; Renzulli, 2003; Renzulli & Reis, 2017; Robinson, 2013). Many scholars also consider creativity an essential aspect in the education of gifted students (Amabile, 2018; Kane, 2016; Kane & Silverman, 2014; Plucker et al., 2018). We also know some creativity characteristics, related to personality traits such as nonconformity, questioning attitude, curiosity, divergence from the traditional, breaking of rules, willingness to take risks, and persistence (McCrae, 1987; Runco, 1993) can be perceived negatively by teachers and peers in the academic classroom setting (Collins, 2020; Collins et al. 2020; Gross, 2014, 2016; Peterson, 2014; Piechowski, 2014). As a result, it is common that the gifted students who show these creative characteristics can be viewed as problem students for teachers.

Gifted experts have long proclaimed that adequate and appropriate gifted programming and services includes innovative teaching that instills curiosity and desire to learn as well as fosters creativity (Clark, 2002; Csikszentmihalyi, 1996, 1998, 1999, 2007; Renzulli, 2003; Torrance, 1984; Thompson & Pfeiffer, 2020; Winebrenner, 2001). Fostering creativity should be intrinsically related to the way teachers prepare their curriculum, their teaching strategies, and what experiential learning opportunities they provide their students. However, there remain teachers who not only are limited to standardized teaching, but who also have difficulties determining and nurturing the giftedness of their



students (Kane, 2018; Pfeiffer, 2016; Winebrenner, 2001). These behaviors can inhibit the development of the gifted students' creativity, leaving them feeling bored and frustrated.

Best practices for gifted educational professionals suggest that teaching and talent development of these students must consider the culture, strengths and their interests (Collins & Kendricks, 2021; Ford et al., 2018, 2021; National Association for Gifted Children [NAGC], 2019). In this way, the learning process can allow students to make meaning and deep connections with the content. Moreover, Torrance (1962) warned cultural discontinuity in learning also inhibits creativity, which negatively impacts academic development. At a minimum, beginner and advanced gifted educator professionals must have a thorough knowledge and skillset to differentiate activities, nurture self-awareness, autonomy, and global perspective (NAGC, 2019). Khan et al. (2019) proported that teaching strategies should encompass modalities that address their students' preferred learning styles such as visual, auditory, and kinesthetic with provocative multimedia, creative speech and explanations, besides experiential activities. These strategies can pique gifted students' curiosity, instigate their desire to learn, attract their attention, and generate an extensive repertoire in the search and deepening of knowledge. Class activities must be linked to students' educational needs and must be meaningful according to their abilities. Teaching based on self-knowledge and knowledge of reality and the world will certainly expand both teachers and students' specific and general skills.

Meaningful and innovative teaching is based on the principle of adapting educational practices to students' abilities. Many gifted education specialists point out that there are several behaviors of gifted students that can signal their lack of interest in the teaching offered (Clark, 2002; Gross, 2014, 2016; Kane, 2016, 2018; Peterson, 2014; Pfeiffer, 2016; Piechowski, 2014; Piske, 2020; Piske et al., 2020a; Piske & Stoltz, 2021; Winebrenner, 2001). The following Table provides a synthesis of some of the behaviors that gifted students may exhibit as a result of non-responsive and inappropriate education, as highlighted in their research:

**Table 1:** Reported Research of Gifted Student Behavior and Learner Outcomes of Students Who Lack Interest in Teaching Strategies/ Curriculum in School.

Student Behavior	Learning Outcomes
Students feel like they already know about a specific topic, skill, or concept and do not feel the need for practice as part of talent development	Unfinished work; under-developed, varied interests; inability to narrow interest, topics.
Students become insensitive to teachers and others' attitudes and perceptions, increasing their feeling of need to self-learn and perfectionism	Perfectionists' traits cultivate a fear of failure, unfinished work, procrastination, or failure to perform school tasks; students are less likely to take academic risks.
Students may question the suitability of classroom activities for their needs even though they will work diligently and well on high-interest topics	To carry out a task without much dedication.
Students suffer from boredom or the feeling that classroom work is too easy or below your expectations.	Behavioral problems, disengagement, and lack of focus/ or distracted focus.
Students exhibit heightened sensitivity about various everyday situations.	Emotional outbursts or periods of gifted abstinence.
Unsuccessful group work can generate negative feelings for students, compelling them to feel responsible for group's work.	Preference to perform tasks alone and further inhibiting social and group dynamic skill development; student ideas misinterpreted or not appreciated by the group.

These are just some situations that create difficulties for gifted students in their personal development and interpersonal relationships during their school life. For this reason, gifted education professionals and other stakeholders must reflect on their work, researching, and always looking for new teaching strategies to serve the gifted students in more creatively and engaging ways.

## The benefits of nurturing creativity

Considered as a differential (Lins & Miyata, 2008), creativity has aroused the interest of the scientific community in recent decades (Nakano, 2018), especially with regard to its development. In general, creative development programs are based on the hypothesis that this skill encompasses a set of skills that can be learned or developed through teaching and practice (Sánchez et al., 2002).

These principles can be applied to giftedness. Gifted students can experience frustration daily during classes when they are underserved, which can lead to a lack of interest in attending school. Much of the time at school, students learn in rote ways, which can trigger boredom and disengagement that can further social isolation and other social and emotional difficulties (Piske & Stoltz, 2021). These are instances when creativity and creative thinking become even more important in the teaching-learning process, especially for gifted students who are thirsty for new knowledge and willing to take academic risks as part of their talent development and maximize their potential. Teaching-learning strategies need to be linked to innovative teaching that gives gifted students the opportunity to be autonomous, use creativity and imagination, and explore topics in their areas of interest (Plucker et al., 2018; Renzulli, 2016).

According to Vantassel-Baska (2016), creative potential requires a harmonious confluence of variables to support its development. In practical life applications, this phenomenon can be linked to finding those activities that help us focus, help us learn, and help us develop our humanity and potential. Realizing and maximizing creative potential, it seems, can help in many ways when approached with an attitude of commitment, curiosity, and affection (Vantassel-Baska et al., 2009). Based on these benefits, this paper aimed to understand the perception of gifted students, families, and educational professionals about:

- (1) teaching strategies employed in gifted education and programming;
- (2) the value and importance of creativity in the development of gifted students; and,
- (3) the role of creativity skill development in teaching strategies designed to develop gifted students within gifted education.

## Method

This researcher sought to investigate the perceptions of gifted students, their families, their teachers, school's principals/directors, and an educator regarding teaching strategies and the role of creativity in gifted students' education. The research was conducted in stages: (1) the approval of the research by the Municipal Secretary of a Brazilian municipality, (2) the invitation to supplied school contacts, (3) the researcher's visit to the school/field to present the project, (4) the meeting with the participants to present the research and sign the consent terms, (5) the data collected, (6) reported findings and analysis of the data.

The research project was filed and approved by the Head of the Municipal Secretary of Education office and the person in charge of the Coordination for Assistance to Special Needs. After authorization to start the research, invitational contact by telephone was made with the schools that the person in charge of Coordination had listed for Assistance to Special Needs. The management team from School A and School B accepted the invitation to participate. The researcher then provided appropriate authorization documents and informed the principals of the research data collection procedures. They signed all documents in agreement. Oral explanation and written consent forms for all school volunteers were provided and signed their agreement to participate.

### ***Participant Selection process***

The goal for the research was to include a group of individuals that were representative of critical gifted stakeholders – gifted students, teachers of gifted students, family members of gifted students, administrators of schools with gifted programs, and educators. Invitations to participate and the research was carried out in the public school system of a municipality in the Brazilian state of Paraná. The families and all of the teachers of gifted students were invited to participate in this research, but not all had the time available. Those meeting the criteria of gifted stakeholder responded and volunteered to participate based on availability for the set interview dates; these same volunteers were observed performing duties and/or participation in gifted related programming tasks. Volunteers were represented from two schools in the district (pseudonyms, School A and School B).

### ***Participants***

Participants from School A included one gifted student, one mother, four teachers, one educator, and one principal/director. Participants for School B included two gifted students, one mother, one teacher and one principal/director for a total of 13 participants. When introducing the participants, care was taken to preserve their anonymity by modifying their names so that none of them were identified, in accordance with Brazilian ethical research principles (Brazilian Health National Council, 2012).

**Table 2:** Participant's Profiles

<b>Participant</b>	<b>School A</b>	<b>School B</b>
<b>The Gifted Student(S)</b>	Geraldo – 9 years old, 5th grader, identified giftedness in the academic area.	Valmir and Renato – both 10 years old, 5th graders, identified giftedness in the academic area.
<b>Gifted Students' Mothers</b>	Lúcia – Geraldo's mother, 29 years old, married, has completed high school	Luíza – the mother of Renato; 28 years old, has a college degree.
<b>Teachers Of Gifted Students</b>	Teacher Augusto – 35 years old Teacher Marcela – 27 years old Teacher Ana – 29 years old Teacher Márcia – 33 years (all have a higher education degree in Pedagogy)	Teacher Eva – teaches Renato; 28 years old, have worked in the municipal education system for over 10 years.
<b>Educator</b>	Neide – 37 years, more than 5 years working in School A	
<b>Principal(S)/ Director(S)</b>	Director Joelma – 42 years old, more than 5 years working in School A	Director Aurélia – 35 years old, have worked in the municipal education system for over 10 years.

It is important to note that all teachers who participated in this research will be able to teach gifted students in regular classrooms in the future, including students who took part in this study, even if they have no training in the area of giftedness. For this reason, it is essential to know the perception of these teachers related to teaching strategies for these students.

### ***Instrument***

The first author for this article conducted an investigation that included an interview and observations of select participants. A qualitative and research approach was employed using semi-structured interviews (see Appendix; Pharm & Pharm, 2021) and observations as data collection instruments from a total of 13 participants. This method allowed the researcher to highlight the subjective nature of perceptions when teachers are attending to the gifted child, their feelings and emotions, and their expectation in their own learning process.

Considering that semi-structured interviews allow a more spontaneous method in which the researcher asks some predetermined questions but also allow for other questions that do not necessarily have to be planned in advance as follow-up to further understand the participant's point of view (Creswel, 2009), seven predetermined open-ended questions was asked. The questions focused on the perception of curriculum and teaching strategies in the general development of gifted students,

the definition and role of creativity in the development of gifted students in a school setting, and the relationship between teaching strategies and creativity skill development of gifted students.

### ***Procedures***

Thirty-minute interviews and observations were conducted in one of the participating student's classrooms at Schools A and B. Observations were made in the same setting and date as the interviews aimed to observe the interactions of gifted children at school with their teachers and peers. Observations of the teacher and student behavior in the classroom were conducted to infer the attitudes of gifted children as a response to their interest in the curriculum and their reception to the teaching strategies offered.

Each research instrument sought to investigate teaching strategies aimed at these children and the importance of creativity during the teaching-learning process. The open-ended questions from the survey yielded open responses from research participant to allow for an exploratory approach to analyze the data and report the finding.

### ***Data analysis***

After data collection, a thorough and repeated reading of all the material collected was carried out for the categorical realization of the results based on content analysis proposed by Bardin (2011), a useful tool for interpreting the perceptions of social actors (Amado, 2017).

For the analysis, the participants' experiences and contexts were considered. According to Weiner (2011) and Minayo (2013), it is important to realize how the participants contribute meaning to the elements of their context. In this research, the elements highlighted were: (1) teaching strategies and (2) the development of gifted students' creativity. In this sense, there was an analytical and systematic path, to make objectification based on opinions, beliefs, values, representations, relationships, and human and social actions possible from the perspective of actors in intersubjectivity (Minayo, 2013; Weiner, 2011).

The students' responses to teaching strategies (e.g., activities that address the needs and interests of the gifted children), and their perceptions about the definition and importance of creativity during the teaching-learning process of gifted students (e.g., the creative benefits for gifted education) were carried out after reading the collected data. In the analysis of this study, the answers obtained based on the responses of the participants from Schools A and B in the interviews and the observations were compared.

## **Research findings**

The results of this research pointed to the participants' dissatisfaction, feelings of discontent, and the need for advances in gifted education. It is important to note that there were some questions that some participants chose not to answer, even though they were explained in detail by the researcher in case of questioning or doubt. Any discomfort was avoided, preserving a climate of harmony and respect.

### ***Participants' perceptions about teaching strategies in the teaching-learning process***

As for teaching strategies in the gifted learning process, participants, in general, believe that teaching mediation reflects the student's development in a meaningful way by preparing activities that address the needs and interests of this child. The strategies mentioned are quite varied and were grouped in three main points: (1) materials, (2) respect to student needs and learning styles, and (3) specific activities to be offered during the class. The first group of responses highlighted some materials that could facilitate the learning process and to keep the students motivated:

“Hardware and software, Informatics, robotics” (student Renato, School B).

“Some strategies would be: projects, robotics, deepening in mathematics, Portuguese, geography, history, arts etc.” (student Valmir, School B).

“More targeted classes would be needed in your area of giftedness with specific materials, increasingly stimulating your skills” (Teacher Marcela, School A).

The literature review indicated that principles of problematized teaching, professional games, simulations, group dynamics, and other innovations are increasingly being applied in different contexts in which creativity can be stimulated and developed considering its cultural expressions (Nakano & Wechsler, 2020). The use of these techniques, regardless of the program and its structure, has been emphasized as responsible for significant changes in attitude in participants in relation to the process of appropriating and producing knowledge, resulting in a greater sense of personal involvement and, therefore, a greater sense of creativity and motivation.

In this sense, it is important to consider that a necessary condition for the students' creative development involves the practice of creative teaching by the teacher, based on the use of varied and new procedures that are aimed at facilitating the students' learning and its meaningful meaning, and the use of multiple teaching strategies (Sierra et al., 2015).

Especially if we consider that not all children learn the same way, and that they have different abilities and skills. A second group of answers is based on this idea and represents the importance of respecting the specific needs and students' learning styles:

“After identifying the skills, I believe that the strengths should be analyzed and work on them persistently, for greater development of the child. There must be room and specific studies, very well-prepared teachers would also contribute a lot in the formation of the gifted student” (Luíza, mother of a gifted student, school B).

“We know that each student has a better learning style, some are more visual, others are more auditory. Thus, teaching strategies should be as varied as possible. These students should be encouraged to contribute to classes through their experiments, research, and discoveries” (Teacher Eva, school B).

“It is necessary to know the student well, his characteristics and needs to develop an action plan specific to him. I believe that exchange activities and relationship dynamics, as many gifted children have difficulties in relate to their peers” (Teacher Ana, school A).

“In addition to regular education, each specific student will benefit from a methodology or strategy depending on the need and area of giftedness. Strategies that address a greater number of sensory channels facilitate the learning of all students” (Educator Neide, school A).

“In resource rooms, students receive specific assistance according to the area of prominence, but in a regular room, teachers explore all areas of knowledge with activities that span all learning styles, offering something more in the case of students with high skills” (Principal Joelma, school A).

Another group of responses involved some activities that can stimulate students' skills. In this group, we can observe a sizeable diversity of suggestions, involving, for example, some strategies like challenging strategies, brainstorming, individual activities or stimulus for specific skills, like reasoning, problem solving, and logical reasoning. Interestingly, two suggestions involved aspects more related to intelligence than creativity (reasoning or logical reasoning). This is a common myth, that considers giftedness only as a presence of a high intelligence, and do not consider other possibilities.

“I believe that looking for challenging strategies, especially in areas where this student has greater ability” (Principal Aurélia, school B).

“Activities where the child can expose his ideas without limits, without direction, where he can create without worrying whether he is in the context or whether it is correct or wrong” (Lúcia, mother of student Geraldo, school A).

“I believe that activities that arouse the child's interest and creativity should be offered. Activities that require reasoning and reflections about problem situations” (Teacher Márcia, school A).

“I find important activities more focused on logical reasoning, which require a lot of thinking. More advanced individual activities for students with special needs” (Teacher Augusto, school A).

Several creative training programs have been developed in the educational context, making use of techniques and materials aimed at facilitating creative expression in the classroom. According to Gonçalves and Fleith (2015), in this context, the creative development presents as the main objective, the development of creative skills of teachers and students, the discussion of concepts related to creativity, the process of raising awareness of the elements present in the school environment, the knowledge about barriers that hinder the development and expression of creativity, as well as the presentation of creative problem solving techniques.

### ***Participants' perceptions about the importance of creativity in the teaching of gifted students***

Regarding the definition and importance of creativity in the education of gifted children, the participants adopted several concepts to define it. From the understanding of the interviewees, this attribute can be related to an intrinsic skill, imagination, specific ability, creation, innovation, invention, the expression of “divergent” thinking, among other issues. The following are examples of the interviewees' reports:

“Creativity is using your skills to create and innovate. All of this must be considered when we work with gifted students, as they often present very creative resolutions for different situations” (Teacher Marcela, school A).

“Creativity is the differentiated ability to solve challenging situations. Creativity is of paramount importance in the education of gifted people, because only then will it be possible to develop quality work and with the perspective of achieving the best results” (Teacher Ana, school A).

“Creativity is the expression of thoughts, it needs a lot of encouragement, materials for the composition of ideas, information about different techniques, opportunities to expose your thoughts. Letting any student create his ideas is to allow him to grow as a being in formation. The students gifted people need opportunities to demonstrate their creativity” (Principal Joelma, school A).

“I think the limit of creativity is imagination. It is important for the future of the gifted child” (Student Valmir, school B).

“It is the capacity for creation, imagination of something innovative. Another way of seeing the world. Usually, the gifted are very creative and need space in the school environment to expose all their creativity” (Teacher Eva, school B).

“Creativity is the ability to overcome challenges, to create strategies to overcome obstacles. This attribute is fundamental for the development not only of students with high skills, but of all students” (Principal Aurélia, school B).

All participants recognized the importance of the attribute in the education of gifted people that emphasizes that creativity generates the motivation to learn, freedom of expression, the skills to innovate, the autonomy to invent what is imagined, and overcoming the obstacles imposed by teaching in a standardized way.

“Creativity is related to activities where the child can expose his ideas without limits, without direction. Where he can create without worrying whether he is in the context or whether it is correct or wrong” (Lúcia, mother of student Geraldo, school A).

“It is creating activities, whether concrete or abstract, that benefit and arouse the interest of the gifted student. It is important to motivate him to always seek information more and more, in his field of knowledge” (Teacher Augusto, school A).

“Creativity is within everyone. It is up to the environment in which the person is and the experiences lived for him to be awakened. It is essential that creativity is awakened in education, including gifted ones” (Teacher Márcia, school A).

“I believe that the teacher who takes care of gifted children needs creativity to meet the student's needs. In addition, he needs to facilitate and stimulate the student's creativity. Creativity is the ability to create and innovate, to do differently what already exists and to create new things” (Educator Neide, school A).

“Creativity is when you see one thing and start to imagine another. It means a lot. Without creativity, there would be practically no gifted” (Student Renato, school B).

“It is to develop easily, to solve clearly. Demonstration of ease to perform tasks. It is necessary to work intensively to develop this creativity, bringing extremely positive results to the goals of the gifted student” (Luíza, mother of student Renato, school B).

As we can see, stimulating the student to practice behaviors associated with creativity, such as proposing new ideas, stimulating self-confidence and courage to try the new, valuing and recognizing original and alternative ideas for solving problems, are behaviors cited by Miranda et al. (2015) as pedagogical skills that the educator must present. Therefore, the value of creativity is recognized by teachers.

It is important to emphasize that the techniques and creative activities, by themselves, do not have direct effects on students without the involvement and commitment of the teacher who is considered a key part of the process (Ferrando et al., 2015). It is this professional who will make possible the adaptations in the methodology used in the classroom, as well as its adequacy. In addition to the development of creativity in students, it is also necessary to train teachers in relation to a series of competencies related to the construct, so that these professionals have knowledge about the tools that help in the recognition and development of creativity, in itself and in others - its students (Miranda et al., 2015).

## **Discussion**

According to the National Association for Gifted Children (NAGC, 2020), a world reference in gifted education, strategies for teaching the gifted should include a good curriculum and instructions for these students because it is practically impossible to develop the talent of a highly capable student with a bland curriculum and instruction. Like all students, talented students need rich learning experiences. That is, they need learning experiences organized by the main concepts and principles of a discipline, and not only by facts.

It is important to create teaching strategies that meet the individual needs of gifted students. Highly capable students often learn more quickly than others of their age. As a result, they typically need a faster pace of instruction than many of their same-age and same-grade peers. The activities offered to these students must necessarily be linked to their area(s) of interest. These strategies should propose a higher degree of difficulty than for many students their age. That is, a higher degree of difficulty requires more skills - more refined skills - applied to a higher level of sophistication.

Strategies for teaching gifted children require the full support from the teacher at all times. Gifted students succeed without much effort and learn more easily. Therefore, when a teacher presents a challenging task, students may feel threatened. As a result of this bias, it can be seen that students probably did not learn to study hard, take risks and make an effort. It is therefore up to the teacher of gifted students to understand this situation and, invite, persuade, and insist on risk, but in a way that supports the success and that motivates students.



The definition attributed to creativity by participants is in line with the most current research (Csikszentmihalyi, 1996, 1998, 1999, 2007; Kettler et al., 2018; Piske & Stoltz, 2021; Plucker et al., 2018; Renzulli, 2016; Sternberg, 2016; Thompson & Pfeiffer, 2020). All of these researchers recognize that creativity provides several benefits for the education of gifted students, among them: (1) intrinsic motivation, (2) autonomy, (3) divergent thinking, (4) freedom of expression, and (5) the courage to face new challenges. To foster creativity in the classroom, new and current suggestions by Thompson and Pfeiffer (2020) are listed below:

- Cultivate a psychologically safe space and create a rewarding environment for unusual questions, answers, and creations. In addition, try to limit formal and rigorous assessment procedures to purely creative activities.
- Ensure that the physical space of the classroom is safe, comfortable, interesting, and stimulating. Consider outdoor activities.
- Emphasize freedom during exercises focused on the imagination, allowing students to daydream, play, move, and determine their own design parameters, hoping to develop their passion for specific activities.
- Protect and prioritize time for creativity in the classroom. Perhaps even more important, think of ways to incorporate creativity-creating strategies into the curriculum and lesson plans.
- Make expectations of creativity explicit. Students do not always understand when and to what extent it is desirable to use their imagination.
- Explain about innovation-based work. Students need to understand that true achievement often stems from prolonged effort, in addition to trial and error.
- Provide many examples and models of artistic and creative works. Do not forget to include yourself as an excellent and accessible model of creative attitudes and products.
- Incorporate well-designed group work to help students develop ideas collectively. Successful groups usually have guidance and monitoring from a teacher and involve some sort of individual processing time.

It is up to the teacher to adapt the school space and classes according to the needs of the gifted students. This requires creative and engaging work where the teacher can promote activities that arouse students' curiosity and willingness to learn. For this, it is important for the teacher to ask questions in the classroom and determine the teacher's areas of interest. The teacher can then prepare and deepen their knowledge through courses, and training and specializations according to the educational needs of gifted children.

Kane (2016) highlighted important characteristics from the literature about effective teachers of gifted students. These characteristics can be categorized in terms of the following: (1) personal and social issues, (2) the issue of teaching strategies, (3) and the intellectual-cognitive issue. According to Kane, the personal/social characteristic of the gifted teacher is important so that they can: (1) identify and know the cognitive, social, and emotional needs of the gifted, (2) possess a sense of humor, (3) be excited, and (4) be culturally responsive.

As for teaching strategies and approaches, the gifted teacher needs to: (1) have skills to differentiate the curriculum for gifted students, (2) employ strategies that encourage higher-level thinking, (3) encourage students to be independent learners, (4) provide student-centered learning opportunities, (5) create a learning environment that does not threaten different ideas, and (6) be well organized.

The intellectual-cognitive characteristic of the teacher who works with gifted people must have in-depth knowledge of the subject of interest to their students. These teachers must: (1) have broad interests, usually literary and cultural, (2) preferably have above average intelligence, (3) be a lifelong learner and think creatively, and (4) possess excellent communication skills.

By enabling a conducive, encouraging, and favorable environment for creative expression, teachers could, as a consequence, expand this capacity in educational context and the results that can be associated: competence in seeing problems from different perspectives, generation of creative

solutions to the new problems to be faced, the presentation of resources to take advantage of it (including creative problem solving techniques and awareness of the factors that can inhibit creativity), the increase in the quantity and quality of creative ideas (Nakano & Wechsler, 2018). The results, when comparing students who took part in creativity programs and the control group, show greater motivation, improved academic and work performance, and the ability to generalize skills for different purposes and contexts than the giftedness group (Torrance & Myers, 1976; Treffinger, 2004).

## Conclusion

The perceptions of the participants in this research revealed that the teaching strategies necessary for the training of gifted students promotes the development of creativity. According to the participants in this study, teaching strategies are essential for the development of creativity among gifted students. As part of the student-centered learning approach, the student is active participant and is given opportunities to learn in a variety of ways and according to his or her interests, through independent and collaborative work. In the digital age, activities involving a variety of technologies can be used to enhance the learning experience for students, such as project-based learning, robotics, project-based learning, games, computer programming, research and challenges, and these playful and artistic activities must also be included in the teaching of these children. A flexible curriculum can also allow for innovative and creative teaching that does not follow a fixed curriculum.

It is important that teaching strategies make it possible to develop the creativity of gifted students. According to Thompson and Pfeiffer (2020), the teaching team can create an environment that is responsive to the needs of gifted students and their creativity, cultivating a psychologically safe school space, free from reprimands and barriers that prevent the development of creative potential.

The teacher should create a rewarding environment of unusual questions, answers, and creations. The teacher should limit formal and rigorous assessment procedures to creative activities, ensuring that the physical space of the classroom is safe, comfortable, interesting, and stimulating. The teacher should also incorporate well-planned group work to help gifted students develop ideas with your peers. This means that the success of student groups requires guidance and support from a teacher who will give them collective and individual support whenever needed.

The knowledge about teacher strategies and the role of creativity in gifted education, among many actors, can be helpful in promoting creativity among gifted students as well as recognizing their creative potential as gifted individuals. Schools must make it clear that creativity is not limited to creative areas such as arts classes. Potential must be developed at several levels, including individual (as a skill set and motivation), school factors (quality of teaching, curriculum adaptation, classroom climate), and school environment (peer relationships and extracurricular activities). Early investment and targeted interventions will result in positive outcomes for creativity. Open-ended questions, groupwork, variety of ideas, appropriate challenges, brainstorming, imagination, flexibility, positive feedback in an environment that offers opportunities, support, and resources to promote creativity can be examples of strategies for stimulating creativity.

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## Appendix

### Interview Protocol

- (1) Does teacher mediation help to promote creativity in gifted education? In what ways?
  - (2) What teaching strategies does a teacher need to offer in the education of gifted students?
  - (3) Does the current curriculum available also for gifted students have an influence on the education of these children?
  - (4) Could you define what creativity is?
  - (5) Is creativity important in the education of gifted students?
  - (6) Is creativity related to teaching strategies?
  - (7) How could teachers develop creativity in the study of gifted students?
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# Talent development at the Voice of Holland: Identifying and Developing Singing Talents to Grow into Professional Performers

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## Abstract

There is a lack of research into talent identification and talent development in the field of performing arts. The Voice of Holland (TVOH) has been the subject of a longitudinal empirical study as a good example of a setting for talent identification and talent development in this field. The study involved a literature review on talent approaches, talent identification, talent development, and performance. The study sought answers to the question how coaches at TVOH identify the singing talents of participants and contribute to develop these talents to a higher level of performance necessary for growth into a professional performer. Data were collected by desk research, participative observations, and qualitative interviews. The study revealed that talent identification and talent development intertwine, transformational coaching is part of performance coaching, and the preparation of talents in the field of the performing arts benefits a more integrated approach on talent development to enhance the overall performance needed to grow into a professional performer. Although the findings and conclusions are context specific for TVOH, they might be useful for teachers, coaches, and talents in the field of the performing arts and anyone else interested in the education and preparation of talents in general.

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**Keywords:** Talent identification; talent development; coaching, performance introduction.

A small handful of researchers are studying talent identification and development in the field of performing arts. More research in this domain of talent is needed, as performance in front of an audience requires a different approach as reflected in the literature on giftedness and talent development in the arts (Haroutounian, 2002; Kozbelt, 2019; Piirto, 1994; Worley, 2006, Zimmerman, 2004). The Voice of Holland (TVOH) has been subject of a longitudinal empirical study during the years of 2017 until 2019 to fill this research gap. TVOH is a television program in which talented singers are identified and developed to a higher level of performance in The Netherlands. Flyvbjerg (2001) stated:

one can often generalize based on a single case, and the case study may be central to scientific development via generalization as supplement or alternative to other methods. But formal generalization is overvalued as a source of scientific development, whereas ‘the power of the good example’ is underestimated (p.77).

This study explored the path of identifying and developing singing talents of participants at TVOH as a route to grow into professional performers. The study examined how coaches at TVOH identify the singing talents of participants and contribute to develop these talents to a higher level of performance necessary for growth into a professional performer. The study included a literature review on talent approaches, talent identification, talent development and performance (in the music business). At TVOH, data has been collected by doing desk research, participative observations, and by conducting qualitative interviews. The aim of the study was to provide evidence-based insights into the way talent identification and talent development of singing talents are applied to improve the education and preparation of singing talents having the ambition to grow into professional performers.

During this study, a constructivist-interpretivist research paradigm was applied. This paradigm foregrounds the subjective experiences and perspectives of individuals, rejecting the notion of a

singular, objective reality in favour of multiple, constructed realities (Burrell & Morgan, 1979; Saunders et al., 2019). The constructivist-interpretivist researcher relies upon individuals' views of the situation being studied, meaning the study focused on revealing viewpoints, perceptions, and interpretations of those who were involved in the study (Creswell, 2013; Saunders et al., 2019). Creswell (2013) stated that "these subjective meanings are not simply imprinted on individuals but are formed through interaction with others (hence social construction)" (p.25). The method of bracketing has been used to reveal the subjective meanings of the individuals' involved in this study. Bracketing refers to the process to set aside researcher own assumptions and interpretations to focus on understanding the meaning of the participants when collecting and analysing the research-data (Ashworth & Lucas, 2000).

The constructivist-interpretivist researcher clarifies his/her own position in the research to acknowledge the influence of own interpretations of the meanings of others (Creswell, 2013; Saunders et al., 2019). In research into behavior, the emic viewpoint has been opposed to the etic viewpoint. An emic viewpoint has been attributed to the initiate, who is part of the field and acts accordingly. An etic viewpoint has been attributed to the outsider, who is not part of the field and looks from the outside (Pike, 1967). This study has been conducted from an etic viewpoint by an outsider, not being part of TVOH or the music business. In order to maintain and secure the etic approach during the study, the degree of participation by the researcher was moderate. This means that the researcher was identifiable as an observant and only interfered occasionally in the interactions to get clarification (De Walt & De Walt, 2002). The findings are context-specific, but might provide others with useful insights into talent identification and talent development in the field of performing arts.

This article successively presents a literature review, a description of the methodology, the findings followed by a discussion and finally the conclusions.

## **Literature review**

This section discusses the literature involved in the study. Successively it presents different talent approaches, discusses views on talent identification, considers relevant matters of talent development, and provides insights into levels of performance of singing artists in the music business.

### ***Talent approaches***

Gallordo-Gallorda et al. (2013) noted that different approaches of talent emerge in the literature, highlighting a distinction between approaches conceptualizing talent as natural ability and approaches considering talent as the mastery of systematically developed skills. Howe et al. (1998) remarked that talent considered as natural ability assumes that the presence or absence of inborn attributes, is often labelled as gifts, and determines the likelihood of becoming exceptionally competent in a certain field. Ericsson et al. (2007) concluded from research across a wide range of performance domains that talent is nearly always made, not born. Gladwell (2008) mentioned that at least ten thousand hours of focused and deliberate practice are required for reaching talented levels of performance. Sloboda (2005) revealed that musical prodigies arise from a supportive environment enabling them to spend a significant amount of time engaged with the materials and training relevant to skill acquisition. According to Garavan et al. (2012) and Nijs et al. (2014), innate talent merges with what has been learned. Hambrick and Tucker-Drob (2015) and Tabuena (2020) underlined this approach based on research with a focus on musical talent. Therefore, this approach has been applied in this study.

### ***Talent identification***

Haroutounian (2014) emphasized that talent identification in the performing arts is about developing potential as well as demonstrating relevant abilities. Gagné (2010) explained that innate talent is expressed in the ease and speed in which skills are acquired. Binder (2015) noted that talent needs development to become more identifiable. Dweck (2006) noticed that especially talented individual's take on challenges that go beyond their own comfort zone to learn and demonstrate progress in their performance in a short period of time. In this study, talent has been identified as the

result of an amalgamation of innate aptitude and acquired skills through deliberate practise and doing tasks that go beyond their own comfort zone in a limited period of time.

Duckworth (2016) and Subotnik et al. (2019) added the presence of personality factors necessary to succeed, such as motivation and perseverance, as indicators for talent. Ryan and Deci (2000) considered a high to excellent level of performance as being difficult to achieve without commitment and effort from an intrinsic will to succeed. Sloboda (2005) underlined this by reporting that children classified as musical prodigies show “a high degree of intrinsic motivation for engagement with a single activity sustained over many years” (p. 251). This study focused on singing abilities, motivation, and perseverance as determining indicators to identify talent.

### ***Talent development***

Garavan et al. (2012) and Dai (2020) revealed that a talented individual is challenged to develop his/her talent by doing stimulating tasks and setting realistic goals. Blanchard and Shula (2002), Ives (2008) and Whitmore (2009) mentioned the importance of coaching for talent development. The literature distinguished different forms of coaching including performance coaching and transformational coaching. Zeus and Skiffinton (2006) and Tschannen-Moran (2014) stated that performance coaching includes the development of individual skills and abilities. Hawkins and Smith (2014) clarified that transformational coaching is enabling change in a coachee’s mindset by shifting beliefs, attitudes, or assumptions to address recurring behaviours, emotional patters, and feelings, in order to enable a significant shift between levels of functioning. Based on Neurolinguistic Programming (NLP) as a coaching approach, Dilts (2018) introduced the coaching model of neurological levels of change to help a coachee increase his self-awareness, behavioural flexibility, and effectiveness. This coaching model assumed that the coaching focuses on encouraging the coachee to develop and exploit his potential in case of obstacles at the level(s) of talent, behaviour, or environment. The coaching focuses on transforming the coachee if causes at the level(s) of beliefs, identity, or mission stand in the way to achieve a higher level of performance. During the study, this coaching model has used to interpret the coaching interventions because the model brings together aspects of performance and transformational coaching.

### ***Performance***

Motowidlo and Van Scotter (1994) contended that task performance and contextual performance contribute independently to overall performance. Motowidlo et al. (1997) and Sonnentag and Freese (2002) explained that task performance is related to abilities and skills, whereas contextual performance is related to effective behaviours that are necessary to succeed in a professional set-up. Specifically for singing talents, abilities such as breath control, managing resonance, vibrato, and expression techniques are inherent in task performance (Davids & LaTour, 2012; Peckam, 2010; Welch et al., 2019). Personality factors like motivation and persistence to reach a higher level of performance as a singer are considered to be determining factors to contextual performance (Haroutounian, 2000a; Subotnik et al., 2019). Beeching (2020) noted that the quality of the musical performer’s state of mind makes the difference, and explained that the freedom from controlling thoughts is essential for a musical peak performance. Beeching (2020) and Passman (2019) clarified that singing abilities and stage-performance skills must be integrated to be successful in the music business. This study considered task performance and contextual performance independently of each other in relation to the overall performance.

Several authors in the field of the music business (Allen, 2022; Beeching, 2020; Passman, 2019) noted that for a successful career as a singer, technical vocal mastery and contextual performance are only the beginning. Allen (2022) emphasized the importance of mapping the talent’s abilities and skills that require development for commercial viability as an artist. Allen (2022) and Beeching (2020) noted that it is necessary for an artist to broaden his/her talents to remain successful over a long period of time in the music business. Herstand (2020) and Karmuhaa (2022) underlined this, as nowadays many record labels only focus on artists who have already shown their value.

## Methodology

This section describes the scope of the study, the data collection, the methods of analysis and the limitations of the study.

### *Scope of the study*

A longitudinal empirical study at TVOH from 2017-2019 revealed how coaches at TVOH identify the singing talents of participants and contribute to develop these talents to a higher level of performance necessary for growth into a professional performer. The study explored the path of identifying and developing the singing talents of participants at TVOH as a route for them to grow into professional performers by searching answers to the following questions:

- How do coaches at TVOH identify the singing talents of participants, and which indicators are decisive?
- How do coaches contribute to the talent development of the participants; which coaching approaches, forms and interventions occur at TVOH?
- What effects of talent development can be identified from the performance of the participants at TVOH?

The aim of the study was to provide evidence-based insights into the way talent identification and talent development of singing talents are applied to improve the education and preparation of singing talents having the ambition to grow into a professional performer.

TVOH started with Blind Auditions, followed by The Battles, Live Shows, Semi Final and the Final. During two seasons (2017-2018 and 2018-2019), the coaches and the participants of TVOH were the subjects of this study. Table 1 provides an overview of the scope of this study and presents the number of coaches and participants involved in the study.

**Table 1:** Scope of the study.

Scope	Season 2017-2018	Season 2018-2019
Talented participants	120	120
Talent scouts	4	4

### *Research approach and data collection*

The researcher obtained permission from the creators of TVOH to conduct research into talent identification and talent development at TVOH as part of a broader investigation into talent scouting in the music business in The Netherlands. As the researcher entered TVOH as an outsider, not having any connections with the coaches or the participants at TVOH and not being familiar with the music business, the etic-approach was applied during the study (Pike, 1967). Consistent with a constructivist-interpretivist research approach, a qualitative and inductive research strategy has been applied to this research, and resulted in the use of multi methods of data collection (Creswell, 2013; Saunders et al., 2019). Data was collected by one researcher who used desk research, participative observations, and conducted qualitative interviews. In order to maintain and secure the etic approach, the researcher's degree of participation was moderate because the researcher was identifiable as an observant and only interfered occasionally in the interactions to get clarification (De Walt & De Walt, 2002). By combining three research methods, known as triangulation, the study has been strengthened (Creswell, 2013; Saunders et al., 2019). This enabled the researcher to verify the consistency of findings, and to understand the meanings of participants' point of views deeper and wider.

#### *Desk research*

Desk research was conducted by studying TVOH website at the start of the study. This approach allowed the researcher to get a first impression about the following: 1) the view of the coaches for the talent and their role at TVOH, 2) the approach of the coaches to talent identification and talent development, and 3) the coaches view about the levels of performance necessary to succeed in the music business.

### ***Participative observations***

Participative observations gained insights into the way the coaches identify singing talents, their approach of the participants, their interventions, and their effects on the development and performance of the participants. Table 2 provides an overview of the observed meetings around The Blind Auditions, The Battles, Live Shows, Semi Finals and the Finals. In total, this study involved 108 observed meetings during both seasons. The Blind Auditions involved 81 participants in 2017-2018 and 79 participants in 2018-2019. The (rehearsals) for The Battles involved 60 participants in 2017-2018 and 59 participants in 2018-2019. In each season, 21 of these participants entered the Live Shows, 6 of them made it to the Semi Final and finally, 4 participants made it to the Final. The coaching sessions after The Battles involved 21 participants. Of the 31 coaching sessions observed per season, 21 were in preparation for the Live Shows, 6 were in preparation for the Semi Final, and 4 were in preparation for the Final.

**Table 2:** Overview of observed meetings.

<b>Observed meetings</b>	<b>Season 2017-2018</b>		<b>Season 2018-2019</b>	
	<b>Number of meetings</b>	<b>Number of participants</b>	<b>Number of meetings</b>	<b>Number of participants</b>
Blind Auditions	7	81	7	79
Rehearsals The Battles	4	60	4	59
The Battles	4	60	4	59
Rehearsals Live Shows	2	21	2	21
Live Shows	2	21	2	21
Rehearsals Semi Final	1	6	1	6
Semi Final	1	6	1	6
Rehearsals Final	1	4	1	4
Final	1	4	1	4
Coaching sessions in preparation for Live Shows, Semi Final and Final	31	21	31	21
<b>Total</b>	<b>54</b>	<b>81</b>	<b>54</b>	<b>79</b>

The researcher was identifiable as an observant and only interfered occasionally in the interactions to get clarification. The reports of the observations were submitted to the participants involved for verification and supplementation. The researcher used the verified and supplemented reports of the conducted observations in the coding process (Saunders et al., 2019).

### ***Interviews***

Data collected by qualitative interviews supplemented the results of the participative observations. After every observed meeting the researcher interviewed the coaches. This means that both, in 2017-2018 and in 2018-2019, the researcher conducted 23 interviews for each coach. In total, the researcher conducted 92 interviews each season. The researcher asked the coaches about the following: 1) their opinion about the singing talent of the participants and the determining factors in their selection of the participants, 2) their opinion about the progress made by the participants, 3) their assumption concerning the obstacles to talent development for each participant, 4) their considerations for their coaching approach and interventions, and 5) their view on the progress in the performance of the participants.

The researcher also interviewed the participants after every rehearsal, resulting in 91 interviews in 2017-2018 and 90 interviews in 2018-2019. The researcher asked the participants about the following: 1) the way they experience their coach, 2) their opinion about the interventions of the coach, 3) their opinion about the effect of the coaching on their talent development, and 4) the progress they experienced in their performance. Table 3 provides an overview of the conducted interviews.

**Table 3: Overview of conducted interviews.**

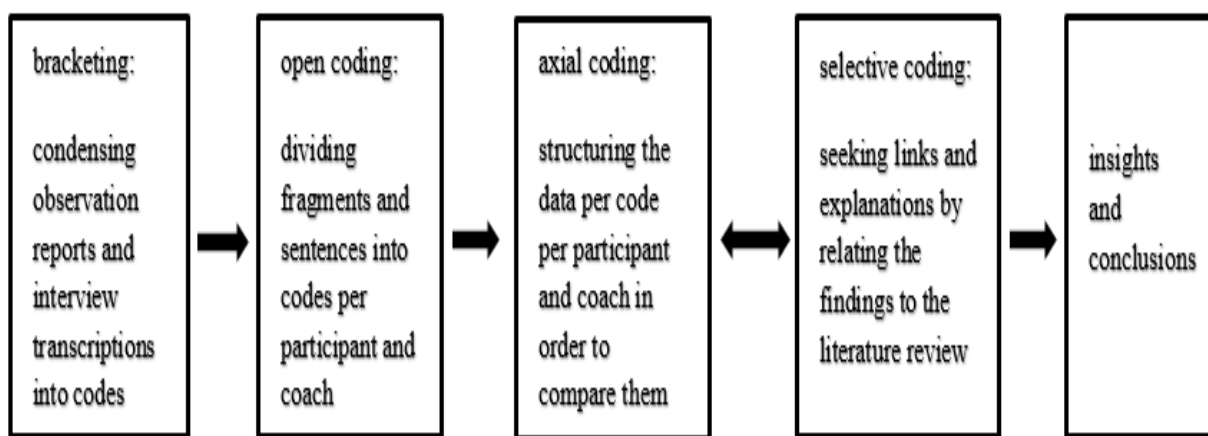
Conducted interviews	Number in 2017-2018	Number in 2018-2019
Participants The Battles	60	59
Participants Live Shows	21	21
Participants Semi Final	6	6
Participants Final	4	4
Coaches	92	92
<b>Total</b>	<b>183</b>	<b>182</b>

The researcher transcribed each interview and submitted the transcribed interview to the participant for verification. The researcher used the verified and supplemented transcriptions for each interview in the coding process.

**Coding and analysing**

During the study, data collection, and data analysis alternated. The researcher analysed data after The Blind Audition, after The Battles, after the Live Shows, after the Semi Final and after the Final. The results of each analysis guided the follow-up of the study and any further data collection. The thematic analysis of the data took place through the phases of open coding, axial coding and selective coding (Saunders et al., 2019). An inductive and a deductive approach alternated to analyse the collected data (Saunders et al., 2019). Table 4 illustrates the process of coding and analysing.

**Table 4: Process of coding and analyzing.**



The method of bracketing has been applied to develop the codes from the transcripts, using participants words (Ashworth & Lucas, 2000). The researcher condensed the observation reports and interview transcriptions into codes. At the open coding stage, the researcher divided the observations reports into fragments per code and classified them per participant and coach. The researcher also divided the interview transcriptions into sentences per code and classified them per participant and coach. Subsequently, at the axial coding stage, the researcher structured the data per code into similarities and differences per coach in order to compare them.

At the selective coding stage, the researcher sought links and explained them by relating the findings to the literature review. In this way the researcher obtained insights into the process of talent identification, into talent development, and into their effect(s) on performance at TVOH. Table 5 presents a code grid listing the codes used during the process of coding and analysing the collected data.

**Table 5:** Code grid.

Codes observation reports	Codes interview transcriptions	Themes
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Talent</li> <li>2. Singing abilities</li> <li>3. Performance on stage</li> <li>4. Comfort zone</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Talent approach</li> <li>2. Abilities/skills</li> <li>3. Potential</li> <li>4. Progress</li> </ol>	Talent identification
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Mastering abilities</li> <li>2. Deliberate practice</li> <li>3. Challenging goals and tasks</li> <li>4. Comfort zone</li> <li>5. Efforts to learn</li> <li>6. Ease/speed of progress</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Systematic way of working</li> <li>2. Choice of goals and tasks</li> <li>3. Execution of tasks</li> <li>4. Commitment to learn</li> <li>5. Experienced progress</li> <li>6. Feasibility of goals and ambitions</li> </ol>	Talent development
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Way of working</li> <li>2. Stimulating/supportive tasks</li> <li>3. Coaching interventions</li> <li>4. Impact of interventions</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Performance goalsetting</li> <li>2. Personal goalsetting</li> <li>3. Necessity of interventions</li> <li>4. Performance setting</li> <li>5. Change/growth</li> <li>6. Career opportunities</li> </ol>	Coaching
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Singing abilities</li> <li>2. Behaviour on stage</li> <li>3. Peak performance</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Vocal mastery</li> <li>2. Stage performance</li> <li>3. Motivation and persistence</li> <li>4. Mindset</li> <li>5. Transformation</li> <li>6. Overall performance</li> </ol>	Performance

### ***Limitations***

Although the etic approach was dominant, it is possible that the researcher made her own interpretations during the study. In this study, the process of bracketing was used to set aside researcher' bias to avoid misinterprets or misreports of participants intended meanings or perceptions (Ashworth & Lucas, 2000). Nevertheless, it cannot totally be precluded that the alternation of data collection and data analysis caused a positive bias confirming existing theory (Creswell, 2013; Saunders et al., 2019). The findings are context-specific for TVOH.

### **Findings**

The findings of the study are presented through the following four themes: 1) Identifying talent at the Blind Auditions, 2) Developing talents from The Battles to the Finals, 3) The role and impact of coaching, and 4) Talent selection at the Finals.

#### ***Identifying talent at the Blind Auditions***

The findings of the observed Blind Auditions revealed that the coaches rate participants on their singing abilities. Participants who sing in the incorrect pitch or get stuck while singing, do not advance to The Battles. During the interviews, the coaches indicated that they pay attention to the pitch of participants as the first indicator of singing talent. The findings indicate that the singing abilities of the participants have to be good to pass the Blind Auditions, but that this encompasses more than the pure technical aspects of singing. An interviewed coach explained: "Singing in the scale from low to high tones, or vice versa, is not interesting. Someone needs to sing dynamically and uninhibited." Another interviewed coach revealed: "Someone needs to connect with the moment and express the feeling of the song." The following quote is illustrative of a fragment from the Blind Auditions in which a participant sang a raw Dutch folk song but did not pass the Blind Audition: "He sings spot on, but it is too polished for this song." An interviewed coach noted that the impact of a participant on the audience is important because the participant must be able to touch the audiences' emotions with the song: "Crucial for passing the Blind Auditions is knowing how to touch others with a song."



### ***Developing talents from The Battles to the Finals***

During the observed rehearsals for The Battles, the focus was on strengthening and optimizing singing abilities to pass to the next stage at TVOH. All coaches push the participants to practise on a regular basis, illustrated by their statements such as “you have to make singing miles” or “it takes a lot of practice to improve your voice techniques.” Each participant received a specific task to improve his/her singing abilities. For example, some participants needed to sing an octave higher or lower, making a better match with their own vocal range. Some needed to learn how to sing less stiffly and sound more natural instead of trained. Other participants needed to learn how to better control their voice to prevent problems with their vocal cords. A coach being interviewed afterwards clarifies the higher goal of the tasks: “Participants need to win of themselves. They must develop their singing abilities and show progress compared to their auditions.” In consistency with this, the findings indicate that all participants who developed their singing abilities to a higher level reached the Live Shows.

The findings of the observed rehearsals for the Live Shows revealed that the focus on talent development broadens to stage performance, illustrated by statements of the coaches such as “your movements must match the song” or “you are like a robot on stage” or “try to act more relaxed on stage.” During the rehearsals, a coach said: “Until now the contest was about making progress in singing abilities, from now on it is about improving the whole picture.” An interviewed coach endorses the importance of stage performance as indicator for talent: “Someone must act natural on stage to grow into an artist”. Another coach explains the urgency: “The energy emanating from a performance is decisive. It should match the emotion of the song. You need to get into that emotion and to convey it to the audience. If you succeed in this, you will make a difference as an artist.”

The findings of the observed Live Shows revealed that the participants who had reached their limits of development, in the opinion of their coach, must leave the contest. This includes participants who are very eager to learn, submitting many demos, frequently asking for feedback, and practising for hours. A coach stated: “I admire some participants for their mentality, attitude, high perseverance, and work ethos. Sadly, commitment is not always enough to make a dream come true.” The findings indicate that developing talent required intensive practice over a longer period of time, and that talent development has limits that cannot be stretched.

The findings of the observed meetings after the Live Shows revealed a focus on the participants’ development of effective behaviours in order to win TVOH. This can be illustrated by a coaching conversation in preparation for the Semi Final in which the participant, who seemed unable at the rehearsal to give a good performance, is being confronted with the burden she had put on herself. The message of the coach is as follows: “It is useless to feel scared. It only makes you insecure. You better consider the situation as a challenge, so you probably feel chill on stage.” Another example is a rehearsal for the Final in which the coach is holding a relativizing conversation with one of the finalists who is not sleeping and throwing up from nerves. Being interviewed afterwards, the coach says: “You must be able to perform under pressure. If not, you are not ready for the music business yet.”

### ***The role and impact of coaching***

Leading up to the Live Shows, the coaches were mainly instructing the participants about how to improve their singing ability. They provided suggestions for improvement concerning breath control, vibrato, and timbre. Six coaches reinforced these suggestions by pre-singing themselves so that the participants could hear the difference with their own performance. They found this useful and gave statements during the interviews such as: “it helps me know how to sing”, “now I know how to save my vocal cords” or “it teaches me how to control my voice”. The findings of the observed Battles and Live Shows appeared to indicate that the participants who already mastered their singing, progressed easily and quickly to a higher level of singing performance with the help of their coach. These participants appeared to benefit from coaching that focused on improving their stage performance. In particular, the participants who entered the Live Shows experienced this advice as useful, because of performing live in front of a large audience for the first time.

From the Live Shows onwards, the coaches took up transformational coaching. Prior to the Semi Finals, the coaches mainly spoke with the participants about how to deal with their nerves, fears, and other kinds of personal concerns in order to bring their performance to a higher level. A coach stated: "Talent can be blocked by one's mindset. If that's the case, I help to break through obstacles standing in the way to flourish." During the coaching conversations at the final stage of TVOH, the participants arrived at new insights about themselves by reflecting on personal ambitions, their own identity, personal thoughts, and beliefs with their coach. Participants referred to the conversations as "sparring about my career path", "holding up a mirror to overcome myself", "making me reflect on myself" and "helping me to make choices for my professional future." Interviewed participants in the Semi Finals and Finals attribute their progress and growth to the coaching they received. "I would never have come this far without my coach!" is the common adage.

### ***Talent selection at the Final***

The findings for the observed Finals make it clear that in the final stage of TVOH, the talent selection is about being a total-artist. The winning participants demonstrated that the overall performance must be excellent to win TVOH. The statements about the winning participants of TVOH are illustrative here: "a musician in heart and soul", "a pure singer" or "an authentic performer". All interviewed coaches agreed that from the start of the Blind Audition, the potential of the winner was palpable.

## **Discussion**

The aim of this study was to fill a research gap. This gap was filled by providing evidence-based insights into the way talent identification and talent development of singing talents are applied, where education and preparation of singing talents pays off. TVOH has been the subject of this study and is a good example of a setting for talent identification and talent development in the field of the performing arts. The findings indicated that coaches at TVOH identify the singing talents of participants and contribute to the development of these talents to a higher level of performance necessary to grow into a professional performer. The study revealed the path of identifying and developing singing talents of participants at TVOH and indicated a path for talents in the performing arts to grow into professional performers.

Building on the notions of Gagné (2010) and Binder (2015) that talent needs development to become identifiable, the findings of the study at TVOH revealed talent identification and talent development as intertwined concepts. The findings confirmed that talent identification in the performing arts involves both demonstrated relevant abilities as the development of potential, as explained by Haroutounian (2014). The study indicates that demonstrated progress is decisive in talent identification. The findings demonstrate how talent with potential is distinguished by the ease and speed of the progression in the performance in a limited period, as stated by Dweck (2006). This argues not to make a distinction between approaches conceptualizing talent as natural ability and approaches considering talent as the mastery of developed skills, but rather to merge them, as advocated by several authors like Garavan et al. (2012), Nijs et al. (2014), Hambrick and Tucker-Drob (2015), and Tabuena (2020). Further research into talent identification and talent development as intertwining concepts is recommended.

The study provides insights into the way coaching contributes to talent development in the field of the performing arts. The findings revealed that as the coaching process continued the performance coaching is shifting to transformational coaching, as described by Hawkins and Smith (2014) with the purpose to handle personal factors standing in the way to express talents and bring them to excellent performance. This demonstrates that in the field of the performing arts, encouraging transformation is part of performance coaching. Besides, it indicates the intertwining of performance coaching and transformational coaching and pleads for integration of these coaching forms when it comes to talent development. It is beneficial to gain more insights into the concept of talent coaching by further research.

The findings reveal insights into the effects of talent development on the performance in the

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field of performing arts and show a successive approach. In the context of TVOH, talent development is about improving task performance at first, with a primary focus on strengthening singing abilities followed by a focus on lifting podium skills. In the final phase, talent development is mainly about improving contextual stage performance. This is in accordance with the statement of Motowidlo and Van Scotter (1994) that task performance and contextual performance contribute independently to overall performance, and that both are required to be able to achieve the highest level of performance. Further research on a more integrated approach, instead of a successive approach to develop talents in the performing arts, can benefit the education and preparation of talents.

The study revealed that it takes a lot of hard work to grow from a singing talent into a professional performer. With many record labels nowadays only focusing on artists who have already shown their value as mentioned by Herstand (2020) and Karmuhaa (2022), potentials and aspiring performers are left to their own when it comes to their talent development and career planning. At the same time, ongoing talent development is a necessity for commercial viability as an artist according to Allen (2022) and Beeching (2020). Therefore, this study fills this gap in the literature for the field of performing arts by providing sufficient opportunities for talent development in preparation of a long-term professional career as a performer.

## Conclusions

In response to the call for more research into talent identification and talent development in the field of performing arts, the study at TVOH revealed how to identify and develop singing talents as a route for growing into a professional performer. In the context of TVOH, talent identification and talent development are intertwined because the talent identification involves both demonstrated relevant abilities as a developable potential. Progress in performance is decisive in talent identification at TVOH. Talents distinguish themselves by the ease and speed of their progression in their performance in a limited period of time. A talent approach that considers talent as an amalgamation of natural ability and mastery of developed skills underlies the talent identification at TVOH.

In the context of TVOH coaching contributes to develop talent to a higher level of performance. The coaching goes beyond coaching on task performance, and involves coaching on contextual performance with a focus on transformation of personal factors standing in the way to come to an excellent performance. This implies that in the field of performing arts, transformational coaching is part of performance coaching. Given the study at TVOH, the field of the performing arts benefits from a coaching model which integrates transformational coaching into performance coaching to optimize talent development. In general, the findings of the study advocate for a more integrated approach instead of a successive approach on talent development to improve the performance in preparation for a long-term professional career.

Although the implications of this study are context-specific to TVOH, they might be useful to teachers, coaches, and talents in the field of the performing arts and anyone else interested in the education and preparation of talent in general. Based on this study, future research could explore how to improve the education and preparation in the performing arts based upon an integrated approach on talent development to enhance task performance and contextual performance on the route to growing into a professional performer. Future research could also build on this study to explore the concept of talent coaching further and to develop a model of talent coaching that fits into the field of the performing arts. This study also encourages other researchers to fill the research gap with respect to talent identification and talent development as intertwined concepts by doing further research in other settings.

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# Non-Teaching Stakeholders' Experiences with Inclusive Education in a Private School in Jamaica

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## Abstract

The literature is sparse on understanding the experiences of stakeholders with inclusive education in the Caribbean. Using a qualitative single case study, this study explores the lived experiences with inclusive education of non-teaching stakeholders (principal, dean of discipline, guidance counsellor, parents, and educational assistants) in a private school in Jamaica. Data was collected using individual interviews, focus group discussions and secondary data. Thematic analysis was used to interpret and present findings. Key findings revealed supportive school leadership, inconsistent teacher competence and pedagogy, controversies with educational assistants, and parental denial as barriers that undermine inclusivity. Leadership support that goes beyond the principal to include the school board of directors was highlighted as an important consideration. The study provides other implications and recommendations for the inclusive classroom in the Jamaican educational milieu. Although the findings are specific to this case, they can be transferred and applied to inclusive education in other contexts regionally and globally to inform inclusive practices and considerations.

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**Keywords:** Inclusive education; disabilities; non-teaching stakeholders; private school; Jamaica.

## Introduction

Inclusive education has gained significant attention in many education systems across the world as it attempts to achieve the Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4) which states that by 2030, all citizens should be given inclusive quality education and lifelong learning opportunities (UNESCO, 2017; 2020). Inclusive education is defined as a process of transformation and an effective way to provide all children an equal chance to go to the same school, learn, and develop the skills they need to succeed during their lifetime (UNESCO, 2017; IIEP-UNESCO, 2019). Researchers argue that regular schools with (an) inclusive orientation are the most effective means of combating discriminatory attitudes, creating welcoming communities, building a global inclusive society, and achieving education for all (Ainscow, 2020; European Council of National Association of Independent Schools, 2017). However, this requires transformation and systems change (Schuelka, 2018).

Many successful and unsuccessful efforts have been made to support inclusive and equitable education in public schools, (Anthony, 2011; Singal et al., 2015; Subbey, 2020; Opoku et al., 2021), but there has been less focus on the practice of inclusive education and exploring and understanding the experiences of stakeholders in private schools (Genovesi et al., 2022; Taylor, 2005). With both the private and public sectors involved in education service provision, Opoku et al (2022) argue that it is critical to pay attention to the implementation of inclusive education in private schools. To know what must be done to improve inclusive education, current systems and practices need to be better understood through the undertaking of quality, in-depth research into inclusive education involving key stakeholders (Ainscow & Miles, 2011; Allan, 2012).

Furthermore, *Macleans* (2024) asserts that in the past, "private school" was usually associated with privilege and, often, a racially, socially, economically, and ethnically homogenous student population, but not so anymore. Rather, private schools have evolved to reflect the diverse tapestry of the nation's population. Fostering inclusivity, combating bias, and quashing discrimination have become paramount for private school administrators, staff, and students alike. Moreover, it is a common assumption that private schools operate differently from government schools in practice, and

the available resources and support they provide are often perceived to be more successful in teaching students. Thus, this study explores the lived experiences of non-teaching stakeholders with inclusive education in a private school in Jamaica using a qualitative case study design. Findings from this study may be used as a sensitization tool into inclusive education, inform inclusive policies and practices to support inclusive education, and bridge the gap of literature on inclusive education in private schools in the Caribbean.

## Literature review

The literature is sparse on the experiences of non-teaching stakeholders with inclusive education in both public and private schools (Genovesi et al., 2022; Taylor, 2005). The direct experiences of relevant stakeholders can provide valuable information on factors that facilitate or hinder innovations in inclusive education (Damschroder et al., 2009; UNESCO Global Education Monitoring Report Team, 2020). In this study, literature related to school leadership, parental involvement, teacher competence and training, and educational assistants will be discussed.

### *School leadership*

Many educational leaders continue to report that they lack the knowledge and skills to oversee inclusive education programs effectively (Murphy, 2018). Sider et al. (2021) explored the experiences of principals supporting students with disabilities in Canadian schools. These researchers found that principals experience challenges with relationships with their teaching and non-teaching staff within the school and encounter challenges relating to staff, allocation of resources, communication, and parental involvement. Similarly, Lawrence (2015) reported that in Trinidad and Tobago, most of the stakeholders including principals had negative experiences regarding the inclusion of these students (Lawrence, 2015). Earlier researchers contend that when school leaders strategically consider the facilitation of teacher learning, teacher learning is enhanced contributing to a higher quality of teaching and learning (Fullan, 2005; Leithwood & Janzti, 2000). However, they assert that very few inclusive school leaders can effectively facilitate teacher learning. Therefore, they need to develop their knowledge of effective ways to enhance inclusive teacher competence and pedagogy.

The role of the principal in fostering inclusive education for children with disabilities is also paramount. A qualitative analysis of data from stakeholders in six sub-Saharan African countries reported favourable attitudes towards IE for children with disabilities (Hui et al., 2018). Children with disabilities and their parents in multiple countries appreciated the opportunities for inclusion and learning provided by inclusive education, but also reported instances of peers' bullying and teachers' hostile attitudes (Asamoah et al., 2018; Bannink, Nalugya, & Van Hove, 2020; Brydges & Mkandawire, 2020; Magumise & Sefotho, 2020). They further contend that school principals' experiences can serve as important framing moments to help them in fostering inclusive schools for students with special education needs (SEN).

Another important consideration for school leaders is the assertion made by Glaze (2018), that leaders should ensure that the workplace is devoid of fear and leaders embrace the voices of parents and other stakeholders in decision making. Specific to the Jamaica, Thompson's (2017) suggests that principals in Jamaica should develop a systematic approach to enhance shared leadership with teachers in schools. While leadership experiences and roles are imperative to inclusive education, Ainscow (2020) postulates that forming partnerships that can support and own the process of change is essential.

### *Parental involvement*

Parent involvement is acknowledged as a crucial aspect of the education of students with special needs (Lai & Vadeboncoeur, 2012). Genovesi et al. (2022) studied parents experiences in South Africa and reported that parents explained their children's determination to be like everybody else. Parents equally 'desired to raise their children as *normally* as possible,' although their preferences seemed more nuanced and dependent on the quality of inclusion. In Europe, a study was conducted by



Sukys et al. (2015) with 170 parents of Lithuanian children in inclusive education. They found that only 68.8% of the parents were able to identify their child's specific learning needs and that just over half were involved in the education process at home. Furthermore, one-third of the parents perceived that they were equal partners when communicating with teachers, and more highly educated parents devoted more time to communicating with their children than did parents with a lower level of education. Like other studies (Sider et al., 2021; Bannink et al., 2016; Engelbrecht et al., 2001, 2003; Mangope, 2017; Okyere et al., 2019), Genovesi et al.'s (2022) findings suggest that parents' collaboration with special educators is insufficient, as these are scarcely available.

## **Teacher competence and training**

Teacher training is a fundamental element of inclusion; it is a key factor in improving the professional competence of every teacher, as it contributes to the development of equitable and quality education (United Nations, 2017; Triviño-Amigo et al., 2022) Blackman et al. (2019) postulate that teacher competence should be the focal point of interrogation toward successful inclusive education in the Caribbean. Quality education therefore requires the continuous updating of teacher training (Arnaiz-Sánchez, 2023). Many results have revealed that teachers who have more training in inclusion have more positive attitudes (Bhatnagar & Das, 2014; Kraska & Boyle, 2014; Vaz et al., 2015). They suggest that suggest that long-term training, as well as professional development training, is necessary to affect attitudes.

Researchers argue that there is a need for teachers to understand the meaning of inclusive education, to master inclusive practices and understand what inclusive pedagogy entails (Morina (2020) so that all of them become facilitators of inclusion and not barriers to it (Arnaiz-Sánchez et al., 2023). It is therefore important that teachers are equipped with inclusive strategies to meet all learners' needs. In South Africa, poor collaboration among teachers was reported, where 'teachers in inclusive classes received extraordinarily little support from their colleagues (Genovesi et al., 2022).

Not only is pedagogical training imperative for teachers, but teacher training on how to use Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) as a tool to support the unique needs of individual learners in the classroom (Kovač-Cerović et al., 2016) is essential. Several studies completed in Canada, Asian, and Middle Eastern countries examined IEP use and implementation in the classroom found limited teacher involvement in its development. As a result, this led to frustration (Crawford, 2016) and low teacher efficacy with its use (Gregory, 2015). Teachers need help to improve their ability to use it in inclusive classrooms (Lee et al. (2007). It was recommended that structured mechanisms be put in place that foster collaboration for the development, implementation, and reflection of the IEP to be effective (Crawford, 2016). In Jamaica, individual intervention plans (IIPs), like IEPs are mandatory in special education units which serve only students with SN in public schools (Special Education Policy, 2015) but it is not mandated in private schools

## **Educational assistants in inclusive settings**

Though contextually defined, the role of a shadow aide is to help the children needing to support activities by helping fill in the Gaps in the learning procedure and overall assist the child to create academic and social abilities (Hamid, et al., 2021). They argue that parents and principals have many misconceptions about shadow teachers (Hamid et.al., 2021). However, time spent with educational assistants (EAs) was identified as one of the main support structures necessary to implement inclusion successfully (Anderson, Klassens, & Georgiou (2007). Andersen, et.al. (2023) found that with EAs support, students in a controlled study were able to stay in regular classrooms throughout compulsory education and follow the same progression as their peers in the control group when they transited to upper secondary education. While the efficacy of EAs is controversial, (Ashbaker & Morgan, 2012; Rutherford, 2011; Sansotti & Sansotti, 2012), the presence of EAs is seen as the most desirable form of support by teachers at the beginning of their career, although reliance on educational assistants appears to be diminished as a result of additional experience and professional development (Hemmings & Woodcock, 2011).

## **Methodology**

In this study, I utilized a qualitative single case study design with an embedded unit of analysis to answer the main research question which is, how do non-teaching stakeholders describe their experiences with inclusive education? Creswell (2014) and Yin (2017) describe the Qualitative Case Study (QCS) approach as an exploration of a case over time through detailed, in-depth data collection involving multiple sources of information. Using a qualitative case study enabled me to gather detailed accounts of participants' experiences. I spent approximately five months at the private school in Jamaica, gathering data to understand the experiences of the participants. The school was selected using a purposive criterion sampling. I developed a list of criteria related to size (over 1000 students), location (accessible), inclusive education practices (currently practices inclusive education) and with no segregated programs. The school that met all the criteria was chosen.

### ***School context***

The school is a privately-owned preparatory school located in urban Jamaica. The campus houses 11 classrooms in the kindergarten department and 30 classrooms between Grades 1 and 6. The population is "multi-ethnic" and "multi-national" with students from varying ethnic backgrounds such as Indians, Chinese, Jamaicans, and white Americans. The average teacher-student ratio is 1:25. A teacher assistant is placed in each class. The school has a staff of 75 teachers and a student population of 1,002. There are no trained special education teachers at the primary level at the school; however, the principal has training in Special Education. All teachers have at least a bachelor's degree in early childhood education or primary education.

Currently, the school supports students with autism, intellectual disabilities, attention deficit hyperactivity disorders, learning disabilities, and students requiring behavioural support. The students come from a middle-upper-class socio-economic background as indicated by the occupations of their parents (lawyers, medical doctors, entrepreneurs, teachers, etc.).

### ***Participants, data collection and data analysis***

This study involved 12 participants within the case (school) who were purposively selected using criterion sampling. Participants include the principal, dean of discipline, guidance counsellor, 6 parents of students with and without disabilities and 3 educational assistants. Data collection included focus group discussion and individual interviews. For analyzing the data, I combined the first two stages (preparing the data and managing the data) of Creswell (2014) stages of data analysis and the six phases of thematic analysis (familiarity with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining, and naming themes, producing the report) proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006). To ensure trustworthiness of the study, I engaged in triangulation to corroborate evidence by employing multiple data collection methods such as focus groups, interviews, observation, and secondary data. Expert collegial audits were done as well as member checking to ensure that what I am representing is what the participants have said and intended to say. Inter-coder reliability was done to minimize biases in the themes generated.

### ***Ethical considerations***

Several steps were taken to adhere to the ethical guidelines for recruitment, participation, and data collection such as gaining ethical clearance from the UWI Faculty of Medical Sciences Ethics Committee and official access letter generated by the School of Education to the principal of the school informing the school of the impending study. Pseudonyms were used to protect the identity of the participants who were explicitly reminded that they had the right not to participate and if they chose to participate, they had the right to withdraw at any time.

### ***Limitations of the study***

This study explores the experiences of non-teaching stakeholders with inclusive education at one private school; hence, the results cannot be generalized to other schools in Jamaica. However, findings might be transferable to both public and private schools.

## Findings

This research sought to answer the main research question: “How do non-teaching stakeholders describe their experiences with inclusive education in a private school? The following four themes emerged from the analysis of the data: supportive school leadership, inconsistent teacher competence and pedagogy, parental denial as a barrier to support.

### *Supportive school leadership.*

The findings show staunch support from school leadership. The participants shared that the principal has a deep desire for change, establishes and maintains a strong relationship with the staff, and her problem-resolution practices were collaborative. For example, the dean of discipline stated that the principal had a good relationship with the principal, and that she felt encouraged by efforts made to resolve conflicts collaboratively. During the interview, “Mrs. Turnbull” articulated with a smile, “Well we have a good relationship with Administration as I have said before whenever there is a problem, we tackle it together as a group”

Ms. Williams, the guidance counsellor, stated that while the principal had always been supportive, it took some time for the school board to recognize the need for inclusive education. This delay affected the decision-making process regarding enrolling students with disabilities in inclusive classrooms. Ms. Williams iterated, “I really cannot say that I’ve been unsupported, but I think what I can say is even the board over time has come to recognize where they need to be and that has helped with the decisions.” This suggests that while the principal may support inclusive education in private schools, barriers may come from the school board which governs the major decision process in the overall running of the institution. It can be inferred that school leadership in private schools does not constitute the principal only but considers the school board’s significant role in the overall decision-making of these institutions. Hence, successful inclusive education requires the support of both the principal and the school board.

While many stakeholders consider the school leadership to be supportive of inclusive education, some participants highlighted shortcomings with the level of support, especially regarding resources. Some parents expressed satisfaction with the school leadership. For example, Melissa, a parent of a child with a disability, applauded the school leadership for their efforts in meeting their children's needs. Melissa said, “I really appreciate the assistance the principal and the guidance council office provided in helping to address the disabilities of my child.”

### *Inconsistent teacher competence and pedagogy*

Findings show that many stakeholders such as the principal, guidance counsellor, and parents voiced concerns about the inclusive teachers' training and teachers' use of strategies. Stakeholders corroborated that teachers need more training in meeting the needs of the students because teaching students with disabilities is different from teaching non-disabled peers in inclusive classrooms. To illustrate her point. Mrs. Turnbull, for example, expressed, “Teachers need more training.... I think they need specialized training because teaching General Ed. and teaching Special Ed. are two totally different things.” In addition to the concerns about inclusive teachers’ training, stakeholders shared mixed feelings about the teachers’ pedagogy with feelings of dissatisfaction more dominant. The principal conceded that the inclusive teachers in her school are not equipped with effective strategies to meet the needs of the students in inclusive classrooms alluding to the use of differentiated strategies. She pointed out that she is not happy with teachers’ pedagogy and believes appropriate strategies are not used. She said:

And so being in a General Ed. classroom, teachers need more strategies as to how to differentiate and how to meet the needs of the children.... All, all the children in the classroom. I am not happy that this is being done adequately.

Slavishly teaching the curriculum and not necessarily allowing for flexibility in their teaching methods was also expressed. She articulated that teachers need to be more creative in how they implement the curriculum. She stated “the curriculum is taught in a very standard way and not adapted to meet the interest of the children. There was a need for more creative approaches to learning.”

Parents articulated mixed views on the effectiveness of teaching. One parent shared that teachers were ineffective in meeting the needs of her child with disabilities in the inclusive classroom. She mentioned the need for teachers to pay more attention to her child's needs, but she did not specify any approach used by the teacher. She said:

There was no direct help from the class teachers with respect to addressing his disabilities.....I do not think that the teachers were effective at all in meeting the disabilities of my child. I think that they need to be more involved in paying attention to and addressing the needs of children with disabilities.

On the other hand, Marsha, who is also a parent of a child with disabilities, opined that the teaching was sometimes effective, but it required a lot of reinforcement at home in areas the child did not find interesting such as Integrated Studies. She expressed that the class teacher did not teach some topics in a way that made her child relate to the lesson, supporting a lack of flexibility.

Findings indicate that parents of students with disabilities experienced a lack of individualized instructional support for the students with disabilities in the inclusive classroom. They articulated that while the school identified a shadow [educational assistant] for their children, there was not enough individualized support from the teacher to meet the needs of their children. For example, Susan expressed:

They (the school) accommodated a shadow [educational assistant] in the class and would provide a slightly elevated level of monitoring prior to the educational assistant. Overall enough support was not being provided on an individual level for him.

Despite the dissatisfaction that parents voiced with the teaching in the inclusive classroom, having the child in the inclusive classroom was the preferred choice as against a special education institution for one parent because it provided her with the opportunity to compare her child's learning with non-disabled peers. For example, Susan communicated, "It was preferred to have him in an inclusive institution. It allowed me to feel more at peace when I compared him to his classmates and found he could execute his classwork at a high level on par with his peers." The experiences of stakeholders regarding teaching and learning in the inclusive classroom vary but are mostly unsatisfactory.

### ***Controversies with educational assistants***

Findings revealed that educational assistants in the classroom were a major contributor to the academic success or failures of students with disabilities. Stakeholders shared that improvements have been observed when students have been supported by educational assistants. Despite the improvement observed with educational assistants in the classroom, the principal alluded that educational assistants lack enough training. She believes that children's experiences are influenced by the training of the educational assistants, suggesting the vital role the educational assistants have in the classroom. The principal affirmed:

Now that we have streamlined the whole shadowing [educational assistant] process. I think it is a little bit more effective. I still believe, however, that we need to do some more training on these educational assistants and because that in and of itself will determine the children's experiences in the classroom.

Parents' experiences with the educational assistants for their children were "bitter-sweet." They agreed with the principal's view that improvements were evident with the help of educational assistants, but it was dependent on the competence of the shadow that was placed on their children, as regression in the learning of their children was observed with some educational assistants. The data also show that educational assistants have changed at least once since the start of the program which was in effect only seven (7 months) up to the time of data collection. For example, Melissa described her experience saying:

He has improved overall but did better with some of the educational assistants compared to others. He was frustrated with some of the educational assistants as he felt they were too hard on him. He regressed with the last shadow.

### ***Parental denial as a barrier to support***

Even though the principal, guidance counsellor, and dean of discipline gave credence to some of the parents for their involvement and support in their children's learning in the inclusive classroom, they corroborated that in their experiences, parental barriers were one of the major setbacks to positive learning outcomes for some of the students with disabilities in the inclusive classroom. Mrs. Turnbull, the principal, reported that parents are enormously supportive, once they have accepted that the child has a learning need. She revealed:

They provide whatever resource for support. They are extremely supportive. And in fact, well, put it this way, once they have accepted that the child has additional need... then they become supportive once they realize that it is in their child's best interest...

Experiences with parental denial were corroborated by several participants as a barrier to successful learning outcomes. The dean of discipline and the guidance counsellor/clinical psychologist shared that they experienced that many parents are sometimes in denial of their children's challenges while some acknowledged their children's challenges. Ms. Palmer exclaimed, "many of the parents are in denial . . . so we have to be careful of the words you say and use...some of them accept readily, others are still in denial." Ms. William's, however, described her experiences with parents by highlighting three types: parents in denial, equipped and learned parents, and those who ignore you completely. For parents equipped and knowledgeable of their child's diagnosis, they provide assessment reports and resources that the child needs making it easier for the school to accommodate the child. Parental denial, however, was associated with grief, a process through which parents try to cope with the diagnosis of their child or grandchild. Ms. William's stated:

You will have that challenge where there might be dual parenting denial. You have the parents telling you that there is nothing wrong with their child or grandchild. And so, you're having this conversation and it's kind of a grief process for them, "Oh, I thought my child was perfect and now you're telling me this . . . you have the parents who come fully equipped, they come and they come with the assessment- they tell you what their child needs, they're educated as to what the child's challenges are, they try to provide the support, and all we do is facilitate. You also have those that ignore you totally- that is the third one (chuckles). You tell them, and they go, "No, no." It is a matter of pride or something else, so they just ignore you.

Parents of children with disabilities also shared their experiences with support for their children with disabilities in the inclusive classrooms. Melissa attested that she is an incredibly supportive parent who monitors her child's learning. She asserted, "I am very involved in monitoring what my child is taught and in ensuring that he is being taught the correct information." Another parent, Susan elaborated on how her support for her child with disabilities in the inclusive classroom is demonstrated. She elaborated that she maintains contact with the class teacher, provides reinforcement at home, and sits in class with her child when the shadow is unavailable/or absent. She boldly professed:

I made sure to keep in contact with the teachers to address any challenges he had at school and would shadow him if the shadow were absent. I also worked closely with them to ensure therapy sessions addressed what he learned at school, and I recapped lessons in areas that he would not focus on in school.

## **Discussion**

### ***School leadership beyond principals***

A culture of inclusion in education requires a shared set of assumptions and beliefs among policymakers (Ainscow et al., 2020). The findings from this study reveal and emphasize the importance of examining school leadership beyond school principals to include those governing principals such as board of governors. NCSE (2011) and Glaze (2018) asserts that for effective inclusive education, several considerations should be made, including strong leadership management which involves not only the principals and teachers but also the board of directors, pupils, disabilities team, ancillary staff, parents, and guardians. Although efforts have been made by the principal to

create an inclusive culture, a continuous discussion with the board of directors was paramount. As articulated, it takes the full support of the leadership including the board members to achieve the implementation of inclusive practices at the school. Discrepancies between leadership visions can impede the process of transformation to support inclusion. (Murphy, 2018) asserts that many educational leaders continue to report that they lack the knowledge and skills to effectively oversee inclusive education programs.

In contrast, the principal in this case is knowledgeable of inclusive education practices, but other factors such as teacher training, parental involvement, and resources have influenced successful inclusive practices. These findings are like the insights of Sider et al. (2021) and Genovesi et al. (2022) who found that principals experienced many challenges with supporting students with special education needs in schools such as community support, attitudes of staff, resources, and parental involvement in inclusive schools. It could be concluded that leadership knowledge of IE does not constitute effective inclusion. Findings show that it takes a visionary, transformative and collaborative leader which Day and Leithwood (2007) and Sergiovanni (2009) view as integral for implementation of inclusive practices and empowerment of staff.

### ***Staff training and competence***

Researchers contend that few inclusive school leaders know how to facilitate teacher learning effectively; therefore, there is a need for more knowledge about effective conditions and programmes that support teacher learning (Sider et al, 2021; Fullan, 2005; Leithwood & Janzti, 2000). This holds true for the school leader in this study. While the principal expressed the desire for the training of staff, a clear plan to achieve this was not expressed. Arnaiz-Sánchez, (2023) opines that quality education therefore requires the continuous updating of teacher training. However, findings from this study suggest that the principal must facilitate the learning of teachers and educational assistants. While the efficacy of EAs is controversial as was found in this study, (Ashbaker & Morgan, 2012; Rutherford, 2011; Sansotti & Sansotti, 2012), the presence of EAs is seen as the most desirable form of support by teachers. Lack of training for teachers may be deemed a barrier to successful education for all and as Arnaiz-Sánchez et al (2023) warns, schools need to ensure that teachers become facilitators of inclusion and not barriers to it.

The need for participation in round table talks with the administration about students in the inclusive classroom was articulated as paramount by stakeholders in this study. This suggests that involving stakeholders in decision making regarding children with disabilities is a priority. This is crucial for teachers and other staff members such as educational assistants, guidance counsellors, and the dean of discipline. This would allow for greater collaborations and allow them to participate in decision-making and keep abreast of students' development. This finding supports Thompson's (2017) suggestion that principals in Jamaica should develop a systematic approach to enhance shared leadership with teachers in schools. I concur with Ainscow (2020) who postulates that forming partnerships that can support and own the process of change is essential.

At the school, the use of Individualized Intervention Plans (IIP) or Individualized Learning Plans (ILP) is not used in the inclusive classroom to meet the individual needs of students with disabilities which may be a contributing factor to parents concerns that adequate individualized support is not given to their children with disabilities in the inclusive classroom. Stakeholders share that the lack of use of IIPs was influenced by two factors; the challenges with its development (time-consuming and requires a lot of monitoring) and lack of teacher training with its use as a resource in the classroom. Findings are like Crawford (2016) and Gregory (2015) who found limited teacher involvement in IEP development in Canada and limited knowledge of how to use it in the classroom. I support Kovač-Cerović et al. (2016) who assert that using IEP effectively may help overcome barriers that children may be experiencing in access to learning. Therefore, the teachers' inefficiency with its use as a resource is problematic and requires immediate measures to address this issue. This can be facilitated through training sessions by trained professionals who have experience with its development and use. Like Crawford (2016) postulate, effective measures for collaborative training in developing and using IIPs must be considered at the school.

## **Collaboration**

The principal in this case voiced that lack of collaboration between teachers may be influencing effective teaching and learning in inclusive classrooms. There is no Special Education Teacher employed at the primary level; hence, co-teaching and collaboration between a special education teacher and the general education teachers in the inclusive classroom is non-existent. This is consistent with Genovesi et al, (2022) findings who reported poor collaboration among teachers with teachers in inclusive classes receiving extraordinarily little support from their colleagues. Does this mean that co-teaching which involves two general education teachers is not doable and effective? In any context, Mastropieri et al. (2005) argued that teachers who collaborate well together are likely to experience success. Considerations for bringing in a specialist teacher means more money which may cause an increase in private school fees is imperative.

Parents are partners in their children's progress in school. Parents at the school voiced the need for more honest communication between the home and school which involves not only the weaknesses of their children but also strengths, limitations, and changes in their children's learning plan. Blackman et al. (2019) postulate that teacher competence should be the focal point of interrogation toward successful inclusive education in the Caribbean. However, findings from this study reveal that teachers cannot be the sole and most important predictor of successful inclusive education, but rather a collaborative approach with teaching and non-teaching stakeholders. All hands on deck are required. Furthermore, findings support Glaze (2018) assertion that leaders should ensure that the workplace is devoid of fear and leaders embrace the voices of parents and other stakeholders in decision making.

## **Parental involvement as a catalyst for change**

Like Genovesi et al. (2022), findings from this study reveal that parents of children with and without special needs are mostly supportive of their children in inclusive classrooms. Some parents shared that they are active participants in their children's learning which is demonstrated in their constant communication with their children's classroom teachers, reinforcing concepts at home, and even filling in for shadows when they are absent. Thus, the finding supports Afolabi (2014) that getting parents involved is an effective strategy for schools to successfully educate children with disabilities. The involvement of parents was done on the parents' part as the school identified several gaps in their efforts to interact more with families of children in inclusive classrooms, highlighting that the school can do more to encourage parental involvement.

The role of parents in inclusive education at the school is that which Fyelling and Sandvin (1999) describe as an "implementer" where they fulfil the demands of the school and are not seen as a client who is a part of the child's problem. Parents of children with special needs are not involved in their child's learning plans as none is developed. Parents are not a part of the selection process of the shadow [educational assistant] which indicates parents' ignorance of their rights or the process. It may also indicate parents' trust in the school in meeting the needs of their children. For example, Mrs. Turnbull expressed with a sigh "The parents to be, to be honest, people do not know what they do not know and so for the most part, they have been presented with what we have now. So, they are happy with it, not knowing that there could be something better."

This study shows that parental knowledge is crucial in successful learning outcomes for students with disabilities in inclusive classrooms as relying on the school system to provide effective learning outcomes for their children can have negative implications. It is imperative, therefore, that measures are put in place not just by schools but the government to educate and sensitize parents across Jamaica of programs that exist for students with special needs in the country. This study is therefore crucial to help sensitize parents and other stakeholders of the importance of partnership in inclusive education and provide relevant and current data that stakeholders can use to make decisions concerning parental involvement and inclusive education.



## Conclusion

The experiences of stakeholders as shared in this article act as evidence from the lived experiences with inclusive education. According to researchers (Ainscow, 2020; Ainscow et al., 2006; 2012), evidence is the lifeblood of inclusive development and needs to align with presence, participation, and achievement of all students. Engagement with evidence is also crucial as it can provide stimulus for professional learning. Findings from this study show that strong school leadership encompasses support from not just the principals of schools, but members of the school board. Other experiences related to lack of training of teachers and educational assistants, inconsistent student progress, negative and positive impact of educational assistants in the inclusive classroom on students, issues around parental involvement related to denial and attitudes of stakeholders were dominant. Based on the evidence from this study, I advance the following conclusions and recommendations.

1. Teacher competence in methodology, knowledge, and use of IIP's influences the education and support of all students in the inclusive classroom.
2. Shadows in the inclusive classroom have a direct influence on the learning outcomes of students with special needs and their non-disabled peers in inclusive classrooms.
3. A community approach that involves co-teaching and partnering with other institutions/organizations is imperative for identifying and using best practices in the inclusive classroom to foster optimal learning of all students.
4. Parental involvement in inclusive education does not entail the provision of resources and presence at school, but it also encompasses a strong and honest reciprocal communication between home and school for successful monitoring of learning for students with special needs.

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# Orientation Towards Symmathesy and Organizational Markers as Means to Cultivate Art Talent Environments: An Empirical Study Researching the Emergence of Talent Environments for Young Artists

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## Abstract

This article presents a study on the development of art environments for young talented artists across 4 municipalities in the western part of Jutland, Denmark. Within this context and based on systems thinking, neo-systems thinking and a holistic ecological approach to talent development, the researchers identify and describe three transcontextual art talent environments (Off-Track, Film, Show-up). Based on the neo-systemic concepts of symmathesy (Together-learning), *the pivotal point* in this study, was to identify organizational markers in the development of a strong talent infrastructure across the municipalities. This to enable and cultivate the artistic potential of young people.

The research question of the study was: *Which organizational markers cultivate the development of art talent environments in the context of four Danish municipalities in the western part of Jutland?*

The study is based on interviews with seven different public servants from different municipalities in the western part of Jutland and build on a prior research regarding young artists within different artistic fields and their instructors.

Through a generic thematic analysis, four organizational markers were identified (organizing, strategizing, license to operate, and creative places). The paper argues that an orientation towards environments as a symmathesy and towards organizational markers can help organizations improve artistic talent environments across municipalities. Further, the role of public servants as talent stewards is discussed in the discussion.

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**Keywords:** Young artists; organizational markers; Symmathesy; talent development; talent environment; living systems theory; holistic ecological approach.

"Dance is for me a fluid language that can tell much more than words"  
Young Artist

## Introduction

This article presents a study into the collaboration on and emergence of talent environments for young artists (YA) in the western part of Jutland across four municipalities.

In Denmark, municipalities across the country have recognized art (music, dance, literature, painting, film, etc.) as a valuable contribution to the narratives about the municipalities, and thus an important approach to attracting new citizens, tourists, investment and prepare the ground for young people to stay in the municipalities instead of moving to bigger towns. To support this approach, the Danish Ministry of Culture in 2018 launched a project to strengthen the focus on two themes related to promoting art and these include: (1) Local Talent Environments, and (2) Young Elite Career Development.

In the first theme, the ministry wanted to support talent environment projects across the country to ensure that knowledge on the development of art environments was produced and

environments emerged. One of the projects that received support was the project described in this article, which connect 4 municipalities in the Western part of Denmark in collaboration with Aalborg University. The project was designed in two phases:

**First phase:** Identify emergent properties among young artists important to create talent environments. (Nørlem & Stegeager 2022).

**Second phase:** Identify organizational markers in the development of a strong talent infrastructure across the municipalities.

The project is based on research within the field of sport talent environments promoting a holistic ecological approach (Henriksen et al., 2010; Henriksen, 2015;) and on research in talent environments developed within the field of living systems theory (Nørlem & Stegeager, 2021; Nørlem & Stegeager, 2022). To this latter approach, the concept of symmathesy (Bateson, 2015, 2017, 2022, 2023) is introduced. The study seeks to identify organizational markers when municipalities and young people collaborate on creating stimulating and flourishing talent environments. The aim of the study was driven by the following research question:

(RQ1): Which organizational markers cultivate the development of art talent environments in the context of four Danish municipalities in the western part of Jutland?

In the following section, the status of contemporary talent research is outlined and the notion of symmathesy is introduced.

## Theoretical underpinning

In this paragraph, the theoretical foundation of the paper is presented. The paper is based on a group of theories collectively referred to as Systems Theory. It is important to emphasize that this does not pertain to the systems theory by the German sociologist Niklas Luhmann's, but rather the living systems theory developed by Ludwig Bertalanffy. Uri Bronfenbrenner, Gregory Bateson, Fritjof Capra and Nora Bateson.

### *Holistic Ecological Approach (HEA)*

Henriksen et al. (2010; 2011; 2015) and Henriksen & Stambulova (2017) redirects the focus in talent development research from an intra-individual perspective of talent for a focus on the context and ecology in which talent emerges. They employed a holistic ecological approach (HEA), based on systems theory (Bertalanffy, 1969; Bateson, 1972; and Bronfenbrenner, 1979). In short, a holistic ecological approach (HEA) refers to a comprehensive and multidisciplinary perspective used to study and understand the interconnections between talent development and the broader ecological systems in which the talents operate. This approach recognizes that talent development is not isolated activities but is deeply embedded within social, environmental, and cultural contexts. In Mathorne et al. (2021), the researchers add that a holistic ecological approach (HEA) “focuses on the whole environment around a prospective athlete, advocating that although individual factors (e.g., biological and psychological) are important, they cannot stand-alone”. And further, “The HEA, which was inspired by influential frameworks developed in ecological and organizational psychology (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Schein, 1992) suggests that successful talent development is contingent upon the integrated efforts of various stakeholders from both athletic and non-athletic domains and across various levels of an athlete talent development environment (i.e., micro and macro)”. Mathorne et al. (2021) p. 3.

### *Living systems theory – Neo systemic theory*

To further encapsulate the perspective on talent environments, this paper turns to the field of living systems theory (Capra & Luisi, 2014; Bateson, 2015, 2017, 2022, 2023). Based on systems theory and the notion of living systems as a specific kind of systems-within-systems, these authors propose that humans must be perceived as a part of nature – not something that is located outside or above nature.

Further, we have learned that when dealing with living systems, the many variables of developing interaction become untenable to consider in such mechanistic parameters. This change in

concept should spark a significant shift in our work, in the sciences, applied professions, communication, arts, that addresses or depends upon our understanding of life and evolution. The discourse with which we discuss and study the living world eg. Talent environments, should be representative of the living world, and should cautiously avoid connotations that imply or are derived from engineering

To this approach, Bateson (2016) introduces the concept of “*symmathesy*” to catch the essence of the learning processes in living systems. Symmathesy is a combination of two Greek words. From words like *symbiosis* or *synthesis*, she isolates the prefix “*syn*” or “*sym*”, which implies togetherness. This togetherness is then combined with “*mathesi*” which denotes “*to learn*”. Together it becomes “*symmathesy*”, which then denotes *learning-together, together-learning or mutual learning*. She defines it as “the process of transcontextual mutual learning through interaction” (Bateson, 2016, p. 169) and her preliminary definition of learning in the symmathesy becomes: “Learning in symmathesy is the perpetual process of positioning and repositioning, calibrating, shifting, and responding to responses within contexts of multiple, simultaneous interactions” (p. 179).

In a recent article Bateson (2022) presents the reader with a thought-provoking question, to exemplify the notion of symmathesy:

“A tree is learning to be on a hill; its trunk is at an angle to the hill, its branches reach toward the light away from other trees’ shadows, it grows in height according to the nourishment in the soil, and so on. The form of the tree is in-formed by the contextual and transcontextual mutual learning it is in with the other organisms it shares a hillside with. If you want the trunk to be at a 90-degree angle to the ground, instead of the angle the tree has found, the approach will be to manipulate the tree. To do so would, of course, upset the precarious balance the tree has found and other organisms living with the tree. It is better to ask, “How is it learning to be in its world?” and immediately notice how the perception moves from the tree to its contextual responsiveness. Is the crookedness in the tree? Or is it in the context?” (p. 103).

As we see in the example above, learning is not to be understood as a thing the reside in a singular living being but a contextual adaptation to the system that the being is part of. Thus, learning is a function of the complex interplay between the parts of the system. It is – to use another metaphor, like a dance constantly evolving without anyone defining where it must go, or how it should be danced. This is symmathesy as action.

In this paper we look at the ability and role of *organizations* to cultivate art talent. Thus, we aim to see how “symmathesy” as a concept and a perspective on contextual learning can help us identify organizational markers that emerge when municipalities and young people collaborate to create inspirational environments for young artistic talents.

### ***Living systems as organizing***

In order to fulfill the ambition of this paper to identify organizational markers that cultivate artistic potential, a definition of the study’s perspective on organizations must be presented. In line with its theoretical rooting in living systems theory, this paper perceives organizations as complex, adaptive, living systems shaped by interconnectedness and relationships. Tzoukas and Chia (2002) defined organizations as “sites of continuously changing human action. Patterns that are constituted, shaped, and emerging from change. Organization aims at stemming change but, in the process of doing so, it is generated by it” (p. 577)

As mentioned above, our research focus is on the symmathesy emerging in the relationship between public servants of the four municipalities and young artists. The public servants who participated in this interview study, can in this respect be perceived both as representatives of the formal organization (the municipality) and as servants engaging in and developing new patterns emerging through their collaboration with the young artist. In our empirical study, we look for patterns of symmathesys in order to try to identify organizational markers that cultivate emerging art talent environments.

The above theoretical foundation is further elaborated in Nørlem and Stegeager (2021; 2022). It aims at supporting the complex understanding of organization as organizing, emergence and symmathesy at the same time. This becomes the field of research in the empirical turn following below.

### ***Empirical contexts, methods and data collection***

Below, the three art talent environments participating in this study are presented.

#### **1. The film art environment**

The film art environment is located at the main campus of the Danish Talent Academy and at the art center “The Butchery” in Holstebro. On the main campus students have access to a cinema, as well as professional equipment for film productions. “The Butchery” holds a cutting suite, common room, and an office room with its own office space available, which can be used as much as the young artists want outside of classes. The film art environment consists of two parallel parts: joint and the independent practice. In addition to one permanent teacher, teaching is largely conducted by professional guest teachers who, through hands-on workshops with their own expertise, introduce the students to many different methods and artistic works.

#### **2. The Off Track art environment**

Off Track is situated in a borderland of festivals and flourishing youth art environments. A living sanctuary where relationships are created and challenged on a foundation of fun, food, music, and much more. Through a festival with a focus on music, the intention is to show young people what dance, film, and other creative art forms can offer. Off Track seek to gather all young people in Lemvig (a small municipality in the most western part of Denmark) and the surrounding municipalities in a community that (as they say themselves) “brings culture down to earth”. Currently the Off Track festival collaborates with primary schools, secondary schools, cultural institutions, and artistic environments in the four municipalities. Each municipality has a talent consultant who is the local Off Track coordinator.

#### **3. The Show-Up art environment**

Show-Up is a talent project created by young artists in collaboration between the Danish Talent Academy and the four municipalities. It is a community of committed young people who actively contribute to cultural life. They experiment with art challenges, new inspiration, and the opportunity to test new ideas for the benefit of others across the four municipals including young people of all ages. Among other projects, Show-Up creates events where young artists affiliated with Show-Up create cultural and artistic days at the elementary schools in the municipalities.

## **Methods**

This study is a mixed method research combining fieldwork, participant observation, and interviews.

It is based on interviews with seven public servants from different municipalities (PS1-PS7) and builds on a prior interview study of six young artists (YA1-YA6) within different fields of art and five instructors (I1-I5).

In addition, 20 hours of fieldwork and participant observation were conducted at both strategic meetings, artistic rehearsals, and at the youth festival “Show-up” where dialogues on-site with youth organizers, facilitators, participants, and public servants, and politicians were conducted. Traditionally Fieldwork is a social practice concerned with the study of cultures. In this study, it is concerned with the emergence of talent environments through the focus of symmathesy (occurrence of together-learning). “It is a technique of gathering research material by subjecting the self – body, belief, personality, emotions, cognitions – to a set of contingencies that play on others such that over time – one can more or less see, hear, feel, and come to understand the kinds of responses others display (and withhold) in particular social situations”. (Maanen, 2011, p. 151).



The selection of data must occur in any scientific recording and exposition, but it is important that the principles of selection be stated. In the field we were guided by major assumptions, e.g.) that the role, behavior and relations of the public servants towards the young artists were somehow important. We therefore oriented ourselves towards contexts and sequences (symmathesy) where this sort of relationship played out. A broad range of fieldnotes were taken while participating in various events and classes were subsequently coded. However, as Maanen (2011) reminds us, fieldnotes are always incomplete, filled in later by memory of an accurate quixotic sort. Choices of topics, frameworks, and substantive domains emerge only after considerable thought and experimentation. Analysis never ends. “And all writing is of course rewriting and rewriting and rewriting. In short, learning in and out of the field is uneven, usually unforeseen, and rests more on a logic of discovery and happenstance than on logic of verification and plan. It is anything but predictable or linear” (Maanen, 2011, p. 153).

### *Warm data*

In addition to the above data collection, other rather curious types of data selection did occur. During the participation in dances, singing, writing workshops, selling food etc., a bodily sense of community emerged within the researchers. The notion of warm data (Bateson, 2022) is interesting in this perspective. In a special issue of the journal 'Unpsychology' Bateson (2022) begins her description of the notion of warm data with this poem:

Of all the things I write about,  
I find data that doesn't call to me.  
Its straight-edged corners make me doubt  
That soul or spirit have a place to be.

We gather facts and figures in a row;  
interrogate them all until  
cold results are all we know  
as sureness leads us where it will.

Yet, as we see the world as black and white  
with hard solutions all to hand,  
we miss a glimpse of something out of sight,  
another way of life we could demand.

Between the lines there lies a way:  
Warm Data can relax and dance and play.  
(p. 9)

Bateson's (2022) interest in science that goes beyond the traditional perspectives of information and data in an attempt to incorporate the moreness of the alive, brings her to suggest a broadening of the concept of data. She does this through the notion of warm data, which she defines as "...the information that is alive within the transcontextual relating of a living system" (p.14). Warm data can be a smile, looking joyfully in the eyes of others, mimicking behavior on the dance floor, a constant helping and reaching out to each other etc. It is both wiggly and unpredictable, and sometimes invisible. By introducing the term transcontextuality she seeks to dissolve the traditional separations we install when looking for data. This means that we sometimes categorize data into predefined traditional categories. Bateson (2022) challenges these preconditions and opens up for new perspectives and novel experience through warm data.

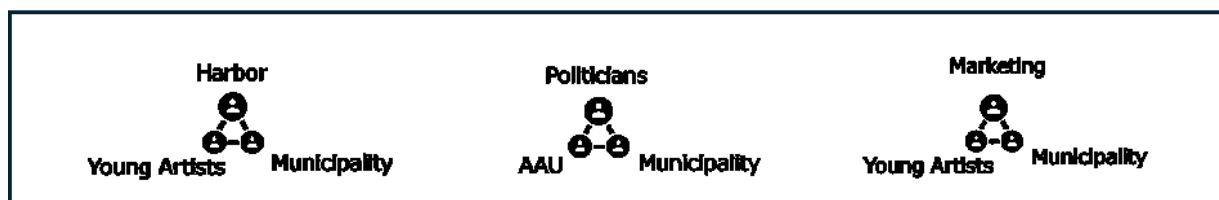
Orientating us towards warm data helps us temporarily grasp a sense of direction, a sense of wholeness, a sense of the living, and a sense of becoming. In our study, we tried to catch and temporarily sustain warm data in order to identify the sense of wholeness relating the traditional data to each other. As an example, warm data guided the researchers towards an understanding of youth ownership of the place. The leisure use of a stair on the harbor of Struer (a small city in one of the municipalities), smiling and dancing under the ceiling of the factory, painting street art on the walls, and floors etc.

### ***Selection and analysis***

After returning to the university, 500 pages of interviews were transcribed along with 100 pages of fieldnotes. The fieldnotes were coded after the situations from where they occurred as symmathesys

In our coding approach, we oriented ourselves towards organizing symmathesys. This included pieces of text expressing situations of:

1. at least three entities included in the dialogue. (see symmathesys below – figure 1.)



**Figure 1:** Symmathesys

2. A sense of mutual curiosity, openness, and appreciation present in the dialogue.
  - E.g., “In fact, I think that they themselves were quite good at understanding the seriousness of security having to be in place”. PS2
3. An idea of movement, transformation or mutual learning taking place in the dialogue.
  - E.g., “I think that there is competence in being able to work with mistakes, in the understanding of learning. In other words, learning typically comes through making mistakes. And it is also a competence of the young artists that they both know it and can understand it and can work with it and in some way also accept it. PS3

Further we approached the data three times over a period of two months inspired by Revsbæk and Tanggard (2015). They described how researchers engaged with emergent qualitative data over time. They state that observing how different parts of various interviews convey diverse significance to the listening researcher at different times and can become a method of continuously unfolding the empirical material in a reflexive, breakdown-oriented process of analysis. This has to some extent been our approach to the interview and observation data collected in the project. We re-engaged with the data in a back-and-forth movement while remaining observant of emergent patterns coming together as “emergent properties” over time (Nørlem & Stegeager, 2022).

## **Results – elements of emergent learning identified in practice as organization markers.**

In this section, we present the results of our analysis. In our data we looked for significant learnings emerging in three symmathesys. These symmathesys include: 1) The film art environment, 2) The Off-track art environment, and 3) The Show-UP art environment. The implication of this symmathesys perspective gives weight to data collected in the interactions, intersections, and relationality of the living. The findings fall into four broad categories describing different organizational markers present both in the support of and emergence of cross-regional art talent environments. Furthermore, the role of the public servants in the symmathesys, were identified and will be discussed.

### **1. Organizing**

The first organizational marker in our findings is named Organizing. The public servants collaborated with the young artists to create minimal organizational and dynamic structures that opened opportunities for combining activities and knowledge. They allowed for the young people to participate in a continuous renegotiation and adjustment of the emerging organizations so that

they matched the flow of activity while at the same time creating a sense of community or ownership and belonging to the emergent art environment - an identity.

“PS6 did a lot with the young artists and coordinated new organizations with them in advance of events and in course of time to create a fit to the current needs, and we could see that there was a need for us to have him as the project manager on this project, as he was not one of the traditional public servants”. (PS1)

“The young artists had someone to turn to and shouldn’t turn to the municipality directly. Sometimes, when I met them, they had changed the organization and brought another young artist on board, or created a new event etc”. (PS2)

When the above dialogue takes place in public offices, online, on the Harbor of Struer or in other locations, being in relation to this organizational marker, is a constant together-learning that takes place in the symmathesy, where both Public Servants and Young Artists are learning about how to organize, adjust, and deliver the needed results. Almost no time is spent on trying to define the organization, because no one actually knows what kind of organizing will be helpful in the current situation. Instead, the public servants allow for space to move with the potentiality of the situation and thus creates room for contextual learning. From our data, it seems very likely that mutual orientation toward organizing in the symmathesy is helpful in the creation of art talent environments – especially if both public servants and young artists can invite this marker into the dialogue.

## 2. Supporting "license to operate"

The second organizational marker is called License to operate. Research indicates that when talking about “*License to operate*” (Howard-Greenwille et al., 2008), we talk about the basic presence of dialogues on security in place at an event, handling the project economy, securing transport for artists across municipals, handling of traditional media, understanding the concept of politics in culture strategies in the municipals etc. This also applies to our research and is related to the emergence of an art talent environment. In the symmathesy, a call and need for support to navigate in this field and at the same time to learn from it became evident. The public servants demonstrated both a responsibility towards the municipality such that no one was harmed from an accident or money misused, and at the same time a responsibility towards the young artists and their learning potential was ensured. As shown below, the municipality was good at being aware of this need in the emergence of the art talent environment.

PS1 is asked how he participated in Show Up on the harbor in Struer;

“When you arrange an art event with 200 young participants, you don’t necessarily want things to go wrong, like if 25 young people end up in the cold water of the harbor and die. After all, this is something that people and politicians in town might be insecure about. Especially if you say that a youth art center will be placed on a dark harbor and they themselves arrange everything. My role is to ask questions on security, economy etc. and assist in making it happen, if they themselves fail to deliver. (PS1)

Another public servant supplements this perspective:

“And then sometimes the young people came to me, and they said that they had some questions. It could be a lot of all these practical things with ... What about permits? What about toilet vans? What about fences? How do you deal with lifeguards? What about smoking? So yes.... in practical, how to run events?” (PS2)

In the dialogues, together-learning or mutual learning appeared as eg. When the public servant learned what the young people knew about security in a certain situation, and elaborated on their knowledge and actions. In this way a micro talent environment emerged. The same thing happened in relation to the Off Track environment.

“In relation to the budgeting process, we loosely monitored what they've bought for the events, and they managed it fine, I think. We spent little money. The learning is that first of all, the

budget is not huge. That's the one thing. What can go wrong! And then... we could just feel that in everything the young people talked about, that they were always conscious about saving money. They could ask; *if we can make it cheaper, is it maybe possible to buy X or Y?* So, we felt that they had an awareness of the importance to keep the budget – even though some of the shopping was a bit out of a traditional guideline of a municipality”. (PS3+PS4)

The learning identified under this organizational marker is a testament to how young artists grew into understanding the framework. This growth was also present when young artists arranged artistic events such as concerts, exhibitions, musicals etc. However, the young artists do not lose energy by drowning in procedures and budget control. It makes the public servant aware of how the young artists approach and talk about economy and security etc. without forcing too many structures on them at one time.

Mutual orientation toward dialogue, action, and awareness with respect to a “license to operate” in the symmathesy is helpful and necessary to the creation of art talent environments.

### 3. Creative spacemaking

The third organizational marker is creative space making. In our data, we noticed that release of artistic potential increased when young people experience having a space (temporary or permanent) in which they can express themselves (physical/virtual). It creates identity, belonging, continuity, opportunity and liberates ideas. Thorning et al. (2018) distinguished between five different qualities of a creative space as they write that a given space can be: 1) a knowledge processor, 2) an indicator of organizational culture. 3) a process enabler providing an appropriate infrastructure, 4) a social dimension, or 5) a source of stimulation. One of the spaces we visited and participated in was a part of the Show Up environment, where young people in the town of Struer long have been asking for their own cultural meeting place. From 2021 it became a reality, since Struer City Council decided to release funds for a new center for youth culture at Struer Harbor –

#### The Siloes.

“So, they’ve actually got a silo down there on the harbor, that the young artists can work from. With this opportunity to be able to gather a bunch of young people to do something creative, it is quite obvious that maybe something permanent can become of it”. (PS6)

“Young people need to know that we take them seriously and listen to them when they demand a new youth culture environment where they can meet and cultivate their interests in a strong and committed community. Therefore, we are now establishing a new and inspiring cultural center for young people at the port of Struer. It is the young people's own place and the young people themselves play a central role in the form of the present,” says chairman of the cultural and leisure committee PS7. (PS7)

In this example, the municipality acknowledged the need for a creative space where young artists can belong and unfold their potential in art and performance. The researchers also experienced an old factory in Holsterbro, and a traditional shop in the main street of Vinderup, a small town in Holsterbro municipality, which were transformed into creative spaces, supporting one or more of the qualities stated above. In addition to a physical space, we had the privilege of experiencing first hand the emergence of an online film art environment suddenly evolving during the national lockdown due to the corona virus. In this online collaborative space, young artists met across different disciplines within art, and worked together online with the solo access to concrete equipment;

“They have access to expensive filming equipment and to use the cutting applications for three days or they used access to projectors and a screen for movie views or we support the creative placemaking with a visit from an instructor or an audio technician online.” (PS3)

This combination of online sense of community and physical access to relevant filmmaking gear made the film environment a great success and in 2020 they won a talent award at the Odense film festival.

Our study indicates that the ability to co-create space together is extremely important when trying to foster talent environments. As our cases underline, Public servants must walk a fine line between offering enough support to facilitate the evolution of talent environments without taking over and thus excluding the young artist from the learning process. Mutual orientation toward creative space making and the power of place in the symmathesy is helpful to the creation of art talent environments and to the becoming identity of the young artists.

#### 4. Strategizing

The fourth organizational marker is called Strategizing. The word itself is once again inspired by Weick (1979) and Chia & Holt (2009). It invites us to look for movement and evolving public strategies. Traditional approaches to strategy in public offices (Mintzberg, 1998) tend to adhere to a stable, top down strategy in terms of different cultural visions, themes, and actions in a municipality. A strategy is an important tool in top management, and public servants must orientate their actions towards the expected outcome. In our data, we see examples of public servants setting the young artists free from the current strategy, while at the same time informing the strategists (top management in public office) about movements “on the ground” to incorporate these continuous changes in the current strategy. In this sense, the strategy becomes alive and a living framework to the young artists, not a straitjacket. Below PS1 explains how he tries to relate to the young artists on issues regarding strategy;

“There are a lot of strategic direction and structures we set up, from our world view (Public servants), and the young artists tend to challenge those structures, don't they? By becoming comfortable with each other (Public servants and young artists) and getting to know each other, it became more acceptable to challenge the strategic direction by through novel actions.” (PS1)

Further

“It was important not to try to steer them in any particular strategic direction. Instead, my goal was to give them the opportunity to learn themselves – empowering them to see the strategy that emerges. We decided to believe that they were capable of handling the challenges themselves (eg. strategizing). firm in the belief that if things went wrong, that would be a valuable lesson learned as well”. (PS1)

Strategizing in this respect can be seen as a back and forth responsiveness to both dialogue and to novel actions between the public servants and the young artists. These forms of interaction serve both the overall direction of the municipality, if the politicians listen, the authentic public communication about what is going on within the city or municipality, and the young artist learning while engaging in the above.

### Discussion

From traditional systems theory, we learned that context matters and that decoding contextual markers influence the actions and/or language in the context. In neo-systemic theory (Capra & Luisi, 2014; Bateson, 2015, 2017, 2022, 2023) we orient towards a constantly changing context as the organization evolves over time. This means that the actions creating the organizational markers above are interwoven and interlinked. The idea of the municipality as an organization is temporarily dissolved and the emerging art environments are constantly in a phase of becoming or accommodating, combining, and responding to responses in the present. In practical terms, our findings indicate that talent environments like those described in this paper cannot emerge through tightly scheduled and unalterable public procedures. Therefore, it is important to “dance the dance” so to speak, to orient one-self towards the warm data guiding the liberation of art potential, and to dive further into this “dance”. To further answer our research question, we asked the following question:

- What is the unique role of the public servant “in the middle”? and How is authority and empowerment balanced?

## Talent steward.

Across the four organizational markers, a new and interesting pattern of interaction emerged in the symmathesies in focus. It was as if the relation between the young artists and the public servants invited a new quality into the relationships. We call this quality *the talent steward*. When researching and engaging into the relationships and communication between the young artists and the public servants an interesting pattern in the symmathesies emerged.

The public servants who take a mediating role in the intersection between the rules and regulations of the municipality and the free flowing streaming of more or less impossible ideas amongst the young artists, explicated an ability to see potential, investigate possibilities, wonder with the young artists and ask probing and supporting questions in this way creating openings for talent propping environments to flourish. This could be called a coaching or growth mindset. We call the position they rotate into as *the talent steward*.

“It's a bit of a challenge to work with young people who live in the present and who at the same time have to take part in processes that take – in their opinion - far too long, right?” PS1 Off Track. (PS1)

The example above, PS1, shows an understanding of the young mind and the challenges in combining this youthful impatience with the rigorous and time consuming working procedures of public organizations. This is an example of a plastic/dynamic mindset. PS3 from the Film environment expresses a similar mindset in his engagement with the young artists:

“Things can come from below, i.e., pure anarchy, no one having any direction whatsoever like some kind of grassroots movement. And then it can come from above, the hierarchical angle. That's the school version, right? And then the young artists say that neither of these two approaches are good enough in principle, it must come neither from above nor from below, it must come from in-between. And from in-between means that I facilitate meetings that specifically try to offer several levels of engagement – places and situation that allows for them to express themselves”. PS3 - Film environment (PS3)

In this example, the public servant listens and adjusts his knowledge and material to meet the voices of the young artists. He challenges his own expert position and meets the young artists from an in-between-position. This position, has a both-and-quality, where learning emerges as together-learning in the present. As a final example, PS4 from the Show Up environment, continues her sensing into the organizational symmathesy on stress and other balances in the system:

“After all, we could feel that they (young artists) balanced the workload well. So it's not like we had the feeling that any of them were about to collapse with stress, and others slacked off like crazy”. PS4 Show Up environment. (PS4)

Again, PS4 balances the interaction with the young artists, does not limit them but attempts to assist them in learning to know signs of fatigue, stress or other imbalances.

To conclude the discussion on the quality of “The talent steward”, we identified plasticity and movement in the symmathesy, between taking authority and facilitating empowerment. We experienced and documented a sliding between control and distributed freedom. It was as if a gentle back and forth movement took place in all the different symmathesies we engaged with. Defined by the words of Gregory Bateson, the talent stewards are like: The acrobat on the high wire who maintains his stability by continual correction of his imbalance (Bateson, 1979, p. 78).

## Conclusion/ findings

The pivotal point of this study was to identify organizational markers in the development of strong talent infrastructures across the municipalities. This to enable and cultivate the artistic potential of young people in the western part of Jutland specifically and to broaden art in general.

This paper contributes to the literature about artistic talent development and argues that an orientation towards *four* “organizational markers” can help organizations improve the development of artistic talent environments. These organizational markers include:

- (1) *Organizing*: The ability of the municipal to co-organize the young artists, to a point where the organizing is helpful and not limiting in relation to their potential.
- (2) *License to operate*: The ability of the municipal to assist young performing artists in the learning process of working with both their art, and the fundamental needs of festivals, programs, events, tours etc. These could be financial planning, security, cleaning up, writing up contracts etc.
- (3) *Creative space making*: The ability of the municipal to identify spaces (physical or online) that create sense of community, sense of home or belonging to the artists. It is important to include the artists in the co-creation of these.
- (4) *Strategizing*: The ability of the municipal to open up the strategy on culture, to be informed and co-created by the young artists on an ongoing basis (strategizing), in contrary to a four year strategy.

Further findings emerged in the discussion about the quality of the role of public servants called “*talent stewardship*”. Here, balanced work with the young artists between “control and freedom” was identified as important and in this role – “Working-in-between” – a more plastic, growth mindset was identified.

The limitation or struggles of this study is its inherent anti-reductionist approach, that try to keep the world and the work open and complex to capture emergence rather than fixed entities. It can challenge other scholars in grasping and researching further with the findings. The authors of this study will continue to learn and work with the complexities of neo-systems theory in talent research and hope others will follow.

This study shows potential towards the creation of art talent environments and invites further empirical studies on the unfolding of the organizational markers and the role of the talent stewardship internally in organizations and across fields. Further theoretical work on symmathesy in the field of organizational learning is also needed.

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# The Psychometric Properties of the Torrance Tests of Creative Thinking Figural Form A

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## Abstract

The Torrance Tests of Creative Thinking Figural Forms A and B are widely used to measure creative potential. Despite their common application in research, there has been a lack of focus on the psychometric properties of the tests. Thus, the scoring of the items is based on some unexamined hypotheses. The items are hypothesized to be equally difficult, and the response categories are hypothesized to be equally distributed. Additionally, it is hypothesized that the items measure a single cognitive factor for each creative thinking skill and that each creative thinking skill is a different cognitive factor. Given the impact of these hypotheses on the validity of the test scores, it is crucial to investigate these four hypotheses. In the present study, Rasch-based analyses and correlation analyses were conducted to examine all these hypotheses for Form A. The data were collected from 157 second-grade students in Turkey. The findings showed that a) the items were equally difficult for only elaboration, internal visualization, and humor; b) the response categories were equally distributed for only resistance to premature closure and elaboration; c) the items measured a single cognitive factor for each creative thinking skill; and d) certain creative thinking skills were highly correlated ( $r \geq .90$ ). Overall, the items in Form A possess sufficient quality for assessing the majority of the creative thinking skills. Nevertheless, some revisions to the scoring of the items may be needed.

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**Keywords:** Torrance Tests of Creative Thinking; Rasch measurement theory; dimensionality; item difficulty; response category difficulty.

## Introduction

Assessment of the potential for creativity has been a primary research interest for years (Mednick, 1968; Runco et al., 2001; Torrance, 1984; Wilson et al., 1953). Several types of instruments, such as the Remote Associates Test (Mednick, 1968) and the Torrance Tests of Creative Thinking (Torrance, 1966, 1984), were developed for this purpose. However, the Torrance Tests of Creative Thinking (TTCT) Figural Forms A and B (Torrance, 1984) are possibly the most prominent (Kaufman et al., 2008). The TTCT-Figural Forms are commonly used for creativity research (Krumm et al., 2014; Palaniappan & Torrance, 2001) and for the identification of creatively gifted students (Hunsaker et al., 1991; Kaufman et al., 2012).

The TTCT-Figural Forms hold significant importance for educators, practitioners, and researchers in different fields, as the tests provide a valuable framework for assessing various creative thinking skills (Kaufman et al., 2008; Torrance, 1984). The TTCT-Figural Forms provide insights into students' creative thinking skills, allowing educators to monitor the development of their students' creative potential over time. Practitioners, such as psychologists and counselors, can use the tests to identify and support gifted students with distinctive creative abilities (Kaufman et al., 2012). Additionally, the tests can assist practitioners in designing personalized interventions that target specific aspects of creativity, fostering a more nuanced approach to talent development. Researchers benefit from the tests to explore the relationships between creativity and various factors, such as age, culture, and educational level (Cheng et al., 2010; Kim & VanTassel-Baska, 2010; Matud & Grande, 2007; Wechsler, 2006; Zhang et al., 2020). Overall, the TTCT-Figural Forms serve as useful tools in assessing, examining, nurturing, and understanding the creative potential levels of individuals in different populations.

The TTCT-Figural Forms were developed in 1966 but underwent updates to their current versions in 1984 (Torrance, 1984). Both forms consist of three subtests, each containing a certain number of visual stimuli (i.e., items). The first subtest has one item, the second subtest has 10 items, and the third subtest has 30 items. In each subtest, examinees are instructed to draw pictures using the items as the starting points and to give a title to each drawing (Torrance, 2006a, 2006b).

The current versions of the TTCT-Figural Forms measure 18 creative thinking skills. Five of the creative thinking skills are norm-referenced, and they are called fluency, originality, elaboration, abstractness of titles, and resistance to premature closure (Torrance et al., 1992). The other 13 creative thinking skills are criterion-referenced, and they are labeled as the creative strengths (Torrance et al., 1992). The creative strengths include emotional expressiveness, storytelling articulateness, movement or action, expressiveness of titles, synthesis of incomplete figures, synthesis of lines or circles, unusual visualization, internal visualization, extending or breaking boundaries, humor, richness of imagery, colorfulness of imagery, and fantasy.

When responses are scored for the TTCT-Figural Forms, a response to an item is interpreted in a different way for each creative thinking skill measured on that item (Torrance et al., 1992). For instance, responses to the items in the second subtest are evaluated in 16 different ways and scored for 16 different creative thinking skills. Therefore, the tests provide different subscores based on different interpretations of the same responses. Each form of the TTCT-Figural can be thought of as an instrument that can be used as 18 different tests, each of which is composed of the exact same items and is given the exact same responses.

Elaboration, abstractness of titles, and resistance to premature closure are manifested to varying degrees in a response (Torrance et al., 1992). Thus, responses are scored in a polytomous manner (i.e., scored with partial credit) for these three creative thinking skills, and they can be referred to as the polytomously scored creative thinking skills. The remaining creative thinking skills are either manifested in a response or not manifested and thus are scored in a dichotomous manner (i.e., 0 or 1). A score of 0 indicates that a creative thinking skill is not manifested, while a score of 1 indicates that the creative thinking skill is manifested. Those creative thinking skills can be referred to as the dichotomously scored creative thinking skills.

During scoring, all the items are treated to be equally difficult for each of the 18 creative thinking skills (Torrance et al., 1992). Thus, the manifestation of a creative thinking skill is given the same score across the items. Additionally, the response categories are treated to be equally distributed for abstractness of titles and resistance to premature closure (Torrance et al., 1992). Therefore, the distance between any two subsequent response categories is considered to be equal across the categories, and the response categories increase by one unit. For instance, 0-1-2 scoring is used for resistance to premature closure, and 0-1-2-3 scoring is used for abstractness of titles. Similarly, it is accepted that each additional requires the same amount of increase in ability to be added to a response for elaboration (Torrance et al., 1992).

## Reliability of the test scores

The reliability of scores on the TTCT-Figural Forms ranges from acceptable to good. The internal consistency reliability coefficient over .90 was reported for the total score in the test manual (Torrance, 2008, 2017). Reliability coefficients over .70 were estimated in different studies, indicating that the tests provide scores with sufficient reliability (Ferrando, 2004; Ferrando et al., 2007; Krumm & Lemos, 2011; Liu, 2020, 2022; Liu et al., 2020; López, 2001; Prieto et al., 2003).

## Validity of the test scores

Previous studies found weak correlations ( $r < .20$ ) between scores on the TTCT-Figural Forms and scores on intelligence tests, providing evidence for discriminant validity (Cho et al., 2010; Palaniappan, 2008; Yong, 1994). As for predictive validity, the test manual (Torrance, 2008, 2017)

reported a significant correlation ( $r = .51$ ) between the test scores and adult creative achievements. Moreover, predictive validity coefficients of .43 (Cramond et al., 2005) and .40 (Runco et al., 2010) were estimated 40 years and 50 years after administering the tests, respectively.

On the other hand, evidence for the internal structure of the tests is inconsistent. Some studies suggested that the tests are unidimensional (Aliotti et al., 1975; Clapham, 1998, 2004), whereas others indicated otherwise (Antunes & Almeida, 2007; Humble et al., 2018; Prieto et al., 2006). Two-factor (Bart et al., 2017; Humble et al., 2018; Kim, 2006; Kim et al., 2006; Krumm et al., 2014), three-factor (Antunes & Almeida, 2007; Auzmendi et al., 1996; Ferrando, 2006; Oliveira, 2007), and four-factor (Prieto et al., 2006) structures were identified in previous studies. A meta-analysis study (Said-Metwaly et al., 2018) provided evidence that supports a two-factor structure.

## **Fairness of the test scores**

Fairness was examined in terms of gender (Awamleh et al., 2012; Buitink, 2017; Campos et al., 2000; Cheng et al., 2010; Kim et al., 2006; Kim & VanTassel-Baska, 2010; Matud & Grande, 2007; Zhang et al., 2020), ethnicity (Cheng et al., 2010; Palaniappan, 2008; Saeki et al., 2001; Tran, 2004), and socioeconomic status (Hermon et al., 2018; Johnson, 1974; Ogletree & Ujlaki, 1973; Voss, 1997). On no occasion did examinees in one group (females) consistently score significantly higher than did examinees in that group's counterpart (males). In some study settings, examinees in one group scored higher than examinees in its counterpart. However, in other study settings, the difference shifted or disappeared (Cheng et al., 2010; Kim & VanTassel-Baska, 2010; Matud & Grande, 2007).

## **Statement of the problem**

Despite considerable research on the reliability, validity, and fairness of scores on the TTCT-Figural Forms, certain psychometric properties of the tests remain unexamined. There is a lack of evidence with regard to item difficulty for all the creative thinking skills and the distributions (difficulty levels) of the response categories for the polytomously scored creative thinking skills. Furthermore, evidence for the internal structure of the tests is insufficient and disputable (Almeida et al., 2008; Heausler & Thompson, 1988; Kaufman et al., 2008; Kazelskis, 1972; Zeng et al., 2011). There are no data based on item-level analyses that show whether a single cognitive factor loads on the items for each creative thinking skill and whether each creative thinking skill is a different cognitive factor.

The factor analysis studies addressed the internal structure of the TTCT-Figural Forms, but there are some issues concerning those studies. For instance, prior to factor analyzing the tests, each creative thinking skill was already treated to be a different cognitive factor. Moreover, it was accepted that a single cognitive factor loads on the items for a creative thinking skill. Additionally, subtest scores on the norm-referenced creative thinking skills were used for factor analyzing the tests, instead of item scores. Researchers omitted item scores, treated each creative thinking skill as one item, used the subscore on each creative thinking skill as the item score, and conducted the analyses at the subscore level (Auzmendi et al., 1996; Heausler & Thompson, 1988; Kim, 2006). As a result, this procedure resulted in factor reduction. It should also be noted that the creative strengths were not included in the analyses of those factor analysis studies.

Researchers did not conduct item-level analyses in previous studies, and therefore factors identified in the factor analysis studies did not correspond to any of the creative thinking skills measured on the tests. For example, Bart et al. (2017), Kim (2006), and Said-Metwaly et al. (2018) identified a two-factor model and treated those two factors as two types of creative personality. They argued that those factors were the innovative type of creative personality and the adaptive type of creative personality. Furthermore, they argued that the innovative factor loads on fluency and originality and that the adaptive factor loads on elaboration, abstractness of titles, and resistance to premature closure. However, without conducting item-level analyses and examining dimensionality for each creative thinking skill, one cannot be sure about these arguments.

The lack of evidence on item difficulty, response category difficulty, and the internal structure of the tests led researchers to accept certain hypotheses as true. These hypotheses are based on Torrance et al. (1992) and can be summarized as the following:

1. The items are at the same difficulty level for each creative thinking skill.
2. The response categories are equally distributed for abstractness of titles and resistance to premature closure. With respect to elaboration, each additional detail requires the same amount of increase in ability to be added to a response.
3. The items measure a single cognitive factor for each creative thinking skill.
4. Each creative thinking skill is a different cognitive factor.

Due to the absence of evidence, these hypotheses raise concerns about the scoring of the items and the validity of the test scores. If the items are not equally difficult and the response categories are not equally distributed, the validity of the test scores degrades because in this scenario, the ability levels of examinees could not be properly captured by the current scoring. Additionally, if the items do not measure a single cognitive factor for any of the creative thinking skills, the item scores based on a sole criterion become problematic. This is problematic because the item scores could not capture all the cognitive factors impacting responses for that creative thinking skill. Finally, if each creative thinking skill is not a different cognitive factor, total test scores are inflated for some examinees. The reason is that the same cognitive factor would be scored more than once under different creative thinking skills.

## Purpose of the study

It is crucial to seek statistical evidence for the aforementioned four hypotheses, as they impact the item scoring and test validity. The primary objective of the present study is to conduct Rasch-based analyses and correlation analyses to examine those hypotheses for the TTCT-Figural Form A. The use of Rasch-based analyses makes the present study significant in comparison to other studies on the TTCT-Figural Forms because no previous study has applied Rasch measurement theory to the tests. With regard to its focus, the current study is the first of its kind. By addressing those four hypotheses, the present study will provide evidence for the internal structure of the test and show whether the scoring of the items are based on sound evidence.

## Method

### Participants

The participants were 157 second-grade students (83 girls; 52.87%) from northwestern Turkey. The students were enrolled in four different public schools. As a result of the researcher's personal connections with the principals of those schools, the sampling process was conducted using the convenience sampling method.

Due to the ages of the participants, the parents were informed about the study and were provided with a consent form. Two hundred and eight parents granted permission for their children, but 15 students did not participate due to absence or unwillingness. Thirty-six students were excluded from the analyses because those students did not respond to all the items analyzed in the study. There were no missing observations in the data.

### Instrument

The TTCT-Figural Form A (Torrance, 1984) was administered. The item in Subtest 1, all 10 items in Subtest 2, and the first six items in Subtest 3 were analyzed. Given that each item in Subtest 3 is a pair of parallel lines, each item in the subtest was expected to work the same. However, item location may potentially affect the item parameters. Thus, to take the effect of item location into account, the first six items were analyzed.



## **Test administration**

The subtests were administered sequentially. The examinees were able to respond to the item in Subtest 1 and to a sufficient number of items in Subtest 3 within the 10-minute time limit. Several examinees were unable to respond to all 10 items in Subtest 2 within the 10-minute time limit. Those examinees were provided with an additional 15 minutes of time so that each examinee could respond to all 10 items. This decision was based on Cohen and Swerdlik's (1999) suggestion in which they recommended that researchers provide extra time to all examinees if speed is not the object and if the purpose is to examine test properties.

## **Scoring process**

As a certified scorer of the TTCT-Figural Forms, the author scored the tests. Another certified scorer scored 10% of the tests, and then the inter-rater reliability coefficients were estimated. The inter-rater reliability coefficients were used to check whether all the tests were scored accurately (Tinsley & Weiss, 1975). With the exception of elaboration, the items were scored following the guidelines provided by Torrance et al. (1992).

During the conventional scoring for elaboration, each item is not given an elaboration score. Rather, the scoring involves counting the number of details in a subtest. Accordingly, a subtest is treated as a single item, and a score based on the total number of details in the entire subtest is assigned as the elaboration score (Ball & Torrance, 1984; Torrance et al., 1992). For instance, in Subtest 1 in Form A, 1 point is given if there are 0-5 details, 2 points are given if there are 6-12 details, 3 points are given if there are 13-19 details, 4 points are given if there are 20-26 details, 5 points are given if there are 27-33 details, and 6 points are given if there are more than 33 details in total in the subtest (Torrance et al., 1992). Similar scoring is done for Subtests 2 and 3.

To examine the individual items for elaboration, a different type of scoring was employed. The following criteria were used. For up to five details, the number of details in an item was assigned as the elaboration score. For instance, if there were three details, the item was given 3 points. For six or more details, the item was given 6 points. This type of scoring made it possible to analyze the items using the rating scale model (Andrich, 1978).

## **Analyses**

Prior to conducting the Rasch-based analyses and correlation analyses, means and standard deviations were estimated. Additionally, Cronbach's  $\alpha$  (Cronbach, 1951) values were computed to check the reliability of the test scores.

### ***Rasch analyses***

The dichotomous Rasch model (Rasch, 1960) and the rating scale model (Andrich, 1978) were used for analyzing the first, second, and third hypotheses. The dichotomously scored creative thinking skills were analyzed through the dichotomous Rasch model, as the model is used for binary data. The polytomously scored creative thinking skills were analyzed through the rating scale model because the model was developed for analyzing Likert-type items (Likert, 1974). Separate analyses were conducted for each creative thinking skill. FACETS Version 3.65.0 (Linacre, 2009) was used for the analyses.

To investigate the first hypothesis, the difficulty levels of the items were estimated for each creative thinking skill, and the number of item groups regarding difficulty was checked using strata statistics (Linacre, 2017; Wright & Masters, 2002). Additionally, to determine whether the difficulty levels of the items will be stable across samples, item reliability indices were estimated (Bond & Fox, 2015). The item reliability index is recommended to be over .90 (Fox & Jones, 1998; Linacre, 2016).

To examine the second hypothesis, Rasch-Thurstone thresholds (Linacre, 2003; Thurstone, 1928) were estimated for elaboration, abstractness of titles, and resistance to premature closure. Rasch-Thurstone thresholds show the difficulty levels of the response categories for a polytomously scored item (Bond & Fox, 2015). Additionally, to check whether the response categories function properly, outfit mean-square values are considered. Linacre (2002b) suggested that the outfit mean-square value for each response category should be less than 2.0.

To address the third hypothesis, point-measure correlation coefficients, fit statistics, and eigenvalues obtained through the principal component analysis of the standardized Rasch residuals were considered in accordance with Linacre's (1998, 2017) suggestion. Point-measure correlation coefficients show the relationship between the examinee responses and Rasch measures (Bond & Fox, 2015). In a unidimensional data set, positive point-measure correlation coefficients should be estimated (Bond & Fox, 2015; Linacre, 2017).

Infit mean-square (IMNSQ), outfit mean-square (OMNSQ), and standardized fit statistics were estimated to examine item fit. The mean-square value shows the amount of variation involved in an item. An IMNSQ value and an OMNSQ value of 1.00 denotes 0% variation (Wright & Linacre, 1994). A mean-square value above 1.00 indicates more variation in the item measures, whereas a mean-square value below 1.00 implies less variation. Linacre (2002a, 2017) argued that up to 50% more variation is negligible and does not threaten unidimensionality. Therefore, IMNSQ and OMNSQ values under 1.50 are considered "productive for measurement" (Linacre, 2009, p. 192). IMNSQ values are sensitive to the responses of examinees whose ability levels are close to the difficulty levels of the items (Linacre, 2009).

On the other hand, OMNSQ values are sensitive to the responses of examinees whose ability levels are much higher or lower than the difficulty levels of the items (Linacre, 2009). Standardized fit statistics indicate how likely the misfit is for an item (Linacre, 2002a). An item with a good fit should have standardized infit (S-INFIT) and outfit (S-OFIT) statistics between -2.00 and 2.00 (Bond & Fox, 2015), as values out of this range denote misfit.

To estimate the variance in the item residuals, principal component analysis was conducted for each creative thinking skill. Both the dichotomous Rasch model and the rating scale model extract the primary cognitive factor from the data during the analyses (Bond & Fox, 2015). Therefore, if the data represent a unidimensional construct, random noise should be left in the residuals (Linacre & Tennant, 2009). In other words, there should not be a large eigenvalue that explains a considerable portion of the variance in the item residuals. According to Linacre (2017), an eigenvalue as large as 3.00 does not threaten unidimensionality as long as no single eigenvalue is considerably larger than the others.

### ***Correlation analyses***

To investigate the fourth hypothesis and detect the highly related creative thinking skills, item difficulties were correlated among the creative thinking skills. Because each creative thinking skill is hypothesized to be a different cognitive factor (Torrance, 1984), examinee performances on the items and the difficulty levels of the items are expected to vary across the creative thinking skills. In other words, the creative thinking skills are not expected to be highly correlated. A Pearson correlation (Pearson, 1909) coefficient value of .90 was determined as the cutoff for flagging highly related creative thinking skills because a coefficient value of .90 or above between two variables is an indication of collinearity and a large amount of shared variance (Field, 2009).

## Results

### Descriptive Statistics

The means (*M*), standard deviations (*SD*), item strata values,  $\alpha$  values, inter-rater reliability coefficients, and item reliability coefficients are presented in Table 1. The reliability of scores on the TTCT-Figural Form A ranges from poor ( $\alpha = .26$  for unusual visualization,  $\alpha = .36$  for internal visualization) to good ( $\alpha = .88$  for expressiveness of titles,  $\alpha = .90$  for abstractness of titles) for the sample of the study (O'Rourke et al., 2005). The inter-rater reliability coefficients ranged from .84 to 1.00, indicating that there was a sufficient level of scoring reliability.

**Table 1:** Descriptive statistics and reliability coefficients.

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Item Strata	Cronbach's $\alpha$	Inter-rater reliability	Item reliability
AT	4.79	0.72	5.66	.90	.89	.94
CI	2.38	0.34	4.35	.63	.86	.90
El	22.92	1.69	2.50	.85	.84	.73
EE	1.07	0.24	3.12	.76	.89	.81
ET	2.10	0.32	4.11	.88	.90	.89
Ex	2.25	0.48	4.70	.65	.91	.91
Fa	1.35	0.27	3.18	.78	.91	.82
Fl	15.22	0.30	3.08	.71	.99	.81
Hu	0.64	0.19	1.16	.65	.85	.28
IV	0.99	0.28	1.20	.36	.90	.30
MA	1.85	0.35	4.07	.53	.89	.89
Or	9.38	0.49	6.15	.51	.93	.95
RC	10.57	0.89	5.87	.68	.89	.95
RI	2.74	0.36	4.07	.67	.87	.89
SA	1.41	0.27	3.88	.73	.90	.88
UV	4.40	0.43	5.73	.26	.87	.94

**Notes.** AT: Abstractness of titles. CI: Colorfulness of imagery. El: Elaboration. EE: Emotional expressiveness. ET: Expressiveness of titles. Ex: Extending boundaries. Fa: Fantasy. Fl: Fluency. Hu: Humor. IV: Internal visualization. MA: Movement or action. Or: Originality. RC: Resistance to closure. RI: Richness of imagery. SA: Storytelling articulateness. UV: Unusual visualization. The letter S in S1, S2, and S3 refers to subtest, as in Subtest 1. The letter I in I1 through I10 refers to item, as in Item 1. *NA* indicates that there is no infit mean-square value corresponding to that particular item.

Note that the analyses of synthesis of figures and synthesis of lines did not produce any interpretable results due to few manifestations. Overall, two and six manifestations were observed for synthesis of figures and synthesis of lines, respectively. Nevertheless, this situation was expected because Torrance (1979) already mentioned that these two creative thinking skills can be manifested by a very low percentage of examinees.

### Item difficulty

The item difficulties ranged from -3.41 to 1.98 across the creative thinking skills (see Table 2). The item strata values for only internal visualization (1.20) and humor (1.57) indicated that there was one item group with regard to difficulty. The strata values for the other creative thinking skills were over 2.00, denoting more than two item groups.

**Table 2:** Item difficulties.

Items	AT	CI	El	EE	ET	Ex	Fa	Fl	Hu	IV	MA	Or	RC	RI	SA	UV
S1I1	-1.95	-2.68	NA	-2.55	-3.41	NA	-3.10	-2.01	-1.20	-0.94	-2.48	-1.22	NA	-2.36	-3.75	-2.05
S2I1	0.03	0.34	-0.07	-1.37	-0.98	NA	-0.36	-0.81	-1.07	-0.24	-1.36	-0.23	0.22	0.07	-0.29	0.94
S2I2	0.08	0.42	-0.02	0.91	0.34	NA	0.29	0.77	0.40	-0.24	0.63	0.66	-0.10	0.01	0.53	0.59
S2I3	0.25	-0.36	0.06	0.91	0.01	NA	0.45	-0.08	0.13	1.12	-0.81	-1.54	-0.13	-0.62	-0.85	-1.42
S2I4	0.19	-1.64	-0.12	-0.41	-0.39	NA	-0.94	0.64	-0.64	0.18	-0.88	-0.32	-0.83	-0.75	-0.05	-0.72
S2I5	0.22	0.17	-0.04	-1.88	-0.29	NA	0.45	-0.29	-0.48	-0.28	1.72	-1.16	0.75	-0.05	0.07	-0.06
S2I6	0.27	-0.36	0.13	0.04	0.01	NA	0.45	0.71	-0.10	0.36	-0.32	-0.11	-0.67	-0.27	0.21	-0.90
S2I7	0.39	0.09	-0.07	0.91	0.34	NA	0.00	0.50	0.40	0.02	-0.15	-1.28	0.08	-0.16	0.37	-0.54
S2I8	0.33	0.17	0.06	0.22	0.34	NA	0.45	0.57	0.73	0.56	-0.06	-0.03	0.16	-0.32	0.53	-0.44
S2I9	-0.14	0.10	0.12	0.04	-0.20	NA	-0.36	-0.81	-0.10	0.56	-0.81	0.04	0.30	0.35	0.53	0.59
S2I10	0.33	0.84	0.24	0.91	0.72	NA	0.84	0.28	0.73	0.18	1.72	0.51	0.21	0.58	1.98	1.08
S3I1	NA	0.84	-0.04	0.64	0.11	-0.55	0.45	-0.98	-0.40	-0.12	0.24	0.75	NA	0.97	0.21	0.81
S3I2	NA	0.42	-0.18	0.42	0.34	-0.67	0.14	-0.18	-0.30	-0.47	0.49	0.71	NA	0.42	0.21	0.75
S3I3	NA	0.10	-0.06	0.04	0.59	-0.76	0.14	0.50	0.13	-0.12	0.49	0.59	NAa	0.21	-0.39	0.35
S3I4	NA	0.52	-0.08	0.04	0.59	0.55	0.29	0.11	0.73	-0.24	0.13	0.75	NA	0.58	-0.39	0.35
S3I5	NA	0.62	-0.04	0.91	0.86	0.59	0.14	0.43	0.13	-0.36	0.49	0.79	NA	0.58	0.53	0.30
S3I6	NA	0.42	0.10	0.22	1.01	0.84	0.63	0.64	0.13	0.02	0.96	1.08	NA	0.76	0.53	0.39

**Notes.** AT: Abstractness of titles. CI: Colorfulness of imagery. El: Elaboration. EE: Emotional expressiveness. ET: Expressiveness of titles. Ex: Extending boundaries. Fa: Fantasy. Fl: Fluency. Hu: Humor. IV: Internal visualization. MA: Movement or action. Or: Originality. RC: Resistance to closure. RI: Richness of imagery. SA: Storytelling articulateness. UV: Unusual visualization. The letter S in S1, S2, and S3 refers to subtest, as in Subtest 1. The letter I in I1 through I10 refers to item, as in Item 1. NA indicates that there is no infit mean-square value corresponding to that particular item.

The item reliability indices were between .28 and .95. The two lowest reliability indices were estimated for internal visualization (.30) and humor (.28). The reliability indices were excellent ( $\geq .90$ ) for originality, abstractness of titles, resistance to premature closure, unusual visualization, extending or breaking boundaries, and colorfulness of imagery. For the other creative thinking skills, the reliability indices were below the cutoff point, but they were still sufficiently large ( $\geq .80$ ), except elaboration (.73).

## Response category difficulty

The seven difficulty levels of the response categories for an item with a difficulty level of 0 logits for elaboration are as follows: 1) -1.68 (no detail), 2) -0.70 (adding one detail), 3) -0.25 (adding two details), 4) 0.04 (adding three details), 5) 0.32 (adding four details), 6) 0.71 (adding five details), and 7) 1.52 (adding six or more details). The outfit mean-square values for the response categories were 1.00, 1.10, 0.90, 1.10, 0.90, 1.30, and 0.90, respectively from the first category to the last.

The four difficulty levels of the response categories were 1) -3.35 (giving the lowest level of title), 2) -1.81 (giving the second level of title), 0.96 (giving the third level of title), and 3) 4.69 (giving the highest level of title) for an item with a difficulty level of 0 logits for abstractness of titles. The outfit mean-square values for the response categories were 1.10, 0.90, 0.90, and 1.80.

Finally, the three difficulty levels of the response categories for an item with a difficulty level of 0 logits for resistance to premature closure are as follows: 1) -1.32 (lowest level of resistance), 2) 0 (medium level of resistance), and 3) 1.34 (highest level of resistance). The outfit mean-square values were 1.00, 1.00, and 1.10 for the response categories.

## Point-measure correlation coefficients

A separate set of point-measure correlation coefficients was estimated for each creative thinking skill. All the coefficients were positive, ranging from .14 to .73 (see Table 1). The point-measure correlation coefficients showed that all the items worked in the same direction for each creative thinking skill.

**Table 3:** Point-measure correlation coefficients.

Items	AT	CI	EI	EE	ET	Ex	Fa	Fl	Hu	IV	MA	Or	RC	RI	SA	UV
S1I1	.63	.54	NA	.60	.62	NA	.66	.16	.50	.40	.51	.30	NA	.62	.62	.35
S2I1	.71	.27	.50	.53	.73	NA	.42	.43	.55	.32	.38	.22	.46	.32	.41	.22
S2I2	.57	.40	.45	.32	.52	NA	.40	.50	.40	.46	.27	.32	.54	.43	.29	.12
S2I3	.64	.32	.52	.31	.61	NA	.41	.31	.39	.13	.48	.22	.49	.47	.53	.32
S2I4	.69	.43	.51	.53	.67	NA	.54	.55	.52	.38	.38	.33	.49	.44	.37	.33
S2I5	.61	.25	.40	.52	.62	NA	.36	.31	.43	.35	.21	.25	.32	.29	.37	.15
S2I6	.63	.40	.50	.53	.57	NA	.48	.55	.41	.27	.45	.30	.54	.47	.43	.41
S2I7	.63	.38	.52	.42	.59	NA	.46	.43	.44	.36	.41	.30	.47	.42	.32	.35
S2I8	.58	.25	.44	.40	.62	NA	.45	.38	.30	.20	.24	.31	.48	.40	.29	.40
S2I9	.69	.35	.47	.48	.61	NA	.45	.29	.28	.18	.42	.41	.54	.33	.33	.19
S2I10	.54	.41	.42	.33	.46	NA	.43	.35	.27	.40	.14	.35	.54	.34	.18	.23
S3I1	NA	.43	.45	.45	.56	.60	.52	.39	.25	.39	.37	.35	NA	.24	.37	.29
S3I2	NA	.42	.56	.42	.54	.59	.54	.42	.50	.39	.28	.30	NA	.39	.47	.15
S3I3	NA	.46	.49	.51	.51	.63	.41	.53	.35	.29	.38	.35	NA	.40	.57	.31
S3I4	NA	.25	.43	.53	.52	.60	.41	.51	.31	.27	.37	.38	NA	.21	.44	.29
S3I5	NA	.35	.45	.43	.50	.60	.38	.51	.41	.26	.40	.50	NA	.25	.36	.23
S3I6	NA	.34	.42	.38	.46	.56	.44	.42	.43	.32	.36	.45	NA	.23	.33	.22

**Notes.** AT: Abstractness of titles. CI: Colorfulness of imagery. EI: Elaboration. EE: Emotional expressiveness. ET: Expressiveness of titles. Ex: Extending boundaries. Fa: Fantasy. Fl: Fluency. Hu: Humor. IV: Internal visualization. MA: Movement or action. Or: Originality. RC: Resistance to closure. RI: Richness of imagery. SA: Storytelling articulateness. UV: Unusual visualization. The letter S in S1, S2, and S3 refers to subtest, as in Subtest 1. The letter I in I1 through I10 refers to item, as in Item 1. NA indicates that there is no point-measure correlation coefficient to estimate for that particular item.

### Mean-square values

All the IMNSQ values were below 1.50 for the dichotomously scored and polytomously scored creative thinking skills. The IMNSQ values showed that the amount of variation involved in each item was below the suggested cutoff point (1.50) for all the creative thinking skills. Table 4 presents the IMNSQ values.

**Table 4:** Infit mean-square values.

Items	AT	CI	EI	EE	ET	Ex	Fa	Fl	Hu	IV	MA	Or	RC	RI	SA	UV
S1I1	1.02	1.04	NA	1.20	1.31	NA	1.13	1.20	1.14	1.07	1.09	0.99	NA	0.93	1.24	0.99
S2I1	0.89	1.10	1.06	1.18	0.78	NA	1.23	0.86	0.99	1.02	1.17	1.09	0.93	1.08	1.06	1.01
S2I2	1.09	0.93	1.06	1.13	1.16	NA	1.12	0.99	0.91	0.84	1.05	1.02	0.95	0.92	1.11	1.07
S2I3	0.90	1.07	0.87	1.11	0.83	NA	0.99	1.14	0.98	1.05	0.91	1.04	1.01	0.93	0.92	1.02
S2I4	0.90	1.14	0.88	0.86	0.81	NA	1.04	0.88	0.92	0.89	1.12	1.00	1.23	1.02	1.04	0.99
S2I5	1.15	1.14	1.07	1.27	0.99	NA	1.08	1.11	1.04	1.00	1.00	1.06	1.14	1.10	1.05	1.08
S2I6	0.97	1.03	1.05	0.72	1.05	NA	0.82	0.88	1.02	1.00	0.93	1.04	1.07	0.91	0.87	0.94
S2I7	0.89	0.94	1.04	0.81	0.85	NA	0.96	1.02	0.82	0.94	0.89	0.97	1.00	0.96	1.10	0.99
S2I8	1.19	1.16	0.90	1.02	0.81	NA	0.89	1.14	0.98	1.06	1.11	1.03	1.00	0.99	1.02	0.92
S2I9	0.87	1.04	0.98	0.95	0.97	NA	1.09	1.13	1.26	1.06	1.01	0.95	0.90	0.98	1.00	1.05
S2I10	1.17	0.82	1.09	1.09	1.09	NA	0.82	1.17	0.99	0.88	1.04	0.99	0.86	0.98	1.06	0.97
S3I1	NA	0.79	1.10	0.79	1.04	1.04	0.74	0.87	1.13	0.95	0.93	0.99	NA	1.06	0.99	0.95
S3I2	NA	0.85	0.79	0.91	1.00	1.09	0.75	0.98	0.89	0.98	1.05	1.04	NA	0.92	0.81	1.01
S3I3	NA	0.85	1.02	0.80	1.08	0.96	1.14	0.90	1.07	1.03	0.85	0.99	NA	0.89	0.71	0.95
S3I4	NA	1.08	1.04	0.76	0.98	0.94	0.95	0.84	0.94	1.09	0.91	0.98	NA	1.09	0.96	0.97
S3I5	NA	0.93	0.99	0.77	1.01	0.96	1.13	0.91	0.96	1.15	0.85	0.86	NA	1.08	1.01	0.99
S3I6	NA	0.98	1.20	1.19	0.99	1.01	0.83	1.10	0.93	0.99	0.88	0.90	NA	1.13	1.03	1.01

**Notes.** AT: Abstractness of titles. CI: Colorfulness of imagery. EI: Elaboration. EE: Emotional expressiveness. ET: Expressiveness of titles. Ex: Extending boundaries. Fa: Fantasy. Fl: Fluency. Hu: Humor. IV: Internal visualization. MA: Movement or action. Or: Originality. RC: Resistance to closure. RI: Richness of imagery. SA: Storytelling articulateness. UV: Unusual visualization. The letter S in S1, S2, and S3 refers to subtest, as in Subtest 1. The letter I in I1 through I10 refers to item, as in Item 1. NA indicates that there is no infit mean-square value corresponding to that particular item.

The OMNSQ values showed that several items had misfit for the dichotomously scored creative thinking skills (see Table 5). OMNSQ values greater than 1.50 were estimated for some items for emotional expressiveness, storytelling articulateness, movement or action, expressiveness of titles, internal visualization, humor, and richness of imagery. However, the S-OFIT values showed that misfit was not likely for those items, except the item in Subtest 1 for expressiveness of titles (S-OFIT = 2.90) and storytelling articulateness (S-OFIT = 2.50). The S-OFIT statistics for expressiveness of titles and

storytelling articulateness indicated that the item in Subtest 1 did not work as intended for certain examinees whose ability levels were much higher or lower than the difficulty level of that item. On the other hand, both the OMNSQ and S-OFIT statistics were within the suggested range for good fit for all the items for the polytomously scored creative thinking skills.

**Table 5:** Outfit mean-square values.

Items	AT	CI	EI	EE	ET	Ex	Fa	Fl	Hu	IV	MA	Or	RC	RI	SA	UV
S1I1	1.25	1.05	NA	1.21	2.62	NA	1.42	1.43	1.18	1.05	1.13	0.99	NA	0.93	1.72	0.99
S2I1	0.68	1.12	1.08	1.18	0.66	NA	1.06	0.52	0.98	1.14	1.20	1.13	0.94	1.07	0.93	0.86
S2I2	1.36	0.57	1.01	0.64	1.01	NA	0.97	0.95	0.57	0.65	0.90	1.03	0.91	0.78	1.14	1.18
S2I3	0.92	1.43	0.77	0.53	1.04	NA	0.99	1.44	0.89	1.57	0.91	1.04	0.95	0.98	0.86	1.04
S2I4	0.64	1.14	0.88	0.96	0.71	NA	1.00	0.74	0.91	0.72	1.08	1.04	1.21	0.99	1.21	1.01
S2I5	1.01	1.43	1.21	1.12	0.88	NA	1.25	1.43	1.14	0.98	0.53	1.06	1.36	1.38	0.96	1.23
S2I6	0.89	0.90	0.88	1.51	0.96	NA	0.52	0.77	0.93	1.06	0.74	1.04	0.98	0.76	0.57	0.89
S2I7	0.91	1.02	0.93	0.41	0.79	NA	1.05	1.21	0.53	0.80	0.90	1.01	1.03	0.92	0.86	0.91
S2I8	1.04	1.17	0.99	1.10	0.39	NA	0.68	1.33	1.10	1.24	1.63	1.06	0.94	1.04	1.58	0.95
S2I9	0.79	0.87	0.98	0.67	1.00	NA	1.19	1.08	1.42	1.43	1.05	0.92	0.90	1.15	1.03	0.97
S2I10	1.40	0.45	1.06	0.53	1.43	NA	0.53	1.24	1.34	0.56	1.14	1.01	0.90	0.81	0.50	0.91
S3I1	NA	0.37	1.18	0.52	0.97	1.02	0.36	0.65	1.55	0.72	0.78	0.98	NA	1.11	0.96	0.82
S3I2	NA	0.73	0.78	0.94	1.06	1.09	0.44	0.86	0.67	0.95	0.84	1.05	NA	0.75	0.39	1.33
S3I3	NA	0.59	1.02	0.77	0.78	1.04	0.83	0.72	1.05	1.14	0.74	1.02	NA	0.99	0.42	0.92
S3I4	NA	1.17	1.20	1.57	1.03	0.94	1.48	0.74	1.11	1.23	0.95	0.93	NA	1.69	1.03	0.94
S3I5	NA	0.70	0.99	1.39	0.63	0.86	1.33	0.79	0.85	1.27	0.51	0.83	NA	1.17	0.57	1.15
S3I6	NA	0.89	1.08	0.84	1.27	0.93	0.90	1.17	0.62	0.96	0.34	0.83	NA	1.07	0.73	1.05

**Notes.** AT: Abstractness of titles. CI: Colorfulness of imagery. EI: Elaboration. EE: Emotional expressiveness. ET: Expressiveness of titles. Ex: Extending boundaries. Fa: Fantasy. Fl: Fluency. Hu: Humor. IV: Internal visualization. MA: Movement or action. Or: Originality. RC: Resistance to closure. RI: Richness of imagery. SA: Storytelling articulateness. UV: Unusual visualization. The letter S in S1, S2, and S3 refers to subtest, as in Subtest 1. The letter I in I1 through I10 refers to item, as in Item 1. NA indicates that there is no infit mean-square value corresponding to that particular item.

### Principal components analysis of residuals

All the eigenvalues ( $\lambda$ ) were below 3.00, and there were several principal components with eigenvalues over 1.00 for each creative thinking skill (see Table 6). A relatively large eigenvalue ( $\lambda > 2.00$ ) was estimated for elaboration ( $\lambda = 2.09$ ), emotional expressiveness ( $\lambda = 2.03$ ), and humor ( $\lambda = 2.34$ ). However, eigenvalues greater than 1.00 were estimated for several other principal components for these three creative thinking skills. These findings indicated that there was no dominant principal component in the residuals.

**Table 6:** Eigenvalues obtained with the principal component analysis of the standardized Rasch residuals.

PC	AT	CI	EI	EE	ET	Ex	Fa	Fl	Hu	IV	MA	Or	RC	RI	SA	UV
1st	1.49	1.92	2.09	2.03	1.77	1.47	1.65	1.76	2.34	1.92	1.59	1.72	1.53	1.53	1.81	1.66
2nd	1.36	1.54	1.59	1.61	1.59	1.25	1.51	1.66	1.81	1.67	1.48	1.58	1.37	1.45	1.67	1.51
3rd	1.26	1.49	1.41	1.47	1.49	1.18	1.40	1.43	1.45	1.34	1.41	1.42	1.24	1.40	1.55	1.44
4th	1.18	1.33	1.34	1.36	1.32	1.09	1.29	1.26	1.37	1.30	1.22	1.27	1.13	1.35	1.37	1.34
5th	1.12	1.26	1.24	1.19	1.23	0.90	1.22	1.21	1.28	1.17	1.18	1.24	1.05	1.27	1.18	1.31
6th	1.02	1.22	1.14	1.13	1.13	0.09	1.17	1.17	1.23	1.13	1.18	1.16	1.01	1.24	1.13	1.30
7th	0.99	1.13	1.09	1.07	1.09	NA	1.15	1.12	1.10	1.06	1.14	1.15	0.97	1.15	1.05	1.19
8th	0.93	1.09	1.05	0.99	1.01	NA	1.03	1.08	0.99	1.01	1.08	1.06	0.85	1.11	1.02	1.01
9th	0.84	1.02	0.95	0.98	0.96	NA	1.03	1.04	0.86	0.98	1.02	1.03	0.83	0.99	0.96	0.94
10th	0.73	0.94	0.81	0.90	0.91	NA	1.00	0.95	0.81	0.97	0.98	0.96	0.03	0.95	0.92	0.89
11th	0.09	0.79	0.73	0.84	0.87	NA	0.91	0.91	0.78	0.91	0.89	0.93	NA	0.93	0.89	0.87
12th	NA	0.77	0.72	0.79	0.81	NA	0.88	0.82	0.73	0.87	0.83	0.86	NA	0.88	0.81	0.85
13th	NA	0.72	0.68	0.69	0.76	NA	0.79	0.70	0.68	0.84	0.80	0.82	NA	0.77	0.76	0.83
14th	NA	0.67	0.62	0.65	0.72	NA	0.70	0.66	0.60	0.79	0.75	0.70	NA	0.73	0.67	0.71
15th	NA	0.66	0.53	0.57	0.63	NA	0.62	0.61	0.54	0.49	0.72	0.63	NA	0.63	0.57	0.59
16th	NA	0.37	0.01	0.51	0.54	NA	0.49	0.49	0.22	0.39	0.65	0.45	NA	0.54	0.53	0.54
17th	NA	0.07	NA	0.18	0.17	NA	0.14	0.13	0.20	0.15	0.08	0.01	NA	0.07	0.12	0.01

**Notes.** PC: Principal components. AT: Abstractness of titles. CI: Colorfulness of imagery. EI: Elaboration. EE: Emotional expressiveness. ET: Expressiveness of titles. Ex: Extending boundaries. Fa: Fantasy. Fl: Fluency. Hu: Humor. IV: Internal visualization. MA: Movement or action. Or: Originality. RC: Resistance to closure. RI: Richness of imagery. SA: Storytelling articulateness. UV: Unusual visualization. NA indicates that there is no item corresponding to that particular principal component.

## Item correlations

The correlation coefficients ranged from  $-.62$  to  $.94$  (see Table 7). Similar patterns of item difficulty were obtained for certain creative thinking skills, and this situation resulted in a few high correlation coefficients. A coefficient value of  $.90$  or above was estimated between the following pairs: 1) abstractness of titles and expressiveness of titles ( $r = .94, p < .001$ ), 2) abstractness of titles and fantasy ( $r = .91, p < .001$ ), 3) expressiveness of titles and fantasy ( $r = .90, p < .001$ ), and 4) richness of imagery and colorfulness of imagery ( $r = .93, p < .001$ ).

**Table 7:** Correlation coefficients of item difficulties among the creative thinking skills.

	AT	CI	El	EE	ET	Ex	Fa	Fl	Hu	IV	MA	Or	RC	RI	SA	UV
AT		.76*	.08	.67*	.94*	NA	.91*	.82*	.62*	.63*	.64*	.27	-.13	.81*	.86*	.48
CI			.17	.61*	.80*	.20	.86*	.37	.65*	.16	.72*	.59*	.73*	.93*	.78*	.82*
El				.23	.22	.61*	.51*	.11	.37	.58*	.20	.03	.11	.08	.56*	-.03
EE					.80*	.06	.68*	.61*	.80*	.47	.44	.35	-.29	.59*	.67*	.35
ET						.78*	.90*	.77*	.77*	.38	.76*	.56*	.01	.83*	.84*	.58*
Ex							.43	.51	.37	.22	.31	.81*	NA	.33	.38	-.62
Fa								.64*	.71*	.47	.78*	.43	.35	.80*	.83*	.56*
Fl									.56*	.37	.54*	.28	-.59	.37	.64*	.16
Hu										.39	.58*	.41	.08	.57*	.62*	.33
IV											.02	-.21	-.25	.12	.38	-.13
MA												.50*	.46	.70*	.73*	.59*
Or													-.03	.73*	.47	.73*
RC														.60	.20	.50
RI															.78*	.86*
SA																.69*
UV																

**Notes.** AT: Abstractness of titles. CI: Colorfulness of imagery. El: Elaboration. EE: Emotional expressiveness. ET: Expressiveness of titles. Ex: Extending boundaries. Fa: Fantasy. Fl: Fluency. Hu: Humor. IV: Internal visualization. MA: Movement or action. Or: Originality. RC: Resistance to closure. RI: Richness of imagery. SA: Storytelling articulateness. UV: Unusual visualization. *NA* indicates that the correlation coefficient was not estimated because there were not mutual items. \* shows the significant coefficients at  $p < .001$ .

## Discussion

### Item difficulty

Item difficulties, strata values, and item reliability indices were estimated to examine the first hypothesis (the items are equally difficult). The strata values below 2.00 denote one item group for internal visualization and humor in terms of difficulty (Linacre, 2013; Wright & Masters, 2002). The strata value for elaboration is over 2.00, but the items are centered on 0 logits, and the difference between the easiest and most difficult items is 0.36 logits. In other words, the items are at the same difficulty level for elaboration, but the six response categories resulted in a strata value over 2.00 (Bond & Fox, 2015). The strata values are greater than 2.00 for the other creative thinking skills, and this finding implies that the items are not at the same difficulty level (Linacre, 2013; Wright & Masters, 2002). Note that the strata values for abstractness of titles and resistance to premature closure are 5.66 and 5.87, respectively, which are greater than the numbers of response categories.

The item reliability indices indicate that the difficulty levels of the items were estimated with a high precision for all the creative thinking skills, except elaboration, internal visualization, and humor (Bond & Fox, 2015; Fox & Jones, 1998). Therefore, it is highly probable that the items vary in difficulty for the overwhelming majority of the creative thinking skills. The item order for elaboration, internal visualization, and humor may change in other samples (Bond & Fox, 2015). However, this change may not produce more than one item group with regard to difficulty. Thus, based solely on the



findings of the present study, it can be argued that the first hypothesis is supported for only elaboration, internal visualization, and humor.

These results raise significant concerns about the validity of the test scores. This is because the TTCT-Figural Form A seems to produce unfair scores on certain creative thinking skills for some examinees who respond to more challenging items but receive the same score as other examinees who respond to less challenging items. To overcome this issue, the scoring of the items may need to be revised based on item difficulty for several creative thinking skills (Bond & Fox, 2015). In this way, each examinee receives a score that precisely reflects her or his performance on an item.

## Response category difficulty

Rasch-Thurstone thresholds (Linacre, 2003; Thurstone, 1928) were estimated to address the second hypothesis (the response categories are equally distributed). The findings indicate that each additional detail does not require a considerably different increase in ability level to be added to a response because the difference between any two subsequent categories is much lower than 1.40 logits for elaboration (Linacre, 2002b). Given that the items on Form A are at the same difficulty level for elaboration in the present study, the findings validate the current interpretation of responses for elaboration.

The second hypothesis is also supported for resistance to premature closure, as the difference between any two response categories is almost the same across the response categories. The Rasch-Thurstone thresholds (Linacre, 2003; Thurstone, 1928) are below 1.40, in contrast to Linacre's (2002b) suggestion, but this can be neglected because the response category difficulties are very close to the cutoff point. It appears that each response category measures a narrow section of resistance to premature closure (Bond & Fox, 2015). Therefore, researchers and practitioners can continue using the equally distributed 3-point scale for scoring. However, the scoring may need to be revised based on item difficulty because there are multiple item groups for resistance to premature closure. In this way, raw scores could reflect more precise estimations of the examinees' performances.

The second hypothesis is not supported for abstractness of titles because the Rasch-Thurstone thresholds (Linacre, 2003; Thurstone, 1928) indicate that the response categories are not distributed evenly. Therefore, the current scoring method is not verified for abstractness of titles. The findings suggest that the scoring needs to be changed based on item difficulty and response category difficulty (Bond & Fox, 2015). In this way, the revised scoring can capture the ability level differences across the response categories for second-grade students.

It appears that the overwhelming majority of the second-grade students are not sufficiently developed to produce titles that convey abstract thought. Only four examinees produced the highest level of titles in the present study. This finding was expected and is aligned with Torrance's (1979) results. Nevertheless, some second graders may generate titles that correspond to the highest response category. Therefore, researchers and practitioners can continue using the 4-point scale scoring after revising it.

## Dimensionality of the creative thinking skills

Point-measure correlation coefficients, fit statistics, and eigenvalues were estimated to investigate the third hypothesis (the items measure a single cognitive factor for each individual creative thinking skill). The positive point-measure correlation coefficients estimated in the present study suggest that the items operate uniformly in the same direction. In other words, the items measure a single cognitive factor for each creative thinking skill (Bond and Fox, 2015; Linacre, 2017).

The infit statistics are aligned with the point-measure correlations. The IMNSQ and S-INFIT values imply that each interpretation of responses provides information about a single cognitive factor (Linacre, 2009). Furthermore, the findings show that the items work productively for examinees whose ability levels are close to the difficulty levels of the items (Linacre, 2009). The outfit statistics also

support the unidimensional structure for the items for each creative thinking skill, except the item in Subtest 1 for expressiveness of titles and storytelling articulateness (Linacre, 2002a). Moreover, the outfit statistics suggest that the overwhelming majority of the items work productively for examinees whose ability levels are much higher or lower than the difficulty levels of the items (Linacre, 2009).

Estimating high OMNSQ and S-OFIT values for the item in Subtest 1 for expressiveness of titles and storytelling articulateness was not anticipated. This is because the item is hypothesized to measure a single cognitive factor (Torrance et al., 1992). The data of the present study show that some examinees whose ability levels are higher than the difficulty level of the item did not manifest those two creative thinking skills in their responses. The findings imply that additional factors (e.g., fatigue, boredom, and another thinking skill) seem to impact responses for that particular item. Nevertheless, it is also reasonable to infer that the high OMNSQ and S-OFIT values may be due to a few random responses given to the item in Subtest 1, as point-measure correlation coefficients and eigenvalues denote a single cognitive factor.

Finally, all the eigenvalues are below 3.00, and no single eigenvalue is considerably larger than the others. These findings suggest that the cognitive factor extracted through the Rasch-based analyses for each creative thinking skill is the major construct impacting examinee responses for that creative thinking skill (Linacre, 2017).

In conclusion, the scores on each creative thinking skill reflect potential on a single cognitive factor, and the third hypothesis is supported by the Rasch-based analyses for all the creative thinking skills. Therefore, using a scoring method based on a sole criterion for a creative thinking skill is sufficient for capturing examinee performances on a particular item.

## **Dimensionality of the TTCT-Figural**

Pearson correlation (Pearson, 1909) coefficients were estimated to examine the fourth hypothesis (each creative thinking skill is a different cognitive factor). The correlation coefficients over .90 indicate that the examinees exhibited nearly identical performances on the items for particular creative thinking skills, including abstractness of titles, expressiveness of titles, fantasy, richness of imagery, and colorfulness of imagery. In other words, some creative thinking skills seem to require almost the same trait level to be manifested on the same item. One may argue that this situation occurred by chance and that each creative thinking skill is a different cognitive factor. However, because all the thinking skills on the TTCT-Figural Forms are related to creativity (Torrance, 1984), it is more reasonable to infer that the same underlying cognitive factor impacts examinee responses for pairs of thinking skills with high correlations.

It is not surprising to obtain a high correlation coefficient between certain pairs, including abstractness of titles and expressiveness of titles, as well as colorfulness of imagery and richness of imagery. The reason is that the items are scored on similar criteria for these pairs (Torrance et al., 1992). The scoring criteria used for fantasy are not similar to the criteria used for abstractness of titles and expressiveness of titles. Hence, estimating a high correlation coefficient between fantasy and each of the other creative thinking skills is not anticipated. However, the findings indicate that the same underlying cognitive factor impacts examinee responses for these three creative thinking skills. That cognitive factor probably enables an examinee to create drawings that manifest fantasy (e.g., characters from movies and books) and induces a certain level of tension in the examinee to express her or his fantasy-driven ideas through more abstract and expressive titles. If future studies support these findings, some creative thinking skills will need to be removed from the test to avoid inflating test scores.

At this point, the relation between fluency and originality should not be overlooked. Previous studies contended that fluency and originality are highly correlated (Chase, 1985; Ferrándiz et al., 2017; Heausler & Thompson, 1988; Runco & Mraz, 1992; Treffinger, 1985). The magnitude of the

coefficient is expected to increase up to .80 when total scores on each creative thinking skill are considered (Acar, 2023; Forthmann et al., 2020).

Despite previous studies, the correlation coefficient between fluency and originality is .28 in the present study. This finding suggests that the difficulty level of an item for fluency does not affect the originality of responses given to that item. Rather, the originality of responses is impacted by the shape of the stimulus, and this argument was supported in a recent study (Acar, 2023). In his study, Acar (2023) worked with 477 adults and found that the correlation between fluency and originality dropped when scores on Subtest 3 were excluded. In other words, using the same stimulus inflated the correlation coefficient between fluency and originality. Note that each item in Subtest 3 is a pair of parallel lines and that the items in Subtests 1 and 2 are different stimuli.

Overall, the fourth hypothesis is partially validated. The correlation analyses suggest that each creative thinking skill is not a different cognitive factor and that the TTCT-Figural Forms do not measure 18 creative thinking skills. This finding poses a problem with regard to the test scores because certain cognitive factors seem to be scored multiple times under different creative thinking skills, and thus the test scores for some examinees are inflated. This argument is particularly relevant to abstractness of titles and expressiveness of titles, and colorfulness of imagery and richness of imagery due to the similarities in the scoring criteria. However, attention needs to be paid to fantasy as well. The findings indicate that each of the other creative thinking skills is presumably a different cognitive factor.

The findings of the present study complemented the findings of the factor analysis studies on the TTCT-Figural Forms (Antunes & Almeida, 2007; Auzmendi et al., 1996; Bart et al., 2017; Clapham, 1998, 2004; Ferrando, 2006; Humble et al., 2018; Kim, 2006; Kim et al., 2006; Krumm et al., 2014; Oliveira, 2007; Prieto et al., 2006; Said-Metwaly et al., 2018). Previous studies were based on the hypotheses that the items measure a single cognitive factor for each creative thinking skill and that each norm-referenced creative thinking skill was a different cognitive factor. Because both of these hypotheses find support in the present study, one could argue that conducting a subscore-level factor analysis on the TTCT-Figural Forms is appropriate for identifying overarching factors (e.g., personality types), which encompass various cognitive factors (e.g., fluency, originality, and abstractness of titles) related to creativity.

## Implications

The findings of the study have significant implications that concern practitioners administering the TTCT-Figural Forms and the Scholastic Testing Service, the company that holds the rights to the tests. It is crucial to consider the varying difficulty levels of the items and response categories to revise the scoring. Adapting the scoring method to account the variations in item and response category difficulty can enhance the validity and fairness of the test scores. On other hand, the current scoring criteria can be applied consistently across the items, as a single cognitive factor impacts responses for each creative thinking skill. However, a noteworthy consideration arises from the high correlation coefficients estimated among certain creative thinking skills. This finding suggests a careful reevaluation of the test content. It is prudent to revise the test by removing redundant creative thinking skills to ensure more valid and fair assessments.

## Limitations

Linacre (1994) stated that a sample size as low as 150 is large enough to perform Rasch analyses. According to Arrindell and van der Ende (1985), the minimum sample size required for principal component analysis is 100. Thus, the sample size was large enough for both Rasch-based and principal component analyses. However, future research should be conducted with larger samples so that synthesis of incomplete figures and synthesis of lines can also be investigated. Additionally, larger samples can produce more precise item statistics.

The items were scored based on the scoring manual published in the United States (Torrance, 2017), and this situation possibly impacted the scoring for originality. Because there was no zero-originality list for a Turkish sample, whether a response was original was determined using the US manual (Torrance, 2017). It is likely that a different zero-originality list would have been used if there were a Turkish manual and that this situation may have potentially impacted originality analyses.

## Directions for future research

This study is the first one to examine the items on the TTCT-Figural Form A using Rasch measurement theory. More research that uses Rasch measurement theory to examine the items on each form of the TTCT-Figural is needed. Future research should involve samples comprising adults and students from different grade levels to test the hypotheses examined in the present study. Moreover, differential item functioning should be investigated for gender, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status. Finally, the reliability of the test scores and factors impacting reliability should be examined in more detail.

## Conclusion

The present study addresses four hypotheses concerning the items on the TTCT-Figural Form A. The insights gained from this study shed light on critical aspects of the test's structure and scoring methods. The observed variability in item and response category difficulties underscores the necessity for a nuanced approach to scoring. Additionally, the identification of a single cognitive factor for each creative thinking skill provides strong evidence for the test's construct validity. The low and moderate correlations among certain creative thinking skills offer further evidence for construct validity. However, considerably high correlations among certain creative thinking skills warrant a reevaluation of the test's content. Collectively, the findings of the present study contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the TTCT-Figural Forms' properties and offer valuable directions for optimizing the scoring procedures.

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### **Acknowledgment**

I express my deepest gratitude to Bonnie Cramond for her guidance and support for this study, as it is based on my doctoral research. I also thank Burak Türkman for his support in estimating inter-rater reliability.

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# Between Two Worlds: Promoting Identity Development in Middle School

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## Abstract

This paper highlights a (2022) study conducted in a Canadian school division with middle school teachers. The purpose of this study was to learn what middle school teachers did to positively connect with their students. Due to COVID-related concerns, four participants were interviewed individually via zoom and asked to share strategies that they incorporated in the classroom and school to make these connections. Middle school teachers shared strategies and practices that facilitated identity development in their students. Participants in this study appeared to encourage identity development by encouraging introspection and extrospection in their classrooms. They recognized the importance of establishing class routines promoting self-regulation and developing empathy for others. They also created opportunities for students to discuss and learn about local and global topics in class. Their responses are compared and contrasted with past scholarship highlighting the importance of identity development for young people.

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**Keywords:** Middle school; teachers; students; identity; introspection; extrospection.

## A “Turbulent” and vulnerable time

Although not the case for every young person, middle school can be “a turbulent time for young adolescents” because “in the middle school years, [as] many students possess increasingly negative attitudes toward school.” (Raphael & Burke, 2012, p.1). Faust et al. (2014) describe the time in middle school as a “period of greater vulnerability and challenges to values, norms, and self-esteem” (p.43). It appears that one of the consequences of the middle school years is a “normative decline in relationship quality” (Duong et al., 2019, p.212), due to an increase in social, academic, and physiological challenges. Some of the challenges facing students include, “increased social comparison and competition, and heightened demands for academic success.” (Duong et al., 2019, p.212).

Another significant inhibitor of positive student-teacher connections includes, “the developmental shift that children experience as they become more peer-oriented” and “having multiple teachers each day and less time spent together with each teacher” (Prewett et al., 2019, p.69). Carlisle (2011) posits that, “Adolescents’ socio-emotional health and motivation is highly influenced by the relationships they have with their peers; their relationships with adult figures and parents often become secondary in this developmental stage” (p.20). Although middle school students may consider their relationships with adults to be of secondary importance, it is perhaps this time where they may matter most. This includes students’ relationships with their teachers.

## Benefits of positive student-teacher connections

It appears that positive teacher-student connections contribute to student success (Davis, 2001; Hamre and Pianta, 2006; Nasir, Jones, and McLaughlin, 2011; Reimer, 2014; Reimer, 2022). Positive connections with their teachers make students “feel safer and more secure in the school setting, feel more competent, make more positive connections with peers, and make greater academic gains” (Hamre and Pianta, 2006, p.59). Additionally, students who positively connected with their teachers “had higher grades and graduation rates” (Nasir, Jones, & McLaughlin, 2011, p.1755). For this reason, many believe that schools should make relationship and community building a top priority at all levels (Schaps, Battistich, and Solomon, 2004; Hamre and Pianta, 2006).

Although essential in the earlier grades, “student-teacher relationships are [also] important after the middle school transition” (Duong et al., 2019, p.212). Still, the reality is that less is known

about the positive effects of teacher-student connections as students move from elementary school into middle and high school (Prewett et al., 2019, p.69). As middle school represents such a transitional time for young people, perhaps more critical than ever for middle school teachers to build positive relationships with their students. Carlisle (2011) notes that during adolescence, “the onset of puberty and other body development changes may lead to insecurity and low self-esteem, which can also affect adolescents’ socio-emotional health” (p.20). Further, students in middle school are “developing metacognition, which allows them to analyze and think about their own thinking and learning, and moves them toward more abstract ideas” (Carlisle, 2011, p.20). Faust et al. (2014) contend that “middle school students are intensely curious, argumentative, inexperienced with independence, and fledgling critical thinkers” (p. 44).

## Identity development

Middle school is a time when students really begin their search for self-identity as they seek out who they are in relationship to the world around them (Erikson, 1949; Wentzel, 2015). Erikson (1959) states, “To complete the search for an identity, the adolescent must find an answer to the question ‘Who am I?’ and must also establish some orientation toward the future and come to terms with the questions, ‘Where am I going?’ and ‘Who am I to become?’” (p.54). Wentzel (2015) states that “Identity is typically defined with respect to beliefs about ‘Who I am’ and ‘Who I want to be’” (p.306). Tsang, Hui, and Law (2012) further state, “A clear and well-developed identity and favorable self-esteem promise positive development throughout adolescence and even across a whole life span” (p.6).

Teachers and peers play an important role in the development of student self-identity because “Identity is based on psychosocial reciprocity” (Erikson, 1959, p. 52). Wentzel (2015) notes, “At school, these identities develop as children progress through their school-age years, and they are informed by school-based norms, standards of competence, and their own personal values and goals that have evolved as a function of their social and academic experiences at school (p.300). Erikson (1959) adds, “the importance of the peer group in helping the individual to answer the identity question, “Who am I?” cannot be emphasized enough. The answer to this question depends on social feedback from others who provide the adolescent with their perception and their evaluation of him or her.” (p.52).

There appears to be a negative consequence when schools neglect to promote or encourage identity development in their classrooms. Erikson (1959) states, “The adolescent who fails in the search for an identity will experience self-doubt, role diffusion, and role confusion” (p.54). Tsang, Hui, and Law (2012) state the following about the relationship between adolescent development and the development of self-identity.

Adolescence is a developmental stage characterized by rapid and extensive physical and psychosocial changes which often present developmental crises that challenge the adolescent’s coping ability. Successful coping culminates in the formation of a clear and positive identity that can facilitate future development and productive use of personal resources. Problematic coping might make the person vulnerable to emotional and behavioral problems. How adolescents address what they experience in adolescence to formulate their identity has a pivotal impact on their subsequent life journeys. (p.1).

If these statements are valid, it makes sense that middle school students require the assistance, guidance, and support of a trusted teacher more than ever. In order to learn who they are and how they fit within society. Educators need to try to find effective ways promote self-identity for all their students. Teachers need to establish classroom structures and routines that assist students during this brief but often times confusing time of life. Perhaps middle school classroom teachers need to be asked to share key insights based on their professional experiences in order to better understand how to create a classroom climate that can best foster the development of self-identity for all their students. This article is based on a 2022 study that examines how Canadian middle school teachers attempt to do this.

## Methodology

The original purpose of the 2022 study was to capture the perceptions of middle school classroom teachers and learn more about how they positively connected with middle school students. In order to gain insight into how middle school teachers positively connected with their students, I first obtained approval from my University's ethics board and consent from a Canadian school division to conduct my study. I then contacted several middle schools in the school division and asked for consent to invite teachers to participate in my study. If consent was received by the principals, I invited teachers from their school to participate in my study through a brief **presentation** and/or by letters I provided. Teachers were informed in the letter that participation was optional and would be kept confidential. Any teachers who were interested in participating in my study were asked to contact me by email. Prior to study participation, teachers were required to provide written consent.

Four middle school teachers consented to participate in this study. They provided me with written consent, and I sent them potential dates to meet individually or together as a whole group. Due to COVID restrictions, interviews were done individually via zoom videoconference. Prior to meeting, each participant was asked to complete a brief information sheet on years taught, post-secondary education completed, and awards and other recognition they have received related to teaching. Each participant participated individually in one zoom videoconference.

Participants were free to withdraw from the semi-structured interviews at any time. Only I was aware of the identity of each participant. Each interview was audio taped. Additionally, I took detailed notes throughout each interview. Transcripts of the four interviews were generated using Otter.ai, which is a speech-to-text software. Each participant was provided with their transcript for review. Every participant was generally satisfied with their transcript, although one noted several spelling errors in one transcript. These errors were corrected. At this point I brought in a research assistant, and asked that we each independently review the transcripts and seek out potential themes. After some discussion, we agreed upon several themes (or highlights). I sent a list of these themes to each participant. One participant asked to reconsider the wording on one of the themes, and I agreed to amend it as recommended. After one final review of the transcripts, several themes/highlights emerged from across all of the transcripts. After completing a final report of the study, I sent each participant an electronic version of it. Finally, I sent the final report to the school division that provided consent for the study.

## Findings

Two of the significant themes/highlights that emerged from the study will be highlighted for the purposes of this article as they (a) relate to the potentially turbulent times that many students experience during middle school; and (b) underline the importance of connecting with teachers who inevitably serve as their guides. The themes are as follows:

1. Middle school students often live “between two worlds”.
2. Middle school students are in the “age of discovery”.

These two themes will be further explored in the upcoming section. Many direct quotes from the participants in the study are shared in the following section. Please note, for the benefit of the reader I have removed some words that participants repeated, expressions such as “um”, “and”, or “like”, and edited for minor grammatical reasons.

## Between Two Worlds

Participants in the study shared that effective middle school teachers recognize that middle school students are constantly fluctuating between the world of the child and the world of the teenager. The time they spend between these two worlds is short but critical. Middle school teachers believed they needed to embrace this reality. They believed that the teacher's role was to be the “constant”.

### ***Being the constant***

Each participant shared their thoughts on how the middle years represented such a unique stage of life, as the students they taught could not be classified solely as children, nor could they be characterized as young adults. Rather, they seemed to fluidly travel in between these two categories. Participants noted how challenging, temporary, and critical this stage was for human beings. One participant stated, “[M]iddle years kids have a foot in childhood, and a foot in adolescence. They want you to understand where their feet are at any given moment of any given day in any given situation - and reach them where they are.” One participant exclaimed, “[Y]our 11-year-old, your 12-year-old is mature one minute and crying the next minute and you don't know what the heck happened in this in between there. But you have 20 of them doing the same thing.” This inconsistency in presenting behaviours of middle school students was touched upon in several interviews.

One participant described the inconsistent behaviours of middle school students as “a moving target” for parents and teachers alike. One participant shared, “But middle years... it's the complete paradox... On one hand, it's exactly what you can imagine it to be. Annoying, obnoxious... or just like absolutely ridiculous... And then on the flip side, they break every stereotype you've ever imagined.” One participant shared that at times the typical middle school student “isn't really happy to be there”, and at other times may be “eager to please.” One participant offered that on any given school day student in their class “might have a really phenomenal class but they can still become more ‘cool for school’, so to speak, [and] are more cautious about how they open up.”

Participants offered that much of what they received from students depended on grade level. In the earlier middle school grades, one participant stated that when students enter middle school, “There's less of a teenager in them”, then added, “but when you get to grade eight, you're navigating a bit more... There's maybe low, sometimes a little less motivation.” One participant shared that there, “seems to be more drama and more things going on in their lives as they get older. I think they become more socially aware. Whereas [in] grade six, they still just want to go and play recess and they just kind of are happy and want to just talk about things [like]... ‘Did you watch this’, or talk about a movie.”

Participants emphasized that even though students may travel ‘between worlds’, it was the teacher’s responsibility to be the constant in their lives. Participants seemed to discuss strategies and practices that they incorporated in their classrooms that promoted identity development for their students. Before teachers were able to develop the critical thinking skills of their students, it was essential that clear boundaries and routines were first established and maintained.

### ***Boundaries***

Participants shared that being a consistent and responsible adult in their students’ lives meant establishing boundaries for students. One participant offered that one “piece that's very important to middle years’ kids is boundaries. They want to push you there. They're at this stage of life where they're like, ‘I'm almost grown up, and I don't have to do what you tell me to do’. And so you have to [as] teachers very clearly delineate where the boundaries are. And be consistent with those boundaries. Even if even if you think they're harsh. But if you don't, then they will walk all over you.” The participant then stated, “[B]oundaries can be negotiated, okay? But if it's not okay for them to do XY behavior, then it's never okay for them to do XY behavior. And they know that.”

When discussing why boundaries were so important, one participant offered that they were to keep all students feeling safe. The participant noted, “I always felt that my job as their teacher was to create a safe space in the four walls where they could just relax, right and be okay. Because nothing bad is going to happen to them in the four walls of the classroom”. While keeping students safe was highlighted by the participants, it should be noted that not one of the participants explicitly stated in the interviews what they were keeping students safe from.

## ***Self-regulation***

While clearly articulating and insisting upon boundaries was important for middle school teachers, several participants also spoke of the importance of teaching students the skills of self-regulation. One participant noted, “[I]f you teach kids to regulate, and you help them regulate, they do.” One participant shared the following thoughts on intentionally teaching students to self-regulate through practices like daily meditation exercises.

This concept of self-regulation, and learning how you learn as a person and as a human being. And learning how to manage...That's also a self-regulation piece. There [are] all those layers. When you do it in your classroom...you're talking about meditative practice.”

Several participants were keen to discuss some details of mindfulness and meditative strategies that they incorporated into their classroom routines. Please note, several specific ‘meditation’ and ‘mindfulness’ practices that teachers incorporate into their classrooms will be further discussed later in this article.

## ***Forecasting***

Participants acknowledged that one of their essential roles as middle school teachers was to prepare students for the future during this ‘ephemeral’ (i.e., short-lived) time in students’ lives. One participant referred to this aspect of their jobs as ‘forecasting.’ The purpose of forecasting is to alleviate anxiety for middle school students by clearly presenting, reminding, and posting upcoming events so that they can be prepared. The participant shared an example of how they forecasted for their students, saying, “Giving [students] a forecast helps, especially [for] kids that struggle with anxiousness or worrier or alternative thinking.” In order to provide forecasts for students, the participant ensured that whiteboards had updated daily, weekly, monthly and annual calendars on them, and reviewed these with students aloud. This was especially helpful during the COVID-19 pandemic months. The participant added the following.

[I] give them a month ahead so that they have an idea of what's coming. I think the uncertainty of the pandemic has shown that what the kids need to know is what's next, what is coming up next. It helps them feel a lot more comfortable. And that forecast is more of making sure everyone is calm and collected. So they're not freaking out. If they come in and they're uncertain of the day, kids need a lot of certainty and [in] middle years and [they need] a sense of routine.

## ***Consistent communication***

As middle school students may float between the childhood and young adult world, participants stated that consistent communication was critical. Students needed to be made aware of boundaries, expectations, and the future. In summary, participants stated that students needed to be prepared for what’s to come in the “real world”. In this way participants seemed to be facilitating students’ early work on developing self-identity.

One participant encapsulated the sentiments of several other participants by saying, “It's all part of the real-world experience. Are we communicating clearly? Are we contributing equally? Because in [the] real world adults have to do that. Teenagers have to do that. That's what I established really early.”

## ***The age of discovery***

Teachers in this study assisted in facilitating individual identity by acknowledging that middle school students want to learn about and connect with themselves (introspection) and the outside world (extrospection). They contended that effective middle school teachers needed to act as their students’ guides. Participants also believed that one of their roles was to create opportunities to discuss and learn about local and global issues.

Participants in this study believed that middle school students were at a critical stage in life where they wanted to learn more about themselves and the world they live in. One participant shared



that the middle school years as, “an awakening. They're entering a new stage of life.” One participant shared the importance of students having “tools to navigate their world”. One participant added, “And so social justice becomes important.” One participant noted that one of their main roles as middle school teachers was “fostering independence”, and this could only be accomplished by learning about themselves and the world they live in. It appears that the participants understand that middle school is a time for students to learn about themselves (introspection) and the world around them (extrospection).

### ***Introspection (connecting with self)***

In terms of introspective practices, students needed opportunities to develop intrapersonal skills. Oftentimes this was done informally through brief student “check-ins”. One participant shared that, “the socio-emotional teaching is how I go about everything. I do a lot around just [having] daily conversations with kids.” On a few occasions, participants thought that providing students with alternative spaces when they became overwhelmed was an effective strategy. One participant commented, “[P]roviding an alternative space, I think for kids that [are] either overstimulated or overwhelmed has really helped maintain that comfort.”

This seemed to be a strategy that was used only when deemed necessary. One participant shared that at times individual students became so upset in the classroom and the option of providing an alternative space for that student wasn't possible. In these instances, the participant shared, “I've had scenarios where I've had to take my whole class out, but almost in a way that doesn't make the situation more toxic, but provides a safe place for the moment that is possibly happening.” The participant thought that these incidents, although unfortunate, also provided a valuable lesson in terms of empathy to the class.

I've worked with a range of abilities and disabilities...I think what [scenarios like removing the class when an individual student becomes tremendously distraught]...gives them a sense of empathy, which is also another big focus for me. That kids understand emotional responses from other kids. That can be difficult in the middle years' brain when it's all developing and transitioning. I think the empathy piece has to be taught deliberately. And it's done through things like normalizing a meltdown or normalizing a moment where we have to...leave the room.

**Teaching and incorporating mindfulness practices can be helpful.** For the most part, participants liked to discuss preventative strategies rather than reactive ones. They preferred universal, whole-class approaches to address issues of worry or anxiety prior to any incidents. One participant thought that, “mindfulness practices have to be given regularly to kids. I do a lot of meditation in the class, which also resets the tone. I do it in the morning, first thing, and then I'll do it in the afternoon, right after lunch. And a 10-minute meditation of just practicing deep breathing is really impactful for getting to the learning.” The participant added, “Typically the meditation becomes a really good anchor.” Furthermore, the participant shared the many benefits of incorporating meditation practices in the middle school classroom, especially with one student with special needs.

[K]ids are reset after a wild lunch or kids or reset after maybe a rough night at home when they're coming to school. The meditation has big power to get everybody on board. I have a student this year who...has a brain injury. [F]rom the very beginning, he recognized that there was a quiet that happened during meditation. In the last couple of weeks, we've seen a real focus on him to be focused and not noisy. He...doesn't make a noise during the 10 minutes we have for meditation. It's almost like he's recognized that that's part of our community. That was a big progression for us to see happen.

Participants stressed the importance of providing opportunities for middle school students to develop interpersonal skills. One participant shared that their goal was, “everyone at the end of the day respects each other for who they are...They don't necessarily have to be best friends.” Further, the participant shared the following comparison of a classroom being like a family you live with for a short-term.

One of the things that I stress with the kids is that I never expect them to be best friends as they grew up in adults. But like a family, especially in a multi age setting, you're with this group of learners for a couple of years. And when you're with them for a few years, having that learning relationship like a family where it's like having a sibling. If you get along with your brother or your sister or your cousin or your auntie some days are good, some days are not so good. You keep your distance on those bad days. But I think treating it like a community of learners is part of that building the sense of competence.

One participant summarized their classroom as a “patchwork” of different people, cultures, and lived experiences. The participant noted, “Every kid brings in a different strength, and recognizing those strengths instead of looking at the deficit model.” Further, the participant believed that “the diversity of my community has to be celebrated”, and also needed to work together. The participant shared, “I always describe it like a patchwork quilt...that we all bring in something very diverse...Culturally diverse, emotionally, socially, cognitively diverse. And recognizing how each of the learners if they're verbal, nonverbal, behaviorally challenged, can bring something that they could be celebrated.”

Finally, one participant shared the potential that multi-age classrooms in middle school hold as a means of learning and fostering empathy. They stated the following.

[The] multi-age classroom [is] a classroom where that social emotional connection is established. Everybody worries about body type and image. And we talk about that all the time. Not everybody's skinny, not everybody's tall. Not everybody's short, not everybody's round. But I think when you recognize those pieces of the patches, that come together to build our classroom. It does show that empathy is established, and that empathy is part of the vehicle to get kids to learn. And then what I've also noticed multi-age. It's not always the older kids helping the younger kids. I've had scenarios where younger kids are helping older kids and I do intentional mixed groupings. Where when I'm grouping kids together, I try not to put them they're best friends, I try not to put them in the same grade. I want them to mix it up a little bit.

### ***Extrospection (connecting with the outside world)***

Participants spoke of the importance of connecting middle school students with the “world” outside of their classroom and school. One participant offered, “Pre-COVID, we used to do field trips on a monthly basis, where we would go to [name withheld] library, and...they'd be there every month. The day before we would make a plan of what they were going to do over the course of the day, based on what we were learning and their priorities.” The field trip to the library would ultimately involve students spending lunch in a nearby food court, and then returning to the school to, “report back on what they did and how they understood it.” The participant thought that it was very helpful that the library staff was so welcoming, saying that their greetings were typically, “‘Oh, we're so happy to see you!’ They would brag about our classes being there.” When asked if behavioural or safety issues ever arose from these library trips, the participant explained in detail the variety of supervision strategies teachers used throughout the day to keep the students safe, but concluded by saying that the library, “Seems like a safe place to be goofy.”

One participant highlighted a math lesson once conducted at a shopping mall that students really enjoyed. They explained what the mall math lesson looked like.

We would go to [name of mall], they'd [i.e., students] have a spreadsheet, they'd have teams, pre-designed teams, [and] they'd 'have \$3,000 to spend...[T]here were rules of what they could how much they could spend on certain items, they had to have a certain amount of items, certain amounts had to be on sale. They had to do the sales tax.

When asked how they ensured student safety, the participant added, “We had certain checkpoints. And looking at a checkpoint in the morning, where we all met and everyone checked in, then they went out again.” The participant also shared that they, “had a teaching partner who coined the idea that we should have half the building space, and twice the school buses. Every school should

have their own school bus, or two, depending on the size that they can use on an ongoing basis, or classes.” The participant expressed that many students seemed to be very engaged in these types of activities.

**The importance of discussing current issues and events.** Participants expressed how middle school students wanted to learn more about and engage in current events. They thought that facilitating discussions about local, national, and international events was a necessary and valuable role for them. On occasions the topics discussed could be controversial and sensitive, but that school was the very place these conversations needed to happen. Again, this practice connects well with identity development of students. One participant noted the questions that middle school students recently had regarding issues that arose across the country due to COVID-19.

They want to talk about current events, like they can't help but they want to talk about what's in the news. They want to talk about why everybody's fighting, and they want to talk in the school about it. They don't want to necessarily just go home and talk about it, or read about it on their phones...Because [a middle school student] wants to be treated like a grown-up.

**As issues arise, it is helpful to have established connections with parents.** One participant acknowledged that they occasionally “do get pushback from parents about [discussing current events and issues]. And I say, ‘Well, they're asking, so I need to talk to them about it, because they want to know about it, and where it's a safe space at school.’” The participant expressed that, “I don't give my personal opinion, or I try hard not to. I just pull up an article on the screen. We read the article and we talk about the big words they don't understand and the concepts behind it.”

This is where participants found great value in establishing connecting with parents. One participant stated, “It is really good to be able to have a relationship with parents”. When asked why, one participant said that it assisted with “dialogue”, and another stated, “just to make sure that the parents know what's going on in school, and what we're seeing, so that they can kind of be mindful, have a conversation with a child.” Another participant shared that teacher-parent connections were critical “as issues come up.”

## Discussion and analysis

The intention of this study was to gain insight into how teachers connect with their middle school students. It appears that one of the ways they made positive connections was to facilitate middle school students' identity development efforts. This aligns with Carlyle's (2022) assertion that students in middle school are “developing metacognition” (p.20) and Faust et al.'s (2014) claim that “middle school students are intensely curious, argumentative, inexperienced with independence, and fledgling critical thinkers” (p. 44). As stated earlier, middle school is a time when students really begin their search for self-identity as they begin to answer the question, “Who am I” (Erikson, 1949) and “Who I want to be” (Wentzel, 2015). Erikson (1959) states, “To complete the search for an identity, the adolescent must find an answer to the question “Who am I?” and “Who [do] I want to be[?]” (Wentzel, 2015, p.306). It appears that middle school is a critical time to begin to begin developing a sense of identity, as that it is a critical component of psychosocial development (Tsang, Hui, and Law (2012). Teachers have an incredible opportunity to facilitate the development of middle school student identity development (Wentzel, 2015), and need to take advantage of this short “window in time” because “Identity is based on psychosocial reciprocity” (Erikson, 1959, p. 52).

## Teaching about themselves, the world, and difficult topics that arise

Based on the responses from participants in this study, middle school teachers incorporate a number of effective strategies and practices in order to facilitate meta-cognition and identity development. Most significantly, participants in this study addressed this by providing opportunities for students to connect with and learn more about themselves (introspection), each other, and the world they live in (extrospection). Teachers thought that one of their roles was to help students develop intrapersonal and interpersonal skills such as empathy. Participants also shared the value of exposing

students to meaningful learning opportunities outside of the school. Sometimes this meant discussing difficult topics in the classroom. They shared a number of creative ways in which they did this, and provided several powerful examples of why this needed to happen in a middle school classroom. In this regard it was imperative that teachers created (or provided) a safe space for students to learn about sensitive but important issues. Teacher-parent connections were also vital in this regard.

While connecting with family was seen as beneficial in elementary years (Reimer, 2019), teachers suggested that specifically establishing positive connections with their middle school students' parents assisted when difficult issues would occasionally arise. Participants emphasized the necessity of discussing current events and issues with their students. Still, discussing these issues can be "tricky" and "sensitive". This task can certainly be made less difficult if teachers have established positive relationships with their students' parents and caregivers prior to having these critical conversations in the classroom.

One way this was done by participants was the local/global discussions encouraging critical thinking about sensitive and controversial events/topics. The participants in this study spent time discussing the importance of establishing routines in their middle school classrooms. They acknowledged that middle school was a time of great uncertainty, turbulence, and discovery for most students. Therefore, they incorporated a number of strategies and practices in their classrooms. For example, participants expressed the need for teachers to be the consistent adult in their students' lives by communicating and insisting that students adhere to certain boundaries in order to reduce certain behaviours and help make all students feel safe (again, safe from what exactly was not made clear and should be explored further). In order to set the stage for identity development, self-regulation strategies were promoted and taught in class. To students feeling anxious about the future, a strategy referred to as 'forecasting' was practiced by one participant. Finally, participants emphasized the importance of clear and consistent communication.

The establishment of clear routines is considered to be a significant element of student success (Fink & Siedentop, 1989, Reimer, 2022). The middle school teachers in this study tended to focus more on routines that supported socio-emotional and mental health, rather than routines that promoted academic success. Although academic routines were considered important, it was critical that in middle school, students received emotional support from their teachers.

### ***Limitations***

There were several significant limitations to this study. First, COVID-19 regulations prevented the participants from gathering together in-person. Instead, the choice of participants was to meet individually with me. I would have been interested to have seen what ideas might have been generating by gathering together and listening to one another. Second, this study was small. Only four participants volunteered for this study. It would have been helpful to have had more participants participate in the study, but due to COVID-19, I found it difficult to recruit any more. Still, I am very grateful to the four middle school teachers who participated in this study. Third, participants spent significant time speaking about the importance of making students feel safe in class. Although one can speculate that teachers were referring to keeping students safe from harmful behaviours or bullying, they never explicitly stated what they needed to keep students safe from.

### **Recommendations**

This study generated a number of recommendations for future studies and research in the areas of developing positive teacher-student connections and facilitating student identity. Based on this study's findings, further studies identifying which classroom routines successfully facilitate identity development for students and which routines are not effective. It would be interesting to conduct further studies comparing and contrasting which practices might be more or less effective at the elementary, middle, and senior high school level. Additionally, strategies incorporated to seek out the best ways in which teachers can effectively explore and examine potentially issues in the classroom are recommended.

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## Conclusion

As stated earlier in this article, middle school is an ‘ephemeral’ (i.e., short-lived) time in students’ lives. It is also a critical time for young people. One of the reasons for this is because middle school is a time in life when students really start to ask themselves the existential question, “Who am I?”. Middle school teachers have the imperative role of facilitating the development of student identity development, at least at its early stages. Participants in this study appear facilitate identity development by encouraging introspection and extrospection in their classrooms. They recognize the importance of establishing class routines promoting self-regulation and developing empathy for others. They create opportunities for students to discuss and learn about local and global topics in class. As a result of their efforts, middle school teachers appear to play a key role in assisting students discover who they are.

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# Textiles and the Creative Possibilities of Assemblage Thinking in Early Childhood: A Narrative Look

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## Abstract

As textiles continue to feature heavily in discussions of sustainability, and young students continue to be positioned as saviors of the planet, this paper joins the call for assemblage thinking in early years research that decenters humans and foregrounds relationships. What follows is a subset of a larger study, where one preschool classroom engaged with textile themed provocations, and I had the honor of listening deeply to the children. This work borrows from sociomaterialism and artistic listening to consider what themes emerged when I considered child/textile as entangled in meaning making in one senior preschool classroom. I highlight ways in which the themes of *connect*, *know*, and *perceive* all surface in one richly detailed narrative of children making meaning with textiles. Finally, I offer a way in which research can support this kind of assemblage thinking in the classroom, by looking to relationships between themes and how we might represent those relationships in more nuanced, illustrative ways.

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**Keywords:** Creative thinking; early childhood; narrative look.

## Introduction

I was entering the Gather Round preschool classroom slowly, hoping to put loose wool roving into a large sensory-table bin and let the children interact with it (Daly & Beloglovsky, 2016). I pulled the wool out of my bag upon entering the room and the children crowded around my legs. They chattered to each other and ask to hold some of “that stuff” as I maneuvered and filled the empty table. I spilled the wool, brightly colored mixed with undyed, into the bin. The questions and hands came swirling around, engulfing me in a child web of word, motion and body.

### Wool From Owls

A young girl named Una<sup>4</sup> asked me what “this stuff” was. I responded simply:

“Wool”, I said.

Una nodded knowingly. “Wool from owls,” she said.

...

*Wool from owls.*

...

I was speechless.

As adults many of us know that wool comes from sheep. We generally have some visual context for those sheep, covered in their woolly coats, being shorn and released back into the field. True, most of us have drifted from this reality in our modern lives. Very few North Americans keep or shear our own flock (Hahn, 2020). Yet, we generally have context for the word “wool”.

But this child had somehow subverted that context. She must have held some loose notion connecting wool to animals. It may be that the material reminded her of animal fur. She did not share

<sup>4</sup> All names that appear in this document are pseudonyms.

her connections with me. Yet, the connection between wool and owl goes beyond knowledge of animal origin. The words share every letter. Very few words can be made using only w, o and l. Somehow this child chose the only animal named using all the same letters as the material *wool*. If said aloud “wool” and “owl” share the sound /wɒl/. The word owl silently contains wool and is pronounced ow/wool. The connections Una drew continue past my own imagination, I’m sure. With children they always do.

Una must have liked the way it felt to say this, repeating it over and over while playing with the wool and raising it high, balling it up between her hands, then letting it fall. The wool she was touching, the *object* wool, was participating in her learning and knowing. She was not simply acting on the wool, it was acting on her, and I was acting as witness to this interaction, to this becoming, between seemingly unrelated systems (child/owl/wool). “[...] reflecting upon how we compose and circulate our stories by which we make sense of the situations we find ourselves in, [is] how we ‘join the dots’” (Bennet, 2010, p.72). What dots needed to be connected to better understand and acknowledge Una I wondered? Her connections were not those I had anticipated. Furthermore, in the strict sense, she was incorrect: wool does not come from owls.

The children at Gather Round are “people living storied lives on storied landscapes” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 145). The connection drawn between owl and wool highlights this beautifully. For Una, an origin story lives within her about the nature of this material ‘wool’. It is not my job as a researcher to capture this story, that would highlight her inner text as being (e.g., ‘one thing’). It is my job to capture this story as a moment of becoming (e.g., multi-faceted and alive). Clandinin and Connelly speak often of the “multiple plot lines” each character (participant, researcher, reader) are living (2000, p. 147). A sociomaterial narrative, and this is one, must add the material to the plot line, paying attention to the nonhuman world and its intersections: “this requires us to think relationally with other beings/matter and to draw out the confederacy of objects, bodies and materialities” (Taylor & Hughes, 2016, p.2). For this young girl the plot line of herself (participant/self), an owl (non-human yet alive and agentic) and wool (non-human and dead) form a minute intersection and I must record and wonder about this confederacy.

## Literature review

### Young children and textiles

What I offer in this paper is a close look into one experience of children engaging with textiles, originally situated within a larger, three months, sociomaterial study. In taking a metaphorical magnifying glass to my own larger study, I hope to highlight the way in which thinking through children/textile entanglement is hugely relevant to larger discussions of artistic ways of knowing and education for sustainability. Below I outline the study location, sociomaterial methods, and key facets of artistic ways of knowing and sustainability education as they relate to my work. I highlight one children/textile assemblage and the themes that emerged from that story.

The larger study listened for the entanglement of children/textiles in the senior preschool classroom, at Gather Round, over a three-month period. During this time, I was able to immerse myself in the classroom and get to know the learners and educators well. As a researcher, I designed a project that refused to “do” and “answer”. Instead of textile-activity, I focused on textile-listening. I still offered invitations to engage with textiles, termed provocations (see below), but I did not ask anything of these engagements. I deeply considered the “sensory, storied entanglement [of children] within the interrelational agency of other animals, plants, insects, and the rest of the world” (Ritchie, 2014, p. 250). I needed to let go of my desire to impose order and to seek answers.

This was a project in textile-listening. As a researcher my position was that of listener. This, while similar to observation, extends the role of the researcher so that the utmost attention is given to the entire engagement of the children. What are they doing? What are they saying? To whom or what? What are they holding in their hands, or standing near? I tried to listen *hard*. For this project it meant that listening *was* the activity, a new look at active-listening. Preschool classrooms require a researcher

who is present enough to intervene in situations that ethically require intervention (e.g., you are the nearest adult to a child hit by a toy train), but listening remained the role I inhabited in the classroom. What followed was a project that meandered alongside the textile experiences of the children at Gather Round.

Because this paper is a subset of a larger study, in order to help the reader orient to this metaphoric space, a few relevant concepts are detailed below.

### ***Sociomaterialism***

The term sociomaterial itself is best envisioned as a net, engulfing theories of learning concerned with systems and the interactions between humans, materials and what is known (or for sociomaterialists, “enacted”). Often termed new or “neo” materialisms, these sociomaterial theories commonly assert that materials are neither subordinate nor separate from social interaction, while extending previously held materialist theories to include how feelings and meanings contribute to learning and social productions (Coole & Frost, 2010; Fox & Alldred, 2015). For many sociomaterial theorists “the central premise is that the social and the material are entangled and together constitute everyday life. That is, knowing and learning, identities, activities, and environments are understood to be sociomaterial enactments” (Fenwick & Edwards, 2013, p. 372).

Thus, sociomaterial studies must pay particular attention to the materials located within the work. Materials are understood as “entangled in meaning, not assumed to be separate from it” (Fenwick, Edwards, & Sawchuck, 2011, p.vi). To pay attention to the materials in research requires not simply the *inclusion* of such things in the research narrative, but a deeper attention to what was enacted and learned through those things. This is particularly important in the case of education research where learning is often of central interest. Instead of pat conclusions, sociomaterialism helps the researcher who wants to explore multi-stranded stories that reflect on the affective flow between people, object, environment and researcher. Essentially, this type of research must attend to *becoming* between things (relationship) and produce research that respects this movement.

### ***Listening (Artistically)***

It is helpful to situate this kind of “listening” within larger discussions of artistic ways of knowing. “Creating an environment in the studio that zeroes in on *focused listening* nurtures the essential first step of thinking like an artist”. That first step, perceptual awareness and discrimination, develops in students the ability to acutely perceive by using their senses (Haroutounian, 2019, p. 23, emphasis added). Fitting artistic listening alongside sociomaterial research helps us consider ways in which these metaphorical concentric rings of knowing benefit students. We want to cultivate the ability to listen (artistically) for our students, simply because the arts seem uniquely capable of cracking open our ability to think critically, to attend carefully, and to understand our own learning (Greene, 2000, 1995; Gallas, 1994). When we consider the possibilities of a project like the one detailed below, a project that resists pat conclusions about what can be known, we can further consider why *listening* (as a facet of artistic knowing) is so paramount to learning. Furthermore, because this kind of sociomaterial work looks to highlight the mundane objects entangled within learning, we can consider that if a “visual artist will be fascinated with minute details in everyday objects”, cultivating the cognitive processes that *lead* a visual artist to this attention to object, necessarily supports sociomaterial research (Haroutounian, 2019, p. 23).

### ***Early Childhood Education for Sustainability (ECEfS)***

A final relevant concept to consider is education for sustainability (EfS), and its implementation in the early childhood classroom (called early childhood education for sustainability, of ECEfS) “The concept of sustainability [itself] is a complex and contestable term with multiple meanings and interpretations” (Green, 2017, p. 151). This, EfS promotes “[...] development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (Brundtland, cited in Hedefalk, Almqvist, & Östman, 2015, p. 975). Teachers define it as a three-fold process in which students learn about the environment, change their behaviors based on this

learning and continue to use their critical thinking skills regarding the environment as they move forward (Green, 2017; Hedefalk et al., 2015). Early childhood education for sustainability holds that the well-being of young children, present and future, requires their active participation (Davis & Elliot, 2014).

While a full review of this term and its varied applications is outside the possible scope of this paper, it is important for our purposes to consider how ECEfS has often focused on a romanticized binary of children and Nature as self-evident, ignoring the messy relationship between the human and non-human world as a space of possibility (Taylor, 2013). Drawing from sociomateriality and artistic listening can offer ECEfS an exciting way forward if we want to offer children the possibilities that go hand-in-hand with moving ECEfS away “from focusing on the agentic child [e.g., child is the only change agent in the child/environment dyad] to recognizing diverse ways of knowing that include: affective learning, embodied learning and learning with others” (Weldemariam and Wals, 2020, p.14). If we do not shift to include the messy entanglement of children and the nonhuman world, the path forward focuses only on child as change-agent, and the nonhuman world remains flat and passive as we seek sustainable futures.

## Method

### Location

In operation since the early 1980’s, Gather Round is a non-profit childcare centre in a coastal Canadian city. As a demonstration site for a local early childhood educator training program, it is host to many students and interns. Gather Round is one of three centres in the area that feature this mentorship design and, as such, staff report high levels of job satisfaction, with the average teacher employed for five or more years. While Gather Round features three separate classrooms, in the preschool classroom, where this study was situated, up to twenty-two students and four teachers learn together.



**Figure 14:** Sample provocation featuring birch bark, pine cones and yellow chalk

This preschool classroom, termed the senior classroom, is a large bright open-concept room divided into learning centers using only shelves and small furniture items. Three large wooden tables structure the space, and feature different provocations for the children each morning.

### Provocations

Provocations are offered to children, without expectation, and are experiences a teacher has set-up as a way to respond to, or ignite, a children’s interests and ideas (National Association for the Education of Young Children, 1987; OECD Directorate for Education, 2004). This type of creative hands-on exploration invites children to test, construct, deconstruct, practice and create their own concepts or theories (Epstein, 2014;). “Central to the whole approach is the conception of the child as a

subject of rights and as a competent, active learner, continuously building and testing theories about herself and the world around her” (OECD, 2006, p.12). The difference between a provocation and an activity (a term often considered out-of-date in ECE literature) is that while an activity has a determined and desired outcome (e.g., to use a set of stamps or to sort alphabet blocks correctly), a provocation is open-ended and child-led (Daly & Beloglovsky, 2014, 2020). Thus, in Figure 1 above, a child who chooses to sandwich bits of chalk in the pine cone seeds, instead of using the chalk to make marks on the bark, is not doing anything incorrectly. Rather, that child is using the available materials to learn about and experience the world on their own terms.

## Visualization

To further situate this project, it is helpful to remind ourselves that for sociomaterial studies “the central premise is that the social and the material are entangled and together constitute everyday life. That is, knowing and learning, identities, activities, and environments are understood to be sociomaterial enactments” (Fenwick & Edwards, 2013, p. 372). *Figure 2*, below, was designed to showcase the entanglement of young children and the materials, here the textiles, already present in their lives. This illustration will hopefully engage you with what is an otherwise flat document, and elevate the textiles for one imagined child in the preschool classroom. It becomes a little easier to imagine how the children might have acted on the textiles, and how the textiles might have acted on the children, when we focus in on a layered child/textile illustration. We can see that the child illustrated below is wearing layers of clothing, the clothing is in motion (for example, the underwear is peeking out, despite the hope that underwear will remain “under”), the child is in motion (for example, crouching and pointing), and those moments are what the illustration places under our gaze for further consideration.



**Figure 15:** Clugston (2016) Young Children and Material Entanglement

This project borrowed heavily from methods used by narrative inquirers as I patched together a research methodology fitting a textiled narrative, one that paid particular attention to the relationships between children and textiles. Because I also firmly sought a sociomaterial perspective in

this narrative construction I needed to borrow from different methods and tools consistent with new materialist research that features a heavy degree of creative eclecticism in methodology (Fox & Alldred, 2015). This sociomaterial narrative would then be focused on “what things do, rather than what they ‘are’; towards processes and flows rather than structures and stable forms [...] to interactions that draw small and large relations into assemblage. A range of designs might fulfil some or all of those criteria (Fox & Alldred, 2013, p.408).

Both in the preschool classroom and outside it, I am so often reminded that “children often view and perceive place and their environments qualitatively different[ly] than adults” (Green, 2015, p. 1190). The worldview of the child from ages three to five is quite different than that of adults. The experiences they have had, their literal viewpoint, the items and experiences they find important and their preoccupations are all notably different than that of adults. In this respect I was hindered as a researcher: I am an adult. In an effort to better serve the children and portray their realities I sought to suspend my own adult judgment and questioning as much as possible. I tried to interact verbally with the children as little as possible in order to better take in their culture: I did not interview them. Furthermore, where I chose to locate my body in space as I observed the children had an impact on what I was able to perceive. For example, sitting on the floor at a slight distance from their play I saw them move their hands and toys differently than if I stood above them in observation. Keeping this in mind helped me shape a project grounded in respect for the senior preschoolers.

### **The project**

As a production of this research project, I wanted to weave together a series of narrative moments within the preschool classroom that I witnessed and wondered about. I did not want to represent one singular “output” or research conclusion. There is no objective truth about textile narratives in early learning classrooms to be found in this work. To do this with any degree of grace required an understanding of narrative work *and* new materialist work. It also required a fair amount of researcher creativity. I wanted to create a rich assemblage that expanded minute relationships (as found in student narratives) between children and their textiles into larger webs of affective flow. I wanted to wonder about how the textiles and the children acted on each other and how these thematic actions might be woven together.

### **Themes and story**

While the larger project ultimately featured eight themes relevant to student experiences of textile in the classroom, only three are featured in the story *Ocean, Worms, Fur* below. The themes of connect, perceive and know are outlined below.

#### ***Connect/Crayon***

The theme *connect* implies a moment of relationship within the story brought on by the textile. However, I chose the word *connect* to signify an internal link between child and feeling, knowing, understanding or experience, all facilitated by the textile actor. Thus, the difference between *relate* and *connect* has to do with internal and external moments of association. For the theme *connect* a textile might have triggered a memory, an emotional association, or even a link to previously held knowledge.

#### ***Perceive/Jack O’Lantern***

*Perceive* highlights a moment when the textile as facilitator evoked a moment in the child’s story where information was relayed to a listener (peer, teacher, myself) that does not match what is commonly considered factual information about a textile, but nevertheless is incredibly valuable in understanding the child’s narrative. Rather than calling this theme misconceive, I feel the word *perceive* highlights the ambiguous space in which knowledge lives. Though we may not currently consider thread to come from trees (knowledge from a child we would consider “incorrect”) there may be some future method for making thread from tree cellulose (Gallas, 1994). The child’s narrative that includes thread from trees remains important to our developing understanding of textile literacy.

## ***Know/Acorn***

The theme *know* highlights when children's stories included textile knowledge that the textile artist would consider factual. This means that a child expresses something in their story that matches reality in a way frequently associated with the word "knowing". The importance of this theme is that the child's expression was, again, facilitated by the textile or textile discussion occurring at that time. The link being formed involves the child's knowledge base, the textile facilitator, and the expression of this knowledge both verbally or, occasionally, nonverbally.

## **Provocation six: The microscope**

During the third month of this project all provocations I designed for the children were somehow related to textiles or textile fabrication. During the sixth provocation offered to the children, a microscope was borrowed from a local science lab and set up in the classroom on a large flat art table. The microscope was labeled as an educational-grade microscope with an external light source. Slides were prepared in front of the children in order to facilitate their understanding of what they were viewing. An old chambray shirt was placed on the table and every child who visited the microscope watched and assisted as a small section was cut, dry mounted and placed in the viewing tray of the microscope. Paper and pencils were provided in the event a child wanted to draw me a picture of what they saw through the lens. The microscope was focused beforehand so that children were not tasked with doing so themselves. I also allowed them to move and handle the focus knobs to account for differences in eyesight and increase their engagement with this provocation.

## **Ocean, Worm, Fur**

It was the first cold day of December. The children were arriving late to school as parents and guardians fought with a sticky wet snow and the ensuing traffic. I, a seasoned winter driver from Vermont, had made it to school early enough to make sure the microscope provocation was well established before the children arrived. Not being a proficient user of microscopes, or truly any lab equipment, I felt it was necessary to set-up this provocation with ample time for trouble shooting. By the time a group of six children had arrived in the class, I was ready to greet them at the microscope.

I began by holding up a faded denim shirt. This particular button-up style shirt had been a favorite of mine for many years. My mother had bought it oversized to wear when she was pregnant with my brother over twenty years ago. I remember being six years old, leaning against the soft cotton weave and her growing belly. I "borrowed" the shirt from her as an undergraduate student and never returned it. Over many, many years of wear and repair the shirt had finally broken down to an unfixable state. Nevertheless, it was a recognizable shirt-shape and I hoped that including it in this project would bring the soft magic I knew the shirt had always held for me.

I held up the shirt, surreptitiously smelling it as I did so, and asked the six children what I was holding. Of all six children gathered five said "shirt" and one said "sweater". I then proceeded to silently take scissors and cut a small square of cloth from the corner of the shirt. Una, never one to shy away from conversation, gasped when scissors first met cloth. As I placed the small square under the microscope and adjusted the focus, six sets of eyes stared at me quizzically. No one spoke. Somehow the novelty of the tool, my own silence or perhaps the bizarre situation they found themselves in (I can only imagine it is not often an adult cuts clothing in front of children!) led each of them to silence.

I then invited each of them to peer into the microscope. By way of explanation, I simply said: "This is a microscope" and here Lucy responded, "Oh! To see things we can't see with our eyes like germs" and River added, "A microscope is for looking at really small things". I chose not to expand or comment on their responses. I smiled and invited River to look in the microscope first. It was clear by the hushed, reverent tones the children were engaged and curious about their peers' understanding of the microscope.

Each child silently peered into the tool. Some lingered for up to a minute. Others gazed in for a brief moment and then looked up at me. As each child finished their turn, they told me what they



thought they saw. I did not prompt their responses. Una, who had an overall tendency to comment on everything, looked into the microscope second and commented aloud. Perhaps the children were following her lead. Though River went first, he shrugged and walk away.

Una: "It looks like worms"

Evelyn: "Like stripes"

Lucy: "I see what's inside it. Threads."

Bentley: "The ocean"

Cyrus: "Fur"

All of the children's responses intersect at the themes of *perceive*, *connect*, and *know*. Though some children's responses might be more in line with one theme than another, this narrative moment is best taken collectively as each child responded to one another in some sense. This is to say that as the children took their turn, their narrative was informed by the child before them. Similarly, they continued to listen and live through the narrative after their turn. This sense of collective narrative was, in many senses nonverbal (Denham & Onwuegbuzie, 2013). Despite it remaining difficult to articulate the reasons for the children's collective narrative, I nevertheless feel compelled to call it thus (Shelton & Flint, 2019; Manusov & Patterson, 2006).

When the verbal responses to the textile under magnification began, River was silent. We cannot know this moment's themes with clarity, but River's previous response regarding his knowledge of a microscope imparts that he certainly *knows* something about the nature of microscopes and what they are for. His shrug did not seem to come from a place of not knowing, but from a place of choosing silence. We might infer that he silently *connects* something about what he has seen to what he knows and feels.

Then, when Una takes her place at the microscope, she states that what she sees is "like worms". Here we see she is drawing a *connection* between her knowledge of worms, her perhaps subconscious understanding of simile and her view of the fabric under magnification. What she expresses is not perfectly encompassed by the theme *perceive* or *know* as it is neither particularly factual (or not) to claim fabrication under magnification looks like worms. Evelyn has a similar thematic response to Una's when she says "like stripes" drawing a *connection* to her understanding of stripes and what she sees under the microscope. Interestingly, both children choose things (worms and stripes) that are linear in shape, with an observable thickness and definite boundaries. The difference might be that worms have the potential to intersect with one another while stripes are necessarily parallel to each other.

Lucy takes a narrative step further to describe not simply what she sees, but a mechanism for how she is able to see it. For her moment of added narrative, the theme *know* is particularly relevant. She expresses a factual experience that the microscope allows her to see "what's inside" and, even further factually she sees "threads". Certainly, the woven cotton fabric she is looking at is indeed woven of these "threads" she is able to see and identify. How Lucy arrives at this statement is less evident and thus we can imply she is drawing some type of *connection* to her previous experience with microscopes, fabric, her peers' responses and thread.

Bentley and Cyrus' narrative additions mark a more intense thematic turn to the theme *perceive* as they express the fabric up close looks like "the ocean" or "fur". As neither of them use the word "like" to describe this reaction we do not have a clear moment of simile in their narratives; unlike Una and Evelyn they are not saying that what they see is similar to another item they can imagine, but simply this *it is* that item. They might be employing metaphor, or they may be making a concrete statement about what they see. They explain that they see "fur" or "the ocean". Though we might be inclined to say they likely do not imagine it is actually fur or the ocean, their language does not reflect this as clearly as Una or Evelyn. Thus, their narrative additions centre on the theme of *perceive*. As a collective narrative the children's stories intersect on the themes of *perceive*, *know*, and *connect*. A figure that illustrates this intersection is shown below.

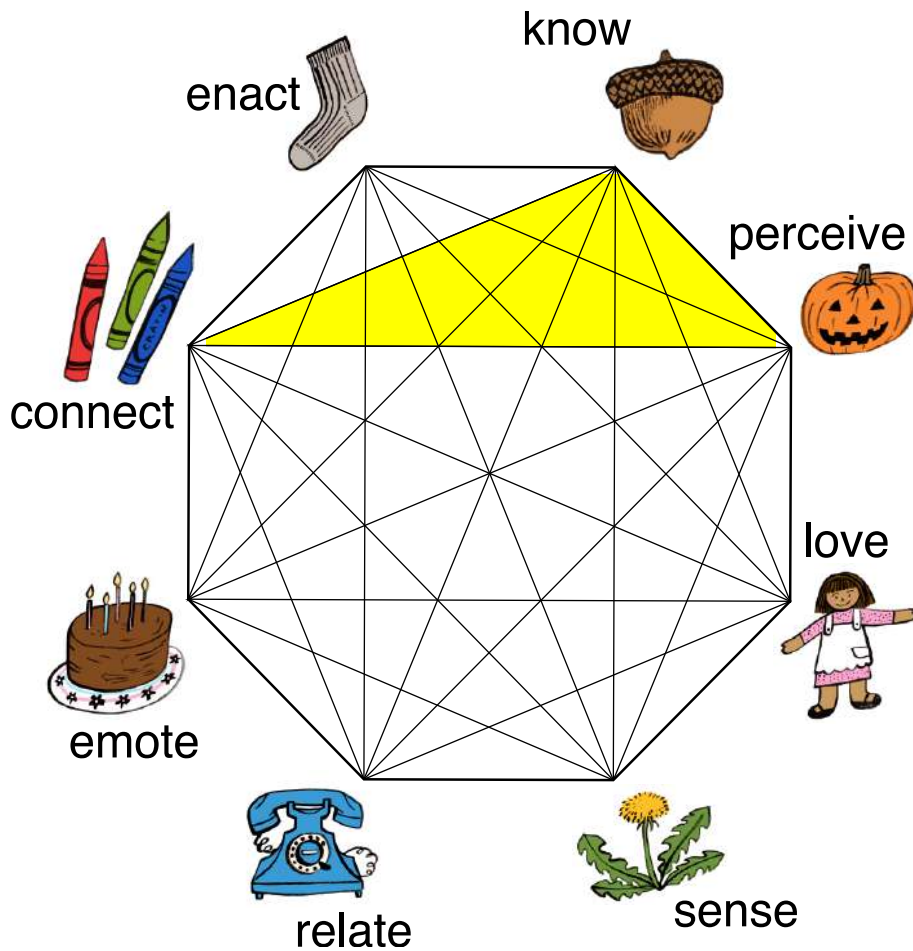


Figure 16: Thematic Visualization "Ocean, Worms, Fur"

## (In)Conclusion

When we turn our gaze to the objects in our lives and stories, we must clean off our smeared glasses and really *see* the connections between everyday objects and knowing, learning and growth. Young children are a perfect audience for seeing freshly what has become invisible. How many parents can empathize with a toddler who will only wear the same two purple shirts over and over? The love for these items stays fresh. “[...] More than adults, children are still open and able to see themselves as integral to this world, and are therefore better positioned to develop a symbiotic relationship of “becoming-with” the world. Ironically, most adults seem to have lost this capacity to a large degree” (Weldemariam & Wals, 2020, p.22). Young children are primed to attend to the everyday because, for them, the work of being alive still requires growth, creativity, discovery and openness. Generally, they are not in charge of paying bills, of cooking dinner or of driving to and from: they are ready to attend. Young children are well suited to paying close attention because, for them, the gaze of mundanity does not yet exist.

Until very recently most ECEfS initiatives have focused on either the child living in a loving relationship with nature or the child as a change agent with the power to protect nature (Cutter-Mackenzie-Knowles et al., 2019; Malone, 2015; Taylor, 2013). However, if we enter into a sociomaterial project such as this one, we can decenter the human and focus on “children’s entanglements within multiple human and non-human assemblages and relations” (Weldemariam & Wals, 2020, p.15). This interwoven relationship between the human and non-human world helps situate early childhood as entangled within nature; neither subordinate nor dominant, but better seen as an “ebb and flow” of agency (Barad, 2007). By paying attention to the materials, here the textiles, at Gather Round preschool this work strives to decenter the human. It equally rejects hero narratives (for

the children) or concrete solutions regarding sustainable futures. This is the work of “becoming with” and of entanglement (Bennet, 2010).

[...] “The materialist perspective raises questions about human capacities to produce research knowledge [...] Conventionally, social inquiry (like other scientific inquiry) has been considered from the point of view of the researcher, who through efforts of reason, logic and scientific method, gradually imposes order upon ‘data’, and in so doing, ‘makes sense’ of the world. [But the materialist perspective] with its own affect economy [...] shapes the knowledge it produces according to the particular flows of affect produced by its methodology and methods” (Fox & Aldred, 2015, p.403).

This project, encapsulated here by a small sub-story from a larger work, attempts to complicate how we learn, by focusing intensely on listening as method. I tried to enact “grounded relational research” within and without the Gather Round preschool room (Pacini-Ketchabaw, Taylor & Blaise, 2016). Because this project resisted activity to focus on listening, I also chose not to impose a singular research question at the start of the work. In order to turn my attention, and hopefully your attention, to the promises of listening as method I chose to close this work with a question that acts as a metaphorical provocations. In the spirit of setting out materials for preschoolers to engage with at their leisure, a form of “come and join me if you wish”, the larger project offered 3 leveled questions that moved from the specific (individual) to the broad (systems) to invite the reader to “come and join” too. They were designed to meet your own work where it was, if you would like to consider the value of listening. I offer here the second level of question, **the research level**, as a way to close this work.

#### ***How Might We Better Represent Textile-Listening in Narrative Research?***

As McKenzie and Bieler point out, if attention is focused only on how children can act as change agents (e.g., must *save* nature), the divide between humans and non-humans deepens (2016). While it is not the goal of this study (nor of any study cited within this paper) to ignore the agency and empowerment of young children, it is important to consider the potential when the human is decentered and non-humans (animals, environments and materials) are brought into focus. For narrative research, I have wondered how we might go about representing this textile-listening to readers of research. How can entanglement and materiality lift itself off the confines of a 2-dimensional page? Figure 3 was created with exactly this entanglement of material and human agency in mind. It is in itself a form of conclusion. It has been designed to shift our focus from the child as agentic meaning-maker, to the items that participated in the meaning of this work, in concert with the child actor. Using a web helps to make messy the work of this ontological shift.

The use of a web illustration helps the researcher envision entanglement and draw readers into the process of listening to materiality (here, to textile/children assemblages). The question a researcher must pose of the themes found within their narrative study is: *how do the themes relate to one another? how does materiality serve the themes? what shapes or structures help us visualize this entanglement?*

For this particular project a web was an interesting structure to impose on the themes for several reasons. First, it calls forth ideas of weaving (spiders) and thread (lace). It also helps the reader imagine that all themes are connected, thinly, but that plucking any one thematic thread will affect the entirety of the entanglement. Lastly, it helps us envision the connections between themes as minute areas of intersection on our interwoven structure.

For other projects the web imagery may not be relevant. Would a triangle best serve the materiality? Three thematic objects supporting each other to create stability. Perhaps the triangle is not equilateral, essentially favoring some thematic area over another. While this work remains a “small, local, relational and decidedly non-heroic research event”, the attention given to listening, materials and entanglement and, ultimately, how to represent them on the page might help other researchers in their own work (Pacini-Ketchabaw, Taylor & Blaise, 2016, p.165).

For research that seeks entanglement and materiality these types of structure relationships are of interest as we consider not simply what themes emerge in the narrative, but how they are entangled with meaning; how they structure the research assemblage.

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## About the Author

**Catherine-Laura Dunnington** earned her M.Ed. at the University of Montana and her Ph.D. at the University of Ottawa. She writes largely about early literacy, feminist theories of childhood, sociomaterial theories of childhood, and teacher narrative. Her work has been featured in the *Bank Street College of Education's Occasional Paper Series*, *Bookbird: A Journal of International Children's Literature*, *The Journal of Curriculum Theorizing* and the *Journal of the Canadian Association for Curriculum Studies*. Her work can be found at [catherine.dunnington.ca](http://catherine.dunnington.ca). She lives near the ocean.

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# Dreaming Possibilities: Reshaping Imaginaries with Feminism and Social Change

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## Abstract

By using the feminist imaginary as a pedagogical tool for resistance and change, an experience of activism within the university context in Naples, Italy is explored. The article focuses on the potential transformative power of art as catalysis for deeper level emotional and spiritual learning transformation. The aim is trying to inspire critical conversations to rethink spaces and practices that allow community care, and conditions that include authenticity, resonance, reflection, and freedom. Engaging in the arts, aesthetics, and creative practices can contribute to a sense of hope, agency, and possibility with the potential to provide avenues for creative expression and innovation. Sharing narratives of possibility and engagement with the arts can promote community connections. This article highlights the way artistic practices contributed to the creation of a dynamic and inclusive creative landscape that challenges established norms while encouraging creative and critical thinking.

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**Keywords:** Art practices; feminist imaginary; activism; social change; transformative education.

*Imagination is one of our most powerful tools. What we imagine, we can become*  
Robin Wall Kimmerer

Subversive thinking

subversive article

to reopen our depressed collective imagination.

Post pandemic art as living art daily to heal from contemporary alienation.

Dreaming as a method of envisioning beyond what no longer serves us, supporting each other's towards new sites of possibilities.

Co-building: source from which we can change, adapt, and transform.

## Transformative opportunities to encounter the “other”

I am on a journey to explore experimental ways of engaging with the world, thinking, expressing, sharing, and transforming through art. Our perception is haunted by the entirety of our experiences, what images reside within our perceptual mechanisms subtly or overtly shaping our figurative imagination? I strongly believe in the subversive power of images beyond imagination to create an emancipative connection with the world inside and around us. Using feminist imaginary as a pedagogical tool for resistance and change, I would like to share some reflections on practice, recounting my personal experience of community and activism. It's a story of hope and possibility, of loss and rage, of struggle and challenge. It is an attempt to promote forms of healing and explore vulnerability as a daily revolutionary act; it is a seed of hope and inspiration. The aim is to inspire critical conversations to rethink spaces and practices that allow community care. The aim is to create environments that nurture both imagination and critical thinking, fostering a more dynamic and creative consciousness along with the educational and transformative potential. The challenge is learning not only to be in spaces but to experience spaces as places of possibility that make it possible to simultaneously satisfy the need for autonomy and community, to feel free and at the same time belong. We need caring environments (physical and feeling dimension) that allow anyone to be without fear, to learn without pressure, to exercise a freedom of being and to express one's own full potential. Art can provide a valuable space to heal from personal struggles and unilinear power. Artistic expression can resist domination or societal hierarchy structures. Spaces can be free from racist, sexist,

patriarchal, homophobic, transphobic and classist thoughts. Art can create a space where it is possible to be vulnerable.

Imagination enables us to embrace alternative realities: open spaces and room for us to appreciate each other and empathize with each other (Thayer-Bacon, 2010, p. 1.) It guides us in fostering empathy through the power of the arts facilitating the creation of new frameworks, seamlessly connecting fragmented elements, and revealing patterns previously unseen (Greene, 1995).

To be enabled to activate the imagination is to discover not only possibility, but to find the gaps, the empty spaces that require filling as we move from the is to the might be, to the should be. To release the imagination too is to release the power of empathy, to become more present to those around, perhaps to care (Greene, 2007, p.4).

How can we try to create such spaces, given the conditions of our environment?

Rethinking spaces (taking account of material and immaterial elements) through new lenses and a collective conversation about how we feel and want to feel in spaces is a starting point. From that point we can learn to express ourselves and connect with each other in more vulnerable and human ways. A systematic change is required from the inside out and from the other way round. Academia needs to explore and address these questions. Research could be more accessible and it could aim to nurture well-being. How can we feed the academia with knowledge that is already there, in the communities?

An institution should not solely be viewed as a place of passage; rather, an institution can be revised as a place that allows the historicizing of experience: a space that invites deep self-reflection, self-awareness, critical thinking, and community care. What power dynamics, constraints, and possibilities, what imagination of institutions have we inherited from the past and how could we envision a deconstruction to make way for spaces and practices that contribute to our well-being?

“A community we can strive for, an ideal democratic community that is always in the making, and in which we feel at home”, states Thayer-Bacon (p.1) by referring to the vision articulated by Bateson (1994) and Greene (1995). Greene emphasizes the significance of recognizing the value of imagination and comprehending its central role in the pursuit of knowledge. A challenge resides in creating learning spaces that engage with individuals' existential narratives and multiple affiliations within institutional and social contexts. Personal experiences can be explored through aesthetic and reflective ways within spaces with which we share psychic and bodily connections. Being present in these sensitive spaces with attention reveals the transformative and authentic, yet multifaceted, power of learning. In this direction, Sheri R. Klein's thinking (2017) aligns in recognizing in encounters with everyday landscape. There is the potential to awaken us evoking experiences of transformative learning.

Klein (2017) proposes a three-step model (*beholding*, *immersion*, and *reflection*) that serves as guidelines for the exploration and interpretation of landscapes supporting the development of awareness. She argues that self-awareness forms an infinite network that is not limited by spatiotemporal constraints defined by a specific learning experience. She discusses how the awareness generated by her personal transformative experience with everyday landscapes has led to the development of deeper emotional and conceptual complexity, including considerations of paradox even within her role as a researcher. Beholding entails pausing to appreciate the beauty and wonder in their myriad forms that surround us in our lives. In a contemporary world replete with distractions, beholding can offer opportunities to focus on the potential of the self, of the others, and of the moment. Beholding can allow us to simultaneously perceive both the small details and the entirety of the whole in her phenomenological inquiry, Klein considers landscapes central to the processes of meaning attribution. Landscapes, therefore, can serve as aesthetic gateways for imaginative, symbolic, and emotional modes of understanding reality. Just as art does, landscapes can invite us to pay attention, requiring receptiveness on visceral, cognitive, imaginative, and emotional levels (White, 2013).



Through reflective engagement with the world, from passive attention to full awareness, something new unfolds. Bateson (1994) refers to it as "the capacity for awed experience of the ordinary" (p. 56). Like Bateson and Klein, Greene (1977) while exploring the concepts of wide-awakeness and full attention to life, writes:

If it is indeed the case, as I believe it is, that involvement with the arts and humanities has the potential for provoking precisely this sort of reflectiveness, we need to devise ways of integrating them into what we teach at all levels of the educational enterprise; and we need to do so consciously, with a clear perception of what it means to enable people to pay, from their own distinctive vantage points, "full attention to life" (p.121).

The need to re-learn how to think about space thus becomes an indispensable key to hopefully leave open new and multiple perspectives for interpretation and discussion. We cannot fail to consider conflict in community, and spaces and practices being negotiated every moment between different beings with different desires and perceptions of what they need. Why is it so difficult to deal with conflict?

It could happen sometimes that we choose to avoid conflict because at stake is our identity, our fragility, and the risk of being left apart. An emancipatory and creative path may leave us wounded sometimes, but we may find more authentic ways of living: "we search, we make mistakes, we learn, we re-invent. Let's do it with love" (Castillo, 2023).

## **The impact of arts on education, personal agency, and social change**

The direction taken by recent studies in the field of education and lifelong learning rejects the notion of emotion as a barrier to reason and knowledge. Indeed, cherishing, deconstructing, and revisiting the role of emotions and intuition in learning processes are vital (Dirks, 2008). Within this perspective is the whole-person approach: learning is reconceptualized in accordance with this comprehensive framework which embraces cognitive, affective, somatic, intuitive, and spiritual dimensions. This approach presents a scenario that acknowledges various modalities essential for transformative processes: both critical reflection and dialogue, as well as purely sensory aspects (somatic, visual, olfactory). Art and creative expression provide avenues for exploring alternative modes of expression and multiple ways of knowing, which may deepen self-knowledge and understanding of others. Lawrence (2005), for example, examines the constraints inherent in traditional ways of knowledge construction within educational contexts. She explores the concept of art as a form of Indigenous knowledge: a way to access latent knowledge and self-discovery. She also highlights the importance of arts-based learning within curricular frameworks and underscores art's potential as a catalyst for social change and for learning from diverse cultural perspectives. Cranton and Lawrence (2009) describe personal transformative stories through photography as a tool that allows one to see the "extraordinary in the ordinary" (p. 314) moving into imaginal, symbolic, and emotional ways of understanding.

A fundamental aspect of creative expression involves the utilization of imagination. As highlighted by Hoggan et al. (2009), engaging in creative expression promotes exploration and experimentation. Imagination acts as a mechanism for envisioning new possibilities and scenarios. Because the arts transcend rationality, they present a variety of opportunities for profound transformative learning experiences to occur.

Simpson (2007) delves into the power of this approach to transformative learning and emphasizes the role of the arts in fostering such learning experiences. In her research she employs collage as a potent tool for arts-based inquiry. Imagination thus acts as a catalyst for transformative experiences allowing us to perceive the familiar, often taken-for-granted, from new perspectives, thereby breaking with the ordinary. Greene (2007) describes it as a "passion for possibility" (p.1), asserting that when we encounter a great work of art, our way of seeing the world widens: we begin to view things as if they could be different.

Hayes and Yorks (2007) instead examine the transformative potential of the arts as a methodological tool for community development and for social change. Key themes include the role of

art as a precursor to activism, its ability to harness conflict and its role in the deconstruction and reconstruction of self and community. Additionally, Lawrence and Butterwick (2007) have drawn attention to the significance of the arts in fostering education for social justice. They conducted a transformative learning study centered on oppression and difference, utilizing arts-based methodologies, highlighting the role of the arts in the processes of imagination and empathetic connection with both personal and collective experiences of oppression. Scher (2007) has synthesized the collective experiences of herself and fellow community arts activists. The dialogue within the inquiry group produced several insights regarding the role of community arts:

1. Community arts establish a safe environment.
2. Art facilitates introspection and contemplation.
3. Art captures historical narratives while also envisioning the future.
4. Art possesses the capacity to foster healing and resilience.
5. Engagement with the arts contributes to community metamorphosis.
6. Art bridges spiritual practices with the realities of everyday life.
7. The artistic process serves as a transformative agent for social change.

Another example that I find quite interesting is Sundus Abdul Hadi's *Take Care of Your Self*. In this work, Abdul Hadi (2020) critically examines the concept of care and its connection to social justice. She explores the role of art in constructing narratives that challenge and address systemic oppression and trauma. Through the exhibit and the book, she connects transcultural artists who engage with the complex issue of intersection of struggle and care. She amplifies the voices of marginalized individuals and underscores the significance of creating brave spaces. Through her exploration, she offers methods for decolonizing care through art and highlights its transformative power. She addresses questions like how museums and galleries can become sites of healing, using art as a transformative practice and a spiritual one too.

The act of creation can be transformative if you allow it to be. So, I encourage you to consider how your acts of care can become positive catalysts for these larger issues of self, community, and the world. It all starts with sharing your story (p.142).

In the following section, I will describe my own personal experience.

## **Community and collaboration /activism and social change**

This story begins with grassroot meetings organized by students, activists and young researchers after a series of recent suicides (spanning from 2022 to 2023) happened in different universities in Italy. Three of them occurred within the university where I pursued my studies, a place that has long symbolized and continues to represent a second home for me. It is the city where I still live and pursue my doctoral research; it is my beloved yet challenging Naples. We felt the need and the urgency to create a student community for mental health, a safe space of care and struggle. By working collectively, we tried to create a space where diverse voices can be heard, fostering a collaborative environment that embraces multiplicity and contradiction, using creativity as a tool for social change. It involved risk-taking and challenges existing power structures but contributing at the same time to the emergence of new possibilities and perspectives. In the initial gatherings there were few participants. The setting was circular and the space-time was dedicated to the expression of personal feelings in any preferred form, whether verbal or non-verbal. At the center of the circle, large white sheets and various materials were provided for writing, drawing, and painting. There was no predetermined structure other than the encouragement to embrace vulnerability and demonstrate care while recognizing and naming the emotions and sensations associated with own experiences as in the technique of *soul work* identified by Dirks (2001).

Some participants etched symbolic words while others engaged in drawing. Some stood up and remained in silence at the center while still others expressed themselves through artistic and theatrical performances. Symbolic language allows for simultaneity bringing together disparate and

separate elements into a cohesive whole, thus facilitating recognition (Lawrence, 2009). Initially, a temporal gap existed between those who stood up to express themselves at the center of the circle, and those who remained seated, waiting, and observing. Afterwards, like in a dance, the cadence between one form of expression and another assumed a faster rhythm creating a collective performance.

Following this, some individuals took the floor to narrate their own stories or express and share feelings of anger, discomfort, and suffering, but also ideas and hopeful aspirations.

In subsequent weekly meetings, we convened to compose a letter addressed to the university Rector and the entire student/academic community, which was subsequently approved and read aloud during classes. Simultaneously, we developed an online anonymous questionnaire focussing on our perceptions of university life, emotional and psychological well-being, presence and/or utilization of university psychological support services, seeking assistance from professionals, and the enduring presence of distress stemming from the pandemic. The questionnaire was disseminated through various social media platforms, employing a QR code integrated into flyers distributed across diverse university campuses and posted on city walls. Additionally, these materials were strategically positioned to optimize visibility. Remarkably, within less than a week, 881 individuals completed the survey. We adopted a name for our group: CSSM (*Comunità studentesca per la salute mentale* - Student Community for Mental Health, Figure 1), initiated an Instagram channel, and established an email address. Our meetings shifted to open-air locations, facilitated by a megaphone due to our increased numbers. Recognizing the constrained time frame and the urgency to present questionnaire outcomes to the university Rector promptly, we convened more frequently to analyze the data, despite ongoing responses to the questionnaire. Given additional temporal flexibility, a heightened methodological precision might have been achievable.

## **Results: Working toward the university as a learning sanctuary**

The data analysis portrays academia as a heedless environment that fails to accommodate the needs of both students and academics. The university environment exacerbates elements of competition, the fear of failure, and the disappointment of expectations, thereby fostering feelings of inadequacy and loneliness. A significant majority (83,2% of survey participants) reported experiencing the need for psychological support at least once; in addition, 51.1% of the participants believe that their emotional and psychological state could be improved, 56% continue to experience a situation of distress that emerged/exacerbated during the pandemic, and 44% are not aware of university psychological support services or consider them inadequate. Additionally, 65% expressed a willingness to engage in grassroots meetings aimed at collaborative sharing, contemplation, imagination, and collective reflection.

In sum, the most prevalent causes of discomfort and distress reported included: competition, individualism, an environment that prioritizes the pursuit of merit and excellence, a sense of personal failure in response to rejection, low grades, or exam deferrals, a demanding pace, performative anxiety, and the imposition of both individual and collective pressures.

The expressed desires encompass addressing structural challenges within the educational system that give rise to profound discomfort, difficulties, and distress. This involves collaboratively constructing an educational framework tailored to the needs of students and all stakeholders. Another suggestion involved creating a new academic journal that would celebrate accomplishments and positive actions. There was a collective call to advocate for a university that recognizes mental health as an inherent right rather than a privilege. The intended haven for knowledge sharing has unfortunately transformed into an environment that induces increasing insecurity, isolation, and the stifling grip of performative anxiety, coupled with the persistent fear of falling short. Some students find themselves categorized as "out of course," while even those who ostensibly "succeed" are burdened by an ongoing dread of "failure" and the apprehension of not meeting expectations.

The university - in all its components - should instead be a safe space, respectful of the diverse individualities, without which it would have no possibility of existence. It should be a place of

gathering and socialization, traversed by those who work and study. It should not be seen as simply an empty building where exams are taken - or pretended to be taken - but as a space lived actively and as protagonists. The university, encompassing all its facets, should ideally manifest as a *learning sanctuary* (Lange, 2009), a safe, nurturing space that respects the diverse individualities of its members, as without such diversity, it would lack the foundation for meaningful existence. It should function as a hub for congregation and socialization.

Dirks also encourages us to consider spirituality in learning as a *soul work*, that is, learning to work with the images that populate our thoughts, emotions, and actions. Beyond either relativism or the search for absolutes, learning can be practiced as a form of spirituality through a lifetime (Bateson, p. 234). Rather than a mere hollow structure where exams are administered, or perhaps feigned, university should be perceived as a dynamically inhabited space, lived actively, with students and academics assuming the roles of protagonists in their collective academic journey.

*“Let's break the isolation together to build a university that is a place of care, sharing, and personal and collective growth”* stands as our enduring mantra, accompanied by *'di università non si può morire'* (one should not die because of university). What happened next?

After occupying the rectorate several times as “space invaders in the academy” (Ahmed, 2017) we managed to secure an open-door meeting with the Academic Senate to present the demands of Student Community for Mental Health. In the preparatory phase our organization underwent increased structuring with a subdivision into three committees: faculty abuses; meritocracy and the taxation system; mental health and plans for the design and implementation of psychological support services.

The meeting was marked by collaboration between the parties and promises of future interventions within the constraints of possibilities and implementation limitations.

The Student Community for Mental Health constituted a small but integral part, and the national mobilization scenario that unfolded in response to suicide emergencies prompted significant shifts. With Ministerial Decree No. 1159 dated July 25, 2023, the Ministry of University and Research finally issued a NOTICE FOR THE ALLOCATION OF FUNDS AIMED AT PROMOTING PSYCHOPHYSICAL WELL-BEING AND COMBATING PSYCHOLOGICAL AND EMOTIONAL DISTRESS AMONG THE STUDENT POPULATION.

During the *Bassai Dai* festival, in a warm summer week filled with artistic events and discussions on themes such as time, rhythm, and care, CSSM opened the final concert with reflections and contributions on the entire journey, celebrating the initial milestones achieved.

## **Intersection of feminism, art, and activism**

After engaging with Helmore's (2021) reading on extending social justice activism into the realm of the imagination, I reflected on how educational practices and activism can contribute to building new imaginaries working on freedom of the imagination (that accesses all human experience, and rejects restrictions of time, place, or origin) and expression for everyone: imagination about what's possible can have revolutionary consequences.

A movement requires us to be moved, feminist movement depends on our ability to keep insisting on something (Ahmad, 2017, p.5). However, at times, disillusionment, emotional overload, burnout, and disorientation may set in. “Who cares for the carers?” We find it written in the Art for UBI (Manifesto) edited by the Institute of Radical Imagination.

I want to recount two episodes that occurred during the year of activism with CSSM, which reinvigorated energies and imagination in dark moments of overload and disillusionment. The first is represented by a community art trademark during a walk along the waterfront after an almost entirely sleepless night. Large letters on the rocks reflected the message *'still alive!'* (figure 2). This was (created post-pandemic) and served to remind us that we are *'still alive'* despite the disruption,

ambiguity, unknowability, risk, and contradictions that mark our era. It's breathing in the pain and a communal healing from collective traumas. It is a dismantling experience of oppression, thus creating a sense of hope and agency. It is an openness towards the sea and new life. In that moment occurred during the Student Community for Mental Health's activism against suicide emergencies it had a profound impact for me. The second episode occurred during the *Non Una di Meno* protest for women's rights (figure 3). The letter, accompanied by CSSM, was read in the streets with an invitation to participate in the assemblies. I felt purple smoke in the air and one manifesto resonating in choirs, on posters, among marginalized voices screaming 'feminism is the cure'.



**Figure 17:** CSSM

How can artistic practices mitigate and address these phases? Reinfusing with meaning, liberating, and generating new energies, connecting, breathing into one's emotions and bodies. The struggle can be exhausting. The task is learning to stay with the difficulty and to keep exploring and exposing this difficulty (Ahmed, 2017). Engaging in the arts, aesthetics, and creative practices can contribute to a sense of hope, and agency. Such engagement provides possibilities and potential avenues for creative expression and innovation. Such engagement can promote healing. The beauty of sharing narratives of possibility and building community connections can emerge. Through these avenues, individuals and communities can find inspiration and strength to face challenges and envision positive futures. Feminist aesthetic and creative practices actively engage with the complexities of identity, power, and societal structures. By embracing experimentation and unknowability, these practices contribute to a dynamic and inclusive creative landscape that encourages critical thinking and challenges established norms.

Hope is not at the expense of struggle but animates a struggle; hope gives us a sense that there is a point to working things out, working things through. Hope does not only or always point toward the future, but carries us through when the terrain is difficult, when the path we follow makes it harder to proceed. Hope is behind us when we have to work for something to be possible (Ahmed, 2017, p.2).



**Figure 18:** STILL ALIVE! Naples



**Figure 19:** Non Una di Meno Protest

## Future directions

Continuing to grapple with my identity as both an amateur artist and a research fellow, I find it challenging to resist the separation of art from research and endeavor to integrate them. Despite the evidence presented by the World Health Organization (2019) on the positive role of art on health and well-being, I struggle to witness this integration within educational practices in institutional contexts in Naples. Although there are indications that perspectives are beginning to change, especially concerning museums and associations and heritage sites as centres of transformation, the journey toward a more unified approach remains an ongoing challenge. A call for imaginative capacity is needed starting from learning environments. Barbara Thayer-Bacon (2010) wonders whether schools offer us hope for learning how to attend to the unfamiliar in each of us, so that the unfamiliar becomes a resource rather than a threat, and recognition is possible (p.5). Her hope shared with Greene and Bateson is that schools can help to make our world a better place. There exists a prevalent fear that integrating the arts into our curriculum may compromise excellence, and that embracing diverse expressions may result in disorder and confusion (Greene, 1995).



At the core of the learning process lies the concept of meaning making which the arts help to process facilitating empowerment, self-discovery, healing, and transformation. In Lee and Taylor's perspective (2011), educators should create spaces and conditions in the learning environment that include authenticity, resonance, reflection, and freedom.

How do we design spaces for a shared creation of meaning, spaces to be thought of, to be dwelled into? What practices address and alleviate anxiety about learning and resistance to transformation? How might we build alternative narratives inspired by responsibility and solidarity, by connecting intellect to passion. and produce knowledge necessary for effecting social change? (Minicom & Walters, 2012). Sara Ahmed (2017) discusses how we learn about worlds when they do not accommodate us, thinking of these experiences as a resource to generate knowledge, how we become inventive, how we create other ways of being when we have to struggle to be?

I explore experiences of being a stranger, of not feeling at home in a world (Ahmed, 2017, p.7).

I used to think that art can bring you out of yourself into a different world; art can make someone who belonged nowhere belong somewhere. Upon deeper reflection I considered that maybe it is not a different world, but we can rather refine our ability to see the world with more nuances by expanding the boundaries between external and internal. In doing so, we discover a possible other world even within ourselves, in the bodies we inhabit, in their possibilities to experience and feel. We might feel a sense of belonging, even if only for a few moments, perhaps nourishing inspiration. Exploring aesthetic experiences can inspire individuals and instill a sense of wonder; as a result, a deeper outlook on life can emerge and alternative ways of being can be explored. Feeling a sense of identity, belonging, and home is a lifelong journey.

Feeling at home in your own body, among people, in the context you live, and with the awareness of being ready to renegotiate desires and needs is an initial step. The core of belonging, identity, and home may change for us over time but I believe that being willing to look for it is a beautiful mission.

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## About the Author

**Ms. Federica Liberti** is a Ph.D. student at University of Naples Parthenope (Naples, Italy) in Pedagogical and Psychological Sciences, Department of Medical, Motor, and Well-being Sciences. Federica completed her master's degree in clinical psychology at the University of Naples Federico II with a thesis titled "Provoking Awakening: New Paths of Transformative Learning." The main focus was on transformative stories that were later collected in a short docm-movie. These stories included a research analysis that had been carried out at the Teachers College of Columbia University (Adult Learning and Leadership Program). Federica was a visiting student at the Université Paris Diderot in 2016; she was also a research intern at Humboldt-Universität, Berlin, in 2018. Ms. Liberti's current research interests focus on the social representations underlying the concept of care and spaces of mutual care. Integrating interdisciplinary and cross-cultural perspectives, Federica's research also explores vulnerabilities, identity construction, and relationships and social transformations in postmodern society. Her research is approached from an interdisciplinary and cross-cultural perspective.

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**A Tribute to:**

# **Prof. Dr. Joan Freeman (1935 – 2023)**

**Sandra Linke**

The International Centre for Innovation in Education (ICIE); Ulm-Germany

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Pathbreaking psychologist and researcher, Professor Dr. Joan Freeman, died on 2 July 2023. She was 88.

Joan Freeman was born Sally Joan Casket in 1935. Apart from the five years she spent as a child evacuee in Canada during the war, Joan grew up in Manchester, England. She received her Ph.D. in 1980 from the University of Manchester and became a chartered psychologist in 1988, licensed to practice by the British Psychological Society. Dr. Freeman was awarded a visiting professorship at the University of Middlesex in 1991. During 1989-2020 while living in London, Dr. Freeman served as a consultant to several agencies and universities while maintaining an active research agenda and a private practice working with children. She was the author or editor of 17 books and over 150 peer-reviewed publications.

Professor Freeman was married to Professor Hugh Freeman, M.D., editor of the *British Journal of Psychiatry* (Dr. Hugh Freeman died on 4 May 2011). Joan Freeman is survived by two sons and one daughter. Her son Tony Freeman passed away shortly before his mother.

Dr. Joan Freeman was a distinguished scholar and academic whose profound contributions to gifted education have left an indelible mark on the world of gifted education

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and research. Her intellectual curiosity and dedication to knowledge were evident in her prolific body of work, which has inspired countless students and colleagues over the years.

Joan's academic journey was marked by excellence and innovation. She was always seeking new ways to advance understanding and push the boundaries of talent development in general and gifted education in particular. Her rigorous research and insightful publications have become essential references. Collectively, her scholarly works reflect her commitment to scholarly rigor and integrity.

Professor Freeman was a pioneer of the longitudinal research approach to studying gifted children and their families. In the course of her career, she served as a consultant to universities and research centre in several countries, including: The International Centre for Innovation in Education (ICIE); the Chinese University of Hong Kong, the University of Prague, Arabian Gulf University, Yale University, the University of Alberta, and the University of Stockholm. Professor Freeman was in regular demand as a speaker around the world.

In 2007, Joan won a Lifetime Achievement Award from the British Psychological Society. The award is given to psychologists with an outstanding record of personal achievements who have also made significant contributions to the advancement of psychological knowledge. In the year 2010, she earned the ICIE award for excellence in gifted education.

As an educator, Professor Freeman had a unique ability to ignite a passion for learning in her students, encouraging them to think critically and explore new ideas. Her mentorship extended beyond the classroom, as she guided and supported emerging scholars with generosity and wisdom. Many of her students went on to achieve great success, a testament to her influence and the profound impact she had on their academic and personal lives.

Joan Freeman's legacy as a scholar and academic expert will continue to inspire future generations. Her contributions have laid the groundwork for ongoing research and development, ensuring that her impact will be felt for many years to come. We honor her memory and celebrate her life, grateful for the knowledge, inspiration, and wisdom she shared with the world.

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In the year 2018, Prof. Dr. Taisir Subhi Yamin (see; *IJTDC*, 6(1&2) 2018: 2023-2011) interviewed Joan Freeman. She explained what motivated her to enter the field of gifted education:

My motivation to enter the field of understanding and helping lively minds to develop has deep roots in my own early observations and feelings. I know that a bright child can get by in the world without an appropriate education. But when high level opportunities and encouragement are absent, achievement is lower than promise and catching up on some early steps in learning can be almost impossible.

Yet, being intellectually gifted (as I suppose I was) was unusual where the other children merely did their time at school to leave at 14 to work the land, tend the animals and spread the gospel of Jesus, eagerly anticipating his second coming. I had to tread carefully, though, after my stories were held up in front of the class as examples of good

writing and imagination: the boys indicated that I should have known better than show them up.

Other than that, I did not receive any recognition of high level potential. But then, I never experienced any of the complaints which are so often presented today as essential signs of giftedness. I was never ever bored. A shelf in our two room wooden home held the Bible and a Sears Roebuck mail order catalogue on both of which I spent a lot of time. In spring the new calves were there to nuzzle and in the winter when the outside pump was frozen I was busy breaking icicles to bring in and melt for house water. There was fun at interchurch meetings and designs to work out at quilting parties.

Rest in peace, Joan. Your scholarly brilliance and compassionate spirit will forever be remembered



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An abstract for a review or a theoretical article should describe in no more than 150 words the topic (in one sentence), the purpose, thesis or organising structure and the scope of the article. It should outline the sources used (e.g., personal observation and/or published literature) and the conclusions.

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A paper submitted should not exceed 7000 words including abstract, keywords, references, and illustrations.

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