(RE)MAKING IDENTITIES: NEGOTIATING CRITICAL LITERACY IN AN URBAN HIGH SCHOOL

by

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Abstract

How can teachers meaningfully engage with students around issues of identity in the classroom? In response to this, I used my urban Toronto public school classroom as a space to investigate the interactive processes of constructing and deconstructing identity through teacher-student relationships. Using practitioner inquiry, my research asks how critical literacy can encourage high school students to reflect on their own understanding of their identity. Through a series of reflective activities I documented the implications of students (and teachers) bringing their whole selves and diverse experiences into the classroom. Findings demonstrate that when given the opportunity, students explored factors that influenced perceptions of who they are and who they wanted to be. Engaging with teaching as a relational act, I facilitated an analysis of relationship dynamics through dialogue and reflection. Findings are valuable for educators and administrators interested in using critical education to engage with youth voices, experiences and ideas.
Acknowledgements

“Hey miss, have you been talking to your friends again?” ~ Gon (student), February 2015

This thesis would not have been possible without recognizing the students in the Bridges to University classroom. It is through your willingness to participate in the many activities I presented to you that allowed me to engage in teaching that was truly transformative. I am humbled by your curiosity, your dedication to exploring yourself and to your joy of learning. You have taught me to be a better listener, to enjoy those quiet awkward moments and to love being a teacher.

It is definitely easier for a teacher to ask students to write then it is for the teacher to begin to write. Although the research portion of this thesis went rather smoothly, the writing process proved to be much more difficult. I have no shortage of individuals who helped support me on my journey.

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Chapter 1: Introduction and Thesis Overview

Stories, we all have stories. Nature does not tell stories, we do. We find ourselves in them, make ourselves in them, choose ourselves in them. If we are the stories we tell ourselves, we had better choose them well.

–James Orbinski

An Imperfect Offering, 2009

Preface

My career as a classroom teacher began rather reluctantly. During my initial job interview, I remember telling the principal that I would get back to him whether I wanted to take the position. He advised me, politely I might add, that no one ever turns down a teaching job and that he would pretend that we did not have the conversation; he said that he would call me on Monday morning to offer me the position. He was offering me a chance to opt out and to stall on my decision. I barely slept that weekend: I felt torn about my ability to work in the public school system - and wondered how much I was going to have to compromise my values and beliefs in this job. I waited anxiously by the phone all day Monday. Before he could offer me the position (again) I shouted “YES! I will take the job!” I was never one to step down from a challenge and I saw this position as a challenge, both personally and professionally. I was determined to figure out how to hold on to my political, social justice-oriented beliefs in a public school system that is known for its conservative decision making and bureaucratic policies. I was resolved to incorporate my values from previous years teaching in outdoor, alternative and experiential education programs into a conventional high school classroom. Twelve years later, I have not
only found a home at the school that I was hired in, I have found a way to facilitate transformative learning for both my students and myself.

This process took many years to be able to learn how to really engage with curriculum as more than just a piece of paper, but rather, as a living document that can bring the classroom, the students and the teacher to life. I learned how to approach the curriculum in a way that did not simply interpret it as a set of static guidelines for lesson planning, but rather, as a text with which students could engage, interact and have input. It took time for me to develop my identity as a teacher and each year I created a set of lessons that adapted the curriculum to fit with the students in my class. Teaching within a school atmosphere of *teaching to the students, not to the curriculum* allowed me to be creative and grow as an educator in such diverse ways. Often curriculum is approached as a checklist, which leaves very little room for counter narratives and ideas to enter the classroom. By taking the time to know the students in my class, I had a better sense of how to reach them and to provide a space where they could explore their voices. I received a tremendous amount of support and freedom from the administrators at my school to engage in the research for this thesis. This support was a result of many years of working together to figure out the best ways to engage with students. It took time, it took patience, and it took a strong desire on all of our parts to figure out ways to encourage learning for both teachers and students.

**Introduction**

The role that schools play in an adolescent’s life has been well documented and explored in various arenas. Often researchers look to techniques and the pedagogy of teaching itself to explain students’ efficacy in schools (Brookfield, 2015; Jones, 2000, Curwin *et al.*, 2008).
Through this research, I am interested in the interactions between teachers and students in relation to how students engage in issues of identity and social justice in the classroom. While there has been research that explores social justice education (Cammarotta, 2011) and the instructional implications for teachers’ roles in classrooms (for example, see Cochran-Smith & Lytle 2009; Campano 2007; and Ballanger 2007) there remains much to be learned about critical literacy related to identity exploration in an urban context in Canada and, more specifically, in Toronto.

This study shows how student’s perceptions about their identities enter into the classroom and impact the ways they engage with the learning material. Additionally, I demonstrate that when one allows the diversity of students’ experiences to become visible in the classroom, students will engage in critical conversations around identity that can lead to both personal connections to the other students in the class as well as connections in the course material. When students are given the chance to explore their identities, they choose to do so in multimodal ways, to illustrate the varied ways in which communication of ideas is completed using text, aural, spatial, visual and digital modes to compose messages.

This thesis is a practitioner research study into the classroom space that I occupy. It presents the possibilities of how youth engage in critical literacy as it relates to their identity and places it in a conversation with my own teaching practice. This research is important as many educators are trying to engage in forms of holistic education that encourage students (and teachers) to bring their whole selves into the classroom space as a way to engage with school curriculum (Miller, 2007). This thesis explores the opportunities that arise when one engages in this work in relation to how students engage with issues related to their identity using multiple modalities. It further
explores the formal and informal dialogues between student and teacher and seeks to engage in understanding the complex relationships that emerge.

**Context**

This study emerged as a way to engage with youth in a relational and meaningful manner. As a secondary school teacher with the Toronto District School Board, I have been teaching at Urban Collegiate Institute as part of the Bridges to University program\(^1\) for the past four years. Bridges to University is a transition program that supports secondary students in their exploration of post-secondary education through a joint University/Secondary school course. The course is delivered in partnership with a Toronto District School Board (TDSB) teacher (myself) and an instructor from the University of Toronto who delivers the University course curriculum. The Bridges to University program and my role in it will be explained in the methods chapter. Over the school year, students learn to engage in discourse around identity-making from critical perspectives and begin to engage in classroom material that allows for the deepened understanding of the social, cultural and political context in which their lives are situated (Apple, 2010; Cummins, 2011; Ballanger, 2007; Freire, 1970; West & Zimmerman, 1987; James, 2012; Cammarota, 2011; Christensen, 2000). Students also learned to engage in course work in a manner that addressed some of the social justice issues that affect their daily lives: poverty, racism, systemic barriers to success, and religious intolerance. Using pedagogy that pushes students to recognize the complex systems of power and oppression in which their lives are situated, students begin to reflect critically about who they are in a more integrated way.

Students engage in critical literacy work as a tool to be able to read the world around them, as a

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\(^1\) All identifying information including names of students, programs and places used throughout this thesis are pseudonyms. Students in this research study chose their own pseudonyms.
means of interrogating what is in the world of words in which students surround themselves.

**Research Questions and Methodology**

In this thesis, I explore the interactive processes of constructing and deconstructing identity through teacher-student relationships within the Bridges to University program. My research looks at the engagement of students in critical literacy related to their identity. This work is informed by the students’ identities that are shared within the classroom space as well as by critical literacy studies and practitioner research.

To explore these issues, my research asks: In what ways do high school students in the Bridges to University program engage in critical literacy work related to their identity?

The following sub-questions also guided my research within the classroom space:

- What pedagogical tools enable the expression of identity to be explored in a classroom space in order to engage students as knowledge makers?
- What happens when a classroom teacher welcomes the ‘whole student’ into the classroom space?
- How do students tell the stories of who they are and who they want to be?
- How does teaching as a relational act influence student engagement in identity work?

Recognizing I am an integral part of the students’ education within the classroom space, I use practitioner inquiry to answer these research questions. Practitioner inquiry allows for the developing of deep knowledge of language, literacy, culture and pedagogy that teachers bring to
their practice and places it in dialogue with what is occurring in their classroom spaces with students. Much has been written about practitioner research as being deeply political, deeply personal and a transformative educational practice (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009; Simon et al., 2012; Simon & Campano, 2013). I wanted to find a methodology that enabled me to engage in dialogue with my students about themes that were emerging in their lives, related to the curriculum they were learning but also to how they interacted in the world, specifically in relation to their identity. Throughout this thesis, excerpts of my reflective journals will be included (and will be further discussed in the Methods chapter). I have taught in the Bridges to University program for four years and I have noticed the following patterns: at the beginning of the year students have many questions pertaining to who they are in the world; and over the course of ten months they emerge in a new place of understanding. This new place is one of strength and resolve in who they are. But they also have more questions about their identity and who they are in this world.

**My Journey Towards Becoming a Teacher-Researcher**

During my twelve years as a teacher at Urban Collegiate Institute, I have experimented with many different pedagogical practices in my classroom. Throughout this time I have been consistently surrounded by a broad demographic represented in each class. Many of the students live in poverty and social housing and face many barriers to success. Others are children of parents who came to Canada as refugees with the intent of finding a better life. Many live in non-nuclear families, in homes with relatives and friends. Working with these students it became obvious to me that the many complexities of their lives, including the histories they brought to the classroom space, were such an important part of who they were and how they
engaged in the classroom material.

As an educator working with teenagers, I am constantly faced with students struggling with their identity and who have many questions, such as who am I?; what is my culture?; what is my nationality?; what is the role that religion plays in my life?; or what does it mean to be an immigrant? I was struck about how complex the lives of the students are in my class after a student arrived late one day. The following is an excerpt from the reflective journal that I kept throughout the course of the study.

Airin Journal Entry October, 2014

A student was late for class today when we started the Who Am I poems. I asked why they were late and they grumbled at me clearly not in the mood to talk. I went about the lesson giving the student some place to cool down. I wanted the Who Am I poems to be a quick response…their first thoughts when they think of themselves….Some really struggled - wanting to know if I was going to mark it and others were laughing the whole time. It was an exercise in beginning to find the words for their own truths that they have inside them. The task was for them to then read them in the next class in front of each other. I was collecting them at the end and the student that came in really angry handed their poem in to me - it was a whole bunch of words crossed out and new ones put in its place - it was a mess to read. I asked if they wanted to take it home to redo and they responded by ‘miss, you are always asking us to write from our truth, well here mine is and it sure sucks right now’. I asked how they would feel about reading it aloud to the class the next day and they said ‘well tomorrow we will see if it is still my truth’. I am struck by the honesty and the ability to put out their words in a way that tell a story of who they are in this moment- I think I tend to hide the messiness - am I missing some of my own
truth by not being able to tap into that raw emotion?

Daily struggles that students face and journal entries such as the above led me to create this long list of questions directed at how I wanted to teach in the class space and allowed me to explore the above mentioned research question further. I allowed these questions to frame, inform and guide my interactions with the curriculum and the students in my class. This brought me to the main focus of this thesis and the primary research question: In what ways do high school students in the Bridges to University program engage in critical literacy work related to their identity?

Over the course of the school year and during the time of the study, there were no standard outcomes of what the final result should be and how the students would engage in this — I allowed the students to determine how we were going to look at these various ideas. I wanted to honour students as knowledge makers and my role helping them obtain the language to strengthen their own identities and arguments. I was interested in how students engaged with multiple modalities to understand identity through digital forums such as tumblr, YouTube channels, blogs as well as how they engage in traditional creative expressions of their identity. I wondered how I could engage my students in the process of critical inquiry related to their experiences and knowledge and encourage them to document how they move through it as teenagers. I wanted to engage them in critical literacy work, helping them to discover how they read the world and how the world reads them. I wanted to study what happens when students are empowered to take up their own agency in the process of self-definition and define their own identities. I found that the students’ personal anecdotes were interesting and revealing, but I wanted to push them further. I was so inspired by my students as knowledge makers that I often
questioned my role as a teacher in the space and wondered who was the ‘teacher’ and who was the ‘student’.

**Framing**

My position within the school allowed me to engage as a teacher-researcher through taking an “inquiry stance” as inspired by Cochran-Smith & Lytle (2009). Taking an “inquiry stance” through practitioner research connects theory and practice because it locates teachers as meaning-makers, where knowledge is constructed through ongoing reflection. Therefore, this approach recognizes the power within teachers to question and theorize their own work (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999; 2009). By incorporating systematic methods of self-reflection around my pedagogy as an educator, I looked at my own positionality and interpretations of learning. Taking an inquiry stance into my own practice has allowed me to accept the ideas of the young adults in my classroom as if they were making sense all the time, even if I did not understand them immediately.

This thesis is inspired by the work of teacher-researchers Gerald Campano and Cynthia Ballanger. In *Immigrant Students and Literacy*, Campano (2007) describes the process he went through in his research to identify what it would mean to create curricula in which students’ individual social identities could be validated as meaningful resources of knowledge rather than seen as problems. Campano suggests that such an exercise could have the potential not only to highlight important elements of our complex and shared world for students, but could also help educators think critically about their own teaching methods (p. 16). By prioritizing and refining my own skill of genuinely listening to my students as they were, as Campano names it, I created a space for students to become the knowledge makers in the classroom and in that same space they were...
able to weave their collective stories into the tapestry within our classroom space. This not only began to shift the dynamic of the student/teacher relationship within my classroom but also challenged my notions of the role of the educator in the classroom.

Ballanger (2007) describes the process in which she explored the moments of dissonance in her own class space through engaging in those ‘puzzling moments’ that her students would present in class. In *Puzzling Moment, Teachable Moments*, Ballanger engages in teacher research and explores those moments that disrupt the natural flow to the class as a space for students’ knowledge and experience to be introduced into the classroom space. Following the work of Ballenger (2009), I have called these moments “puzzling moments” – these puzzling moments allow me to treat these events as “interesting and puzzling as something to think about and explore rather than simply irritating or distressing or something to correct or corral” (p. 6).

**Teaching practice**

There are many models of teaching methods and pedagogy and how to be in the space with adolescent learners. The methods often involved lessons and discipline programs that educators are encouraged to put in place in their classrooms. They are generally taught as a ‘one size fits all’ program and I am often left without answers as to how to adapt these ideas to classroom in a way that work for students, not against them. As an educator of students who are racialized and who face systemic inequalities, I find myself asking questions around my own privilege and position. I wonder how I can go about teaching in these marginalized students in a way that allows their voices, knowledge and experiences to be heard. I come to my teaching with a commitment to the philosophy that students’ liberations and struggles are also my struggles. Though my
experience is different then theirs, I know how to make connections with them, how to listen and how to share some of my life experiences - I bring myself into the classroom, I question my own classroom practices, and I ask what it means to teach critical literacy for social justice and change. Questions are always present as I teach: How do we challenge ourselves as educators and as human beings? How do we deeply engage students? Is it real? Are we employing critical listening? Is it based in social justice? If so, then by, with and for whom? This kind of work can only happen within a class where teacher and students can meet each other in a common space, a place where students personally feel valued.

As a teacher I wondered how I could engage students in critical inquiry about place/space and identity work in relation to “reading the world in a word” as described by Freire & Macedo (1987, p.5). To Freire, critical literacy is reading both the world and the word. Although Freire was speaking both in a conventional context of print literacy and in a cultural and spiritual sense, his advice is that we learn to read the world within the context of our own personal experience in relation to our broader social systems. I am constantly faced with students struggling with their own identity and I have attempted to incorporate this into my practice with culturally relevant pedagogy (Gay, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 1995, 2005). In this thesis I explore the relationship between teacher and student processes of construction and deconstruction of ideas of identity through the Bridges to University classroom. As educators we need to create the conditions for everyone in the class to become engaged. Through practitioner inquiry we can begin to ask the questions: how do you know when you have learned something? Is it different from how your peers would describe it? How do you take that learning and transfer it to another space?
Culturally responsive pedagogy calls upon teachers to use the cultural characteristics, experiences and perspectives of racially, ethnically, sexually and economically diverse students as conduits for teaching them more effectively (Gay, 2000). Much has been written about culturally responsive and culturally relevant teaching and its impacts on classrooms in the United States (Gay, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 1995, 2005; Villegas, 1991; Villegas & Lucas, 2002, 2007; Weinstein, Curran and Tomlinson-Clarke, 2003). More recently, attention has been paid to understanding the impacts of culturally responsive teaching on elementary and secondary school classrooms in a Canadian context (Kugler & West-Burns, 2010; McCready & Soloway, 2010). Although this is not a case study on culturally relevant and responsive pedagogy, it is integrated to the best of my ability, in my teaching practice.

My own personal reflection of my own observations based on the cultural, social, gender, class and personal politics that I bring to my research are integral to this research. Like Hertz (1997), I believe it important that I situate myself as a researcher - who I am, how I identify myself, what experiences have shaped me, and what my motivations are for this research. These are all important questions to be addressed at the outset. The most salient points of my identity are that I am a white, able-bodied, middle class, heterosexual, English speaking, Canadian-born female whose parents are both university-educated and whose one set of grandparents immigrated to Canada in the 1950’s from Eastern Europe as refugees; the other set of grandparents has been in Canada for at least two generations. As such, I am afforded a great deal of power and privilege within the systemic arrangements of Canadian society (Kugler & West-Burns, 2010). This is especially true in the education system, which is oriented towards Western, white, middle-class norms and values and is set up to privilege select groups according to these expectations while
marginalizing and segregating others (Delpit, 1988; Gaztambide-Fernández, 2011; Kumashiro, 2000; Portelli, 2011). Given my identity markers, I recognize that I am among those most privileged within this system. I also recognize, however, that the predominance of these particular ways of knowing and being are not a reflection of their inherent superiority but instead are influenced by the social and cultural context of Canadian society, which promotes particular social, economic and ideological interests of the dominant society while marginalizing others on grounds such as race, ethnicity, sexuality, and social class, among others (Portelli, 2011). As a teacher and a researcher, it is important to be aware of how these dynamics have shaped and continue to shape the curricula and classroom experience in schools, and to understand whom it advantages, whom it disadvantages, and how I can work to make education more equitable and inclusive for all.

**Thesis overview**

This thesis investigates my own understandings and working definitions of critical literacy as it relates to identity issues with students in the secondary school. This research interest has developed over twelve years of teaching in an urban classroom setting and, more specifically, over three years in the Bridges to University program. Throughout this time I engaged in questions about my role as a classroom teacher, the relationships I have with students, and how I conceptualize and teach critical literacy in my own context.

In chapter two, I discuss four theoretical traditions that I engage in this work and draw upon throughout this thesis. First, I explore identity meaning and identity exploration in the context of urban high school students. Second, I discuss critical literacy as a framework for the work that is
being engaged in the classroom space. Third, I explore understandings of practitioner inquiry and taking an inquiry stance through examples of teacher-researchers who are engaged in this work. Following this, I present a short discussion on teaching as a relational act.

Methodologically, this in depth practitioner research project involved the collection of data over the course the school year in an urban classroom setting where students from different cultural, ethnic, class and religious backgrounds were all in class together. The core of this inquiry project is that of taking an inquiry stance. In my practice, taking an inquiry stance involved my intentional adoption of asking relevant questions of students and myself as a forum for surfacing or emerging of insights through the dialogue with students in the classroom space over the course of the year. I discuss this inquiry method in greater depth in Chapter 3.

In chapter 4, I present findings from this research organized around the five themes that emerged over the course of the year as it related to students’ identity. I engage with each of these themes and locate them in relation to examples from the research literature. The themes that emerged look at: the uncertainty of self; trusting others’ voices to find one’s own voice; students’ struggle between who they are and who their parents want them to be; the place of darkness that can emerge when looking at oneself in the process of self-discovery; trust in oneself; the reconciliation with family; and decisions that were made for them. In the final chapter, I read across my findings and the literature, to discuss implications and considerations for further research.
Chapter 2: Identity making, Critical Literacy, Practitioner Inquiry and Teaching as a Relational Act

To engage in the depth and breadth of this research and to contextualize my research question, this chapter presents a focused review of the literature as it relates to identity making in an urban high school. Next, I explore the field of critical literacy to provide a framework for the way in which students engage with course material. The framework of practitioner inquiry will then be explored. Lastly, a brief discussion on teaching as a relational act will be presented in order to frame the interactions between the teacher and researcher in this study. This review includes both conceptual framings as well as empirical examples to situate this research project that straddles research as well as practical pedagogy. In addition, these ideas will also be explored in Chapters 4 and 5, which describe my findings and discuss implications for research and practice.

Conceptualizing Youth Identity

Although there are many studies about the relationship between identity and youth development, this research differs in that it engages in identity exploration in a high school classroom context. This section on the conceptualizing youth identity draws on the work of theorists, such as Stuart Hall (1996), as well as teacher-researchers who are working on Identity in the field, such as Deborah Broderick (2015), in order to contextualize the conceptual and empirical aspects of the role of identity in classroom spaces. Much has been written about the influence of identity on the teaching and learning process for teachers (Akkerman & Meijer, 2011; Lasky, 2005; Zembylas, 2003) and some studies have focused on the experiences of teaching diverse learners (Delpit, 2006; Ladson-Billings, 1995, 2005; Neito, 1999), while others have described the role that the teacher has in interacting with students around identity and social justice issues (Cammarotta, 2011).
Identity matters in teaching not only for the students in the classroom but also for teachers. For example, as a teacher I carry many identities into the classroom each day: a mother, a partner, a daughter, a social justice activist, a head injury survivor, and many more that are assumed and ascribed to the teaching profession. Solomon et al. (2012) describes why teacher identity matters for issues related to social justice and equity. They propose ways that teachers’ social identities influence their teaching and that the tensions students face in relation to their identity, teachers also face. Further, these tensions around social identity help to expose the “multilayered and textured lived experiences of identity” (p. 157). It is with this in mind that teachers who engage in identity work must first examine their own identities, privileges, and assumptions, and be able to discuss them with students in their classrooms. It is in the “way that teachers conceive their own social identity in relation to their motivation and commitment to equitable teacher practice” where we will see a difference in the classroom experience of the students (Solomon et al., 2012, p. 159). This is an important aspect of any identity exploration as teachers can have much power when it comes to shaping students ideas and understanding. The way that teachers look at and describe themselves to their students can have major and lasting impacts on how students begin to explore their own identity.

Why does identity matter? Stuart Hall (1996) breaks down the notion of identity, explaining,

in commonsense language, identification is constructed on the back of a recognition of some common origin for shared characteristics with another person or group, or with an
ideal, and with the natural closure of solidarity and allegiance established on this foundation (pg. 2).

Students come to a school with an understanding of who they are based on the shared values, ideas and experiences that they have with others in the school and in their home community. Hall also suggests that identity is not something that can be won or lost, ignored or abandoned. Students carry their identity with them everywhere they go and even though they might only allow for some aspects to be visible, the ‘hidden’ aspects of their identity are still a part of who they are. Hall purports that identity is all encompassing and that identities call into question ones “history, language, and culture in the process of becoming rather than being: not who we are or where we have come from” (p. 4). Students’ lives are rich and complex, and as they move into school settings they enter into and out of many situations that result in them engaging in trying on different personas that can empower or disempower them. There is a tension between “how we have been represented and how it fares on how we might want to represent ourselves” (Hall, 1996, p. 4). Contrary to the idea that we have complete agency over our own identities, Hall suggests, instead, that identities are constructed within, not outside, discourse, and we need to understand them as produced “in institutional sites, within discursive formations and practices by specific enunciated strategies” (p. 4). He further explains that identity is likened to threading a needle in that “identity is a structured representation which only achieves its positives through the narrow eye of the negative; it has to go through the eye of the needle of the other before it can construct itself” (Hall, 1996, p.21). Using this analogy, students are negotiating the interaction between self and society in understanding their identity as if they are the needle as well as the eye of the needle. This continuous dialogue with the various influencing factors is
represented by the needle, while who they are becoming is in the various attempts that it takes to pass the thread through the eye of the needle. In the many attempts that it takes to pass through the ‘eye’, students can face positive and negative situations: the core of who they are can only be identified when they can pass through the needle. It is not possible to have an identity that is stagnant and fixed as is “always temporary and unstable affective relations which define identities by marking differences” (Grossber, 1996, p.89). The emphasis here is on the multiplicity of identities and differences rather than on a single identity and on the connections for “articulations, fragments or differences” (Grossber, 1996, p. 89). With the many attempts to pass through the eye of the needle, students are exploring the ways in which their social locators are influencing who they are as well as the complex web of similarities and differences. It is with this in mind that identity is explored in this research project.

Students in this study come from diasporic regions of the world. They often feel their national identities are split— e.g., Canadian/Turkish, Canadian/Somali, Canadian/Filipino. Students in this research project not only have the multiplicity of identities but they also are involved in diasporic communities that often have their own complicated identities associated with their location in Canada. Clifford (1994) describes the term diaspora as a “signifier not simply of trans nationality and movement but of political struggles to define the local” (p. 308). Students who have a diasporic identity are a part of a “distinctive community, in historical context of displacement”. They are members of a community that “emphasizes the historically spatial fluidity and intentionality of identity and historical movements (whether forced or chosen, necessary or desired)” (Clifford, 1994 p. 308). As a classroom teacher in a multi-ethnic school I have witnessed how identity is often rooted in the structures of ways of belonging and
affiliations. I often ask myself and the students: how does one look at identity? How do we look at cultural identity and historic identity, that includes the history of movements and an experience of oppression which grants privileges to particular identities over others? It is in these conversations with students that the discussion seems rooted in a productive understanding of difference.

Gutierrez (2008), Gutierrez and Stone (2000), and Wells and Claxton (2002) describe what they call Cultural Historical Activity Theory as a helpful concept to think about in relation to critical literacy and identity in the classroom context. Cultural Historical Activity Theory offers a lens to understand multimodal practices of students’ lives that blurs the modes and methods of communication including oral, printed, moving images all in the pathway to widen the opportunities to understand Identity. Within this Cultural Historical Activity Theory students and teachers have a way of sharing their context, culture, identity, and history and the Cultural Historical Activity Theory to work together in a shared site to give meaning to different identities. This theory allows for a space that traces the movement of students’ complex identities and their positionalities.

Students’ identities in schools are communicated in spaces that are controlled for evaluation of their written and spoken work. It is within the classroom spaces that we begin to see how students’ identities are built from complex social and cultural processes that have shaped their lives. An individual’s identity is made up of the way they see the world, the way a teacher interacts with a student, and the way that students practice their literacy at home and school. There are many ways in which a student’s identity can be explored in and out of the classroom.
Although the Cultural Historical Activity Theory model was not used as a main focus for this research project, it allowed for another entry point for me as the teacher-researcher into understanding youth engagement in their identity. This theory allowed me to explore how culture and history are linked together and can be a place of disruption and cohesion in understanding identity.

What actually happens when students begin to question their own identities in a classroom space? Do they embrace change or do they recoil from it? The answer is be complicated and nuanced since identity formation for students in a world that has already figured out who they are can be challenged by the many identities they hold. Holland et al. (2001) describe identities as figured worlds in which “people tell others who they are, but even more importantly, they tell themselves and then try to act as though they are who they say they are” (p.3). Holland and his colleagues argue that identity is a concept that students can use that connects the intimate or the personal world with the wider world of social relations. This theory of identity rests on the idea that one practices and plays out their identity in the context that they are in and it is bound up with figured worlds. Identities are part of a history imagined as they can be viewed as history enacted every day in person. Often these identities become the fodder for the writings in the classroom. When educators invite students’ whole selves into the classroom they are inviting these varied identities into the class as well. This allows for the diasporic discussions and the cultural historical perspectives to be included in the conversations with each other as students begin to understand their identity.

Much of my own teaching narratives on educating teenagers in response to their identities occur outside of the classroom, both spatially and temporally. Campano (2007) suggests that many
important learning moments happen in what he calls “the second classroom”, a space which often runs counter to the mandated curriculum (p. 4). Teaching can often extend beyond the classroom walls: Campano (2007) describes how his teaching often went beyond the typical classroom conventions and he used the term the ‘second classroom’ to describe this alternative space where he developed more nurturing relationships with students. Similarly, by engaging in identity work with students I have begun to understand their interests in a way that I have not experienced before. Campano (2007) describes this as an engaged curriculum, a curriculum that is responsive to who the children are, to the physical realities of their lives, their words return with new imports, Enabling them to arrive at new understandings of their relationships to their social worlds and awakening of a fuller sense of imaginative and then actual possibility (p. 19).

As a teacher who works with culturally relevant pedagogy, the curriculum emerges from the student’s lives, which results in students being able to engage in the classroom material from a place of experience and knowledge but also as a place to explore their classmate’s experiences. Experiences such as these can help students to have “different experiences of their world, engendering in new forms of school literacy practice and new identities by opening new vistas for investigation and self discovery” (Campany, 2007, p. 19).

When engaging in identity work, Campano (2007) describes a horizontal distribution of power in the classroom where students and the teacher share in inquiry together. He states,

in this more horizontal model the classroom is conceptualized as a space of shared inquiry and the diverse city of the student population as an epistemic advantage, rather than a hindrance, to formulating alternative series of practice that will facilitate the
success of students (Campano, 2007, p. 4).

By engaging in identity work, both the student and the teacher are engaged in a dialogue that has the potential to transform the power structure in the classroom to be horizontal in its distribution.

Much of Campano’s work is driven by his understanding of the identities of the students in the classroom where she teaches and researches. Campano (2007) describes a scenario in which he and Filipino student shared a deeper understanding of who they were and pushed identities into a place of recovery and creation: “by looking through our own boxes of family memories, we begin to reassemble our respective family stories and histories in order to construct more empowering identities for ourselves” (p. 30). This begs the question: What are some of the important factors in engaging with identity in a transparent learning environment? Campano (2007) argues, “the most important ingredient in the powerful student narratives is the relationships they forged through inquiry community which is ultimately about the creative alchemy of a particular community of learners” (p. 120). I have found that some of my most powerful and transformative teaching moments with students are those moments where we connect on a personal level, where our own lives are shared and connections can be made through similarities. As a teacher-researcher this is especially true. By allowing students into the process of reflection—of both teaching and learning—a transformation occurs and a new community of learners emerges.

Critical Literacy and Pedagogy

In my research, I use a working definition of critical literacy as a form of engagement which seeks to analyze the ways in which our embeddedness within larger socio-cultural and political contexts impact the ways in which we learn to read the world around us. The ways students
engage in critical literacy are shaped by the complex relationships amongst students and teachers, which can draw on the cultural and linguistic resources of the learner (Cummins, 1996). It is in this space that the multimodal and varied nature of literacy is inspiring. Students, when given a choice, utilize many forms of expression of their work to include: song playlists, narrated power point slideshows, poetry built from important song lyrics, tumblr pages and the self imagined as neurotransmitters, all which will be discussed in Chapter 4.

Much of what occurs in a classroom space in reference to engaging in literacy work can be understood by looking at discourse. Gee (2008) describes discourse as “being able to engage in a particular sort of dance with words, deeds, values, feelings, other people, objects, tools, technologies, places and times” (p.155). Students are beginning to learn the varied discourses that influence their lives. Gee’s (2008) explanation of primary and secondary discourses is helpful to understand how students communicate through identity work. In Gee’s conception, one learns primary discourse from a home community while secondary discourses are those learned in school or elsewhere, such as the language used in writing an academic essay. Identity discourses can fit into both primary and secondary discourses as students oscillate between how they see themselves, how their families expect them to be, and what happens when these and other conceptions of their identities bump up against each other. The nature of student work described in this study are fluid and move between the primary and secondary discourses of students and could potentially become a hybrid sort of discourse as they are using and moving fluidly between the discourses. They are utilizing their understanding of who they are through the languages that they speak at home, and are translating it into the ways the classroom space has taught them to communicate. By doing this we are contributing to the “acquisition of new discourses”, not eliminating any of their discourses, “but rather building, combining and adding
other discourses to their repertoires” (Delpit, 1992, p. 301).

In the current school system, students operate in a world that places more power and favour on particular discourses (Gee, 2001). These discourses that he writes about place one type of discourse over another. The role of the classroom teacher is to “acknowledge the unfair Discourse stacking that society engages in” and then teach them how to learn the discourse that would otherwise be used to exclude them from participating in transforming the mainstream. Students are asked to engage in multiple discourses at the same time (Gee, 2001). Delpit (1992) points out,

acquiring the ability to function in a dominant Discourse need not mean that one must reject one’s home identity and values, for Discourses are not static but are shaped, however reluctantly, by those who participate within them and by the form of their participation (p. 300).

As teachers and students in classroom spaces we engage and speak to discourse about knowledge and experience related to our identities in numerous ways. Moll (1991) describes the notion of *funds of knowledge*: the “historically accumulate[d] and culturally developed bodies of knowledge and skills essential for household or individual functioning and well being” (p.133). Allowing and encouraging students’ cultural and social knowledge into the classroom, creates a space that is vital for exploring issues related identity. Critical literacy work that I explore in this study was informed by Lankshear and Knoble (2003), who describe literacy as something that “foregrounds the notion of meaning making—as a producer or consumer—from signs, signals, codes and graphic images” (p.15), which creates space to look at the idea of reading a system (or reading identities).
Power and “funds of knowledge” are directly related to this research. As a classroom teacher, I hold a historical and institutional power. Research related to critical literacies creates a framework for understanding and critiquing the ways that classroom language and literacy are tied to power (Campano, Ghiso & Sanchez, 2013, p. 102). By recognizing the knowledge and experience that students in the classroom have, the power dynamic has the ability to begin to shift.

Freire (1970) views students as knowledge makers who can engage as student-teachers and teacher-students. By restructuring the relationship between teacher and student so that “both are simultaneously teachers and students” (Freire, 1970, p. 72), power issues in the classroom can be transformed and addressed. True learning occurs where “learners will be engaged in a continuous transformation through which they will become authentic subjects of the construction and reconstruction of what is being taught, side by side, with the teacher, who is equally subject to the same process” (Freire, 1998a, p. 33). In work with students, the learning is done together and is a continual, ongoing process that has gone far beyond the classroom constructs.

The starting point for organizing the approach to the course for the Bridges to University class was inspired by Freire’s (1970) belief in an emancipatory curriculum that emerges from the lived experiences of the students. There is a level of action that is present in the approach to the course material that “requires a response — not just at the intellectual level, but at the level of action” (p.95). The challenge is in understanding the entry point that each student comes with
and for it to be truly emancipatory they must find their own level of action—be it words or speaking their truth. The teacher’s role in this, as described by Freire, is to guide education in a way that “includes helping the learners get involved in planning education” rather than “merely following blindly” (Freire & Macedo, 1987, p.379)

There are few studies in Canada that look at such collaborative work among students and teachers engaging in curriculum materials in this manner. Simon (2014) describes a project undertaken by a community of adolescents and teachers in an inquiry into the Holocaust memoir *Night* by Elie Wiesel through arts, multimodality, research and critical pedagogy. This inquiry describes the integration of arts into a literacy curriculum and the power art has to change ideas. In another project, a partnership between the Toronto District School Board and the University of Toronto under the project name Proyecto Latin@, high school youth participate in a bilingual, youth driven research study. The youth were able to shape the content of what they were learning and ask critical questions relevant to their daily lives which allowed them to “develop their sense of self-worth, respect, creativity, autonomy, and the ability to make meaningful and relevant contributions to the lives of others” (Guerrero et al., 2013, p 121). Proyecto Latin@ not only challenges the hierarchy that is present in schools and institutions, it critically engages the ways in which Latin@ youth read and interpret the world around them. These examples of youth engaging in critical literacy work in these contexts can provide a framework for engagement.

The work of Linda Christensen has inspired much of this research. Christensen (2011) wrote “I want to teach a critical literacy that equips students to ‘read’ power relationships at the same time that it imparts academic skills” (p. 54). Critical literacy theorists understand the teaching of literacy as political and never neutral and value-free (Christensen, 2011; Freire, 1987). When
utilizing critical literacy work in relation to identity allows students to not only engage in real life experiences that go beyond a limited reading of a particular text but rather to read and understand the text through the series of identities that the students carry. When educators begin from the premise that the students, particularly those most marginalized in urban schools, need to be “fixed”, invariability curriculum becomes a means of erasing the linguistic and cultural resources adolescents bring to the classroom with them (Christensen, 2009). In contrast, in Reading, Writing and Rising Up, Christensen (2000) describes the emancipatory feeling that emerges from the work of poetry on students lives such as the “I Am” poem and the “Where I Am From” poem. The reading and writing of poetry in the classroom can work as a catalyst to “bring the class together through the sharing of details for our lives and lots of laughter and talk” (p. 19). The key to have the students feel fully engaged in such work is to have the teacher also be a participant in the poetry. Christensen (2000) describes how she sets the stage for researching and teaching by sharing her own poetry and other writing with the students (p. 146). Poetry explored in this manner has the potential to create a space for deep exploration and critical understanding of self. Valuing students as identity makers and shapers is vital to having students be able to name injustice in the world around them. It gives the students the ability to describe the world around them and situates them in that world. Without such opportunities, marginalized students do not often see a place for themselves in the world. When they can begin to articulate their identities and relate them to real world issues, students may inevitably begin to trust their own ‘funds of knowledge’ and thus position themselves as knowers and knowledge producers (Moll et al., 1991, p. 2).

When student engagement, critical literacy and pedagogy begin to operate in dialogue with each other, the learning conversations can move towards what Paulo Freire (1970) would describe as
“reading of the world within the word”, a space where students can begin to critically look at their world around them and how their identities shape how they read it. By engaging in a critical literacy in pedagogy in practice is a form of engagement which seeks to analyze the ways in which our embeddedness within larger socio-cultural and political contexts impact the ways in which we learn to read the world around us.

**Practitioner Inquiry: Taking an Inquiry Stance**

This research is informed and inspired by practitioner inquiry. Marilyn Cochran-Smith and Susan Lytle (2001) characterize these processes of collaborative, critical and creative knowledge construction as a matter of “building, interrogating, collaborating and critiquing conceptual frameworks that link action problem posing to the immediate context as well as to the larger social, cultural and political issues” (p. 51-52). This research takes an inquiry stance on students’ work and on exploring what is needed day to day, as well as in designing the classroom curriculum (as presented by Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009). An inquiry stance allows for the classroom realities and the structures in place to surface in a way that can be interrogated. This research study explores how language, multimodal expression and literacy emerge in unique and different ways in one urban classroom. As a teacher-researcher exploring this issue, an inquiry stance allows me space to surface the tensions that are present in my classroom setting. As a culturally responsive educator, Ladson-Billings (1995) created space for student’s home languages, interests and identities to take a front seat in the designing and enactment of her curriculum. An inquiry stance demands that the teacher-researcher ask the questions of what is included, what is not included, why and why not.

An inquiry stance is political—it brings out our own assumptions and the power dimensions in
our lives. Inquiry allows one locate oneself and their role in education and mis-education in students’ lives. Inquiry allows what is underneath to surface and to locate oneself in it. Engaging in practitioner inquiry in this thesis allowed me to ask the difficult questions within my own practice. This radically shifted my view of who I am as an educator in the classroom—I have had to let go of the end result and learn how to focus more on the process. I had to allow for students to take the lead in the exploration of topics. I had to create spaces of moments of dissonance to arise and to then explore them with the students.

Simon (2015) describes a teacher, Laura, and her critical inquiry stance in her practice: “as Laura’s efforts highlight, critical inquiry can be a means of making power more visible, prompting teachers to interrogate outside discourses, promote critical resistance to institutional demands” (p. 64). In this respect, inquiry can be viewed as a means of collective humanization (Campano, 2009). Simon (2015) argues that what is essential to a practitioner taking an inquiry stance, as Laura’s teaching demonstrates, is how teachers can learn from students if they are willing to listen to them (following Christensen, 2009).

Inquiry has been described in many models but the one that resonates with this research is what Marsha Pincus (2001) calls the Circle of Inquiry. Pincus (2001) describes how inquiry involves moving from moments of dissonance to asking the necessary questions to making sense and then to taking action. Most often models of inquiry begin with a beginning and end, while in contrast with the Circle of Inquiry model allows for the circular nature of the dialogue to emerge. The circle is used as a way to negotiate understanding that learning is not finite and that one is always in the circle – constantly moving and changing and never returning back to the exact same place. It is a way to explain the complexity, the phenomenology and the messiness of inquiry. The
Circle of Inquiry does not recognize the concept of master teachers, as teachers are constantly moving throughout the circle attempting to understand their practice.

**Teaching as a Relational Act**

Teaching is fundamentally a relational act, whereby a student’s success is largely dependent on an educator’s ability to establish affirming relationships based on care and respect in the classroom (Noddings, 1991). Caring is a central tenet of culturally responsive teaching and manifests itself in the form of teacher attitudes, expectations, and behaviours about students’ cultures and lived experiences, as well as students’ intellectual capabilities (Gay, 2000, p. 45). Rather than see students’ cultures as impediments to their academic achievement, culturally responsive educators see these students as being in possession of a wealth of knowledge, rooted in their lived experiences and histories, and, therefore, look to affirm and empower students to bring this knowledge into schools and classrooms (Ladson-Billings, 2005).

Teachers convey these caring dispositions in a number of ways including: developing and implementing intellectually rigorous curriculum; providing students with choice in classroom decisions; having high performance expectations for all students; holding themselves and students accountable for achieving these goals; and by having knowledge of students’ community and home cultures and using this knowledge to inform curriculum content and instructional approach (Gay, 2000; Kugler & West-Burns, 2010).

Goldstein (1999) provides an interesting perspective on the role that teacher-student relationships play in shaping the learning process by arguing that ‘caring’ is not a personal attribute but, instead, an action. He states that teachers can demonstrate caring in any number of ways, chief
among them being the teachers’ ability to achieve intersubjectivity; that is, a shared intellectual space with their students. In achieving intersubjectivity, Goldstein argues that teachers “attempt to share their own constructions of a concept while at the same time attempting to understand students’ existing constructions,” and that, “through the process of joint activity and attempting to find or negotiate the meaning of activity, values, and discourses, or through seeking intersubjectivity - teachers demonstrate care for their students as for the subject matter they teach” (as cited in Davis, 2003, p. 220). By helping students to critically interrogate the curriculum and instruction in such ways, looking for inaccuracies, omissions and distortions, educators help to broaden classroom teaching and learning so as to be inclusive of multiple perspectives (Villegas & Lucas, 2002; Ladson-Billings, 1995). It can also help students develop critical perspectives that allow them to identify and challenge inequities legitimized and perpetuated by schools and other institutions in society (Ladson-Billings, 1995, p. 469).

Culturally responsive, inquiry driven teachers have high expectations of students, demonstrate interest in and knowledge of students’ home cultures and communities, value students’ voice and choice, and incorporate this knowledge into classroom practice, and create strong relationships with students. These relationships are premised on care and respect, and help to support students’ academic engagement and achievement (Gay, 2000; Villegas & Lucas, 2002). Teaching in such a way communicates to students that classrooms can be safe spaces where they can affirm their social identities and build a foundation of confidence, self esteem and self-awareness while encountering new knowledge (Kugler & West Burns, 2010, p. 219). This has the ability to translate into student feelings of “academic competence, personal confidence, courage and the will to act” (Gay, 2000, p. 32).
When educators integrate students’ prior knowledge and lived experience into the classroom, it ensures that materials are relevant and engaging and it helps to strengthen connections between home and school life (Villegas & Lucas, 2007). Additionally, it does not pit academic success and cultural affiliation against each other, as is often the experience of non-mainstream students in schools, but instead aims to develop academic success and cultural consciousness simultaneously (Gay, 2000). In order to engage students in the construction of knowledge it is a necessary precondition that teachers establish positive relationships with students, family and caregivers, inviting them to share their knowledge and expertise and using it to inform the teaching and learning experience (Kugler & West-Burns, 2010).

When teachers are knowledgeable about students’ family lives and communities they are better prepared to understand students’ in-school behaviours and incorporate this knowledge about students’ hobbies, favourite activities, and how they spend their time outside of school into curriculum content and instructional techniques. This allows teachers to honour that existing knowledge and experience that these students’ possess and thereby increase students’ motivation and interest in learning (McCready & Soloway, 2010; Villegas & Lucas, 2007). This approach to teaching has the potential to empower students intellectually, socially, emotionally and politically by building on students’ prior knowledge and lived experiences in the classroom (Esposito & Swain, 2009; Ladson-Billings, 1995). However, given the diversity of students, this approach requires educators to adapt a variety of teaching practices to allow for multiple entry points to learning in order to ensure that all students can access the curriculum content (Kugler & West-Burns, 2010, p. 217). This requires an enormous amount of energy and effort on the part of
teachers who must continuously adjust their pedagogy in order to support the various needs, abilities and interests of the diverse students in their classrooms.

Following the lead of Cochran-Smith & Lytle (2009), this research involves inquiry into students’ work, exploring what is needed day to day, as well as in designing the classroom curriculum. Taking an inquiry stance helps to support the kinds of flexibility that educators require to learn from and teach to students’ diverse needs, interests and experiences.

**Conclusion**

The literature presented in this chapter provides a review of the areas that I draw upon in this study. Literature in the fields of identity, critical literacy, practitioner inquiry and teaching as a relational act have shaped how this research was conceptualized and conducted. In the following chapter, I discuss how these theories were put into practice and influenced my methods and methodology.
Chapter 3: Methodology and Research Design

This chapter presents the methodology and a description of how the study was designed to answer the research questions posed in the first chapters. First, the work is situated within the larger landscape of practitioner research in order to explain and justify the methodological framework. Next, a brief explanation of the positionality of the researcher, the teacher, and the student is given. Third, the context of the research site is described, from a broad school board perspective, to the local school perspective and then into the actual classroom and program where the research was conducted. The last section focuses on the methods, the types of data I used, the University of Toronto and TDSB ethics approvals, the multimodal nature of the work, and the depth and breadth of the data that I collected.

Practitioner Research: How the Methodology Chose Me

It would make for good academic process to present the idea that I came to my methodology as a way to answer my research questions, but that would be disingenuous; rather, my research methodology chose me. This thesis is a form of practitioner research and has become a deeply integral way in which I approach my teaching practice. When I was first introduced to practitioner inquiry, I was drawn into the ways that the teacher-researcher could engage and interrogate those moments of dissonance in their classroom in a manner that was meaningful and transformative. This study is inspired by and drawn together in the spirit of taking an inquiry stance using both the methodology and positionality of practitioner research. As a classroom teacher it is impossible to remove myself from my own practice and to conduct research within
my own context. Practitioner inquiry can be understood as a particular type of research methodology under the broader umbrella of a tradition of qualitative research methodology and an approach called grounded theory research. This is an inductive methodology that leads to the emergence of conceptual categories of research. As described by Cochran-Smith and Lytle (2009), “we regard ‘inquiry as stance’ as a grounded theory of action that positions the role of the practitioners and practitioner knowledge as central to the goal of transforming teaching, learning, leading, and schooling” (p.119). They are not referring to the grounded analysis of the data, but rather to the way in which practitioner research situates itself as a research method and methodology for teacher inquiry.

Practitioner research, and more specifically the work of Susan L. Lytle and Marilyn Cochran-Smith (1999, 2001, 2009), framed this inquiry into the practice and discoveries in the Bridges to University classroom program. I saw practitioner research as a way to take an inquiry stance in my own practice. This became a tool to discover the desire to know deeply the what, the why, the how, as well as what is and what is not included in my teaching practice and how that all shapes student’s learning. Practitioner research challenges the current arrangements in schools. Instead of being top down in its approach it allows ways to approach theory-research-practice-policy connections in counter hegemonic ways. The inquisitive nature of practitioner inquiry also allowed me to have a language I could use for what I hoped to achieve in the classroom.

Practitioner research is a deliberate and intentional inquiry by educators into their own teaching practice (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009). It is not a prescribed way of performing research, yet has a clear systematic approach in which the research is undertaken. Systematic refers to the way of documenting and gathering information and experiences inside and outside of the
classroom (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009). Practitioner research is intentional and planned, and the documenting of the experience is part of the systematic research project (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009).

Practitioner research positions teachers and students in a collaborative process where they work together to unearth the tensions and questions that are lying under the surface. Practitioner research not only values educators as producers of knowledge but “students themselves are empowered as knowers” (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009, p.448). Campano et al. (2013) call this a democratization of knowledge, where both the teachers and students are seen as knowledge makers (p.104). This belief that both teacher and students are knowledge makers further drives the ideas Moll et al. (1991) discuss around ‘funds of knowledge’. By this, Moll et al. mean to suggest that there is a ‘fund of knowledge’ inherent to us all. We all have unique histories and lived experiences that can be accessed in all spaces. The actors in the classroom are knowledge makers. By creating a space where the teachers and students are in constant dialogue with each other, tensions can surface in the classroom that might go unnoticed in other spaces.

Practitioner research can be a deeply political work as it “remains deeply radical and passionate, deeply personal and profoundly political” (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009, p.373). The political nature of practitioner research creates an opportunity for teachers to challenge the power dynamics that are present in classroom spaces. I believe that the personal is political; and therefore, education (in my mind) has always been inherently political, even though traditionally it may not have acknowledged itself as such. This work is political as practitioner research is an intentional raising of consciousness regarding the personal and educational space as political. Through this teacher research I have been able to explore my practice inside and outside of the
classroom aimed at engaging my students in transformative educational practices. I have found that Practitioner Research has left me with much unfinished work; I am constantly keeping track of what I do not know rather than what I do know about what is always occurring in my classroom space. It forces many of the unspoken truths to be spoken and addressed.

**Relationship to the Students**

I have taught within the Bridges to University program for four years and in that time I have had the responsibility of supporting students through their learning as well as assigning students a final mark for this Grade 12 University Social Science level course. The relationship that the students have with me in this space is unique, as I support them not only with their high school credit but also obtaining University credit. It is also unique in that we spend every day together for an entire school year. In addition, we are exploring ideas around personal identity, which can often be very emotional and revealing. The students in this space have to feel supported and that they have my trust and the trust of their classmates. This classroom space is a constant work in progress and moves between feelings of vulnerability and power by both the teacher and the students.

**Relationship to the Research**

I am drawn to critical forms of practitioner research that encourage educators to challenge and interrogate their own practices, with the goal of better understanding and teaching their students (Simon & Campano, 2013). Practitioner research has allowed me to engage in the political aspect of teaching and to engage in surfacing the tensions in the classroom space. “As practitioners adopt an inquiry stance in their work they engage in research that has as its goal some element of change, often involving shifting discourse about learners, problematizing the
structures of schooling, and creating new conditions for teaching” (Campano, Ghiso, & Sánchez, 2013, p. 104). Practitioner research is also temporally located in that is does no occur in one moment but rather a collection of moments, discussions and reflections. Cochran-Smith and Lytle (2009) articulate what they see as the underlying purpose for Practitioner research:

A central purpose of (practitioner research) is to conceptualize ‘inquiry as stance’ as a challenge to the current arrangements and outcomes of schools and other educational contexts and to call for practitioner researchers in local settings across the country and the world to ally their work with others as part of larger social and intellectual movements for social change and social justice... To say that we regard inquiry as a stance is to suggest that we see this as a worldview and a habit of mind – a way of knowing and being in the world of educational practice that carries across educational contexts and various points in one's professional career and that links individuals to larger groups and social movements intended to challenge the inequities perpetuated by the educational status quo (p. viii).

My own relationship to this research is explored in the context of teaching and my own epistemic privilege. “Epistemic privilege” (Campano, 2007) refers to the knowledge that one has from being within a context. As a teacher I have a set of knowledge, practices and understandings that inform how and who I am in the educational context. By engaging with my own epistemic privilege, I am able to see the ways in which I have been marginalized and how that has led to me occupying a position of privilege in terms of understanding ‘how the world works’. This is one of the core values of Practitioner Inquiry as outlined by: Campano (2007), Ballanger (2007), Simon and Campano (2013) and Cochran-Smith and Lytle (2009). By occupying a space within my practice that is often very different than my colleagues, one that tries to challenge the power
and authority in the classroom, I am able to engage in this understanding of epistemic privilege. In this research, and by being an insider in the classroom space for a number of years, I carry with me a certain set of knowledge and experience that allows me to explore and push ideas further than if I were an outsider performing research in this classroom space.

Research Context

Toronto District School Board

The TDSB is the largest school board in Canada and one of the largest in North America. There are nearly 600 schools that serve approximately 232,000 students each year. There are 76,000 high school students in over 120 high school settings. (TDSB, 2011a) Students have the opportunity to attend schools outside their immediate neighbourhood under a process of optional attendance. Given its large student population and its location within Toronto, the TDSB and its administrators and staff are faced with the unique opportunity and challenge of serving an extremely diverse student population. As of October 2011, it was reported that students in TDSB schools spoke over 80 different languages, that 53% of students were speaking a language other than English at home or as their first language, and that 26% of TDSB students were born outside of the Canada (TSDB, 2011a).

Many of the racial, ethnic and linguistic groups present in the community and, in turn the school, are among those identified as facing the most challenges with regard to their educational outcomes and opportunities, according to the TDSB’s Grade 9 Cohort Study and Achievement Gap Task Force reports. (TSDB, 2011a)
Urban Collegiate Institute

Urban Collegiate Institute (a pseudonym), the site of my research and teaching practice, is a comprehensive high school. This means that the programs range from Automotive Technology to Advanced Functions Mathematics. There are programs for all kinds of students, at all levels within Urban Collegiate Institute, to create a rather extensive course calendar. There are also partnerships with Seneca College, Dual Credit Programs and the University of Toronto.

Urban Collegiate Institute is located in an area of Toronto, known as a ‘priority neighbourhood’ populated by ‘youth at risk’. This means that students are identified as being at risk of not graduating high school (as defined by the school board). The school has approximately 800 students - of which approximately 200 are English as Second Language learners. The students come from 90 different countries, speak 48 languages and practice fifteen different religions. Geographically, the school is located within a central ward of the City of Toronto, which has a population comprised of diverse ethnic, racial, linguistic and religious backgrounds. 65% of the population in this ward is first generation immigrants, with the majority of recent immigrants coming from the Caribbean, Southeast and Southern Asia, South and Central America, Eastern Africa and the Middle East. Among the national heritages prominently represented in the area are Portuguese, Italian, Jamaican, Vietnamese, East Indian and Filipino. 52% of the area’s populations are racialized populations including Black Latino, South Asian, South East Asian, Filipino and Chinese Canadians (City of Toronto, 2008). In general, students who attend this school are living in families with incomes far below the poverty line and have access to very few resources. Social Planning Toronto defines the poverty line to be based on the amount of income after taxes for a family of four to be $ 38,920 (Social Planning Toronto, 2014). Social Planning Toronto further identifies that poverty is racialized in Toronto and residents of African, Asian,
Middle Eastern, Caribbean and Latin American are much more likely to be living on low incomes (City of Toronto, 2008).

The Urban Collegiate Institute falls within the top 10 (out of 109 schools) on the Learning Opportunities Index (LOI), a TDSB tool that ranks schools by need based on a standardized composite indicator in hopes of ensuring that historically marginalized student populations receive an equitable allocation of resources and support. The index is based on statistics drawn from the students’ neighbourhoods including: median income of families; percentage of families whose income is below the Low Income Measure (half the medium income of the city before tax); percentage of families receiving social assistance; percentage of people with a high school diploma; percentage of people with a university degree; and proportion of lone-parent families. (TDSB, 2011c, p. 3). This index is published every other year and recognizes that children from lower income families face more significant barriers to achieving high educational outcomes than other students. Using the same set of data “collected in a consistent, reliable, and objective manner,” the LOI ranks schools from across the TDSB relative to one another, with schools where students face the greatest level of external challenges ranking higher on the scale (TDSB, 2011c, p. 1). This designation has, in the past, meant that additional resources would be issued to each school so that students in schools with high LOI’s would have access to resources that students in schools with low LOI’s already have. The LOI is a TDSB initiative implemented in an attempt to address some of these concerns by striving to provide all students with an equal opportunity to succeed.

Taken together, these statistics provide an indication of the challenges faced by the students at
Urban Collegiate Institute and the educators and administrators who serve them. In stating this, I also acknowledge that correlation does not mean causation. I acknowledge that these statistics are in no way a reflection of a deficit among these students, families or communities, and that the presence of these factors does not prevent these students from high levels of academic attainment. These statistics were incorporated to help identify some of the systemic challenges faced by the students at Urban Collegiate Institute, which make it more difficult for them to succeed.

Urban Collegiate Institute plays a vital role in students’ lives. As much as they are deemed at risk by the school board, they are also a group of youth who have much potential. They are dynamic, honest, and live their lives with much authenticity. It is easy to figure out when they are in a bad mood, when they do not like something because they do not hesitate to tell you. Students who graduate return to the school for years after they graduate and want to stay connected to the school community and the teachers.

*Bridges to University*

*Bridges to University* is an Integrative Program for students who might not necessarily go to University because they face high levels of systemic racism and poverty. For many, they are the first in their family to graduate from high school and to have a chance to be in a supportive environment while taking a first year Sociology course from the University of Toronto. *Bridges to University* is administered through the Transition Year Program at the University of Toronto and supported financially by the TDSB.

The Bridges to University classroom is unique because students enrol in two high school credits
(Grade 12 Social Justice and Equity and Grade 12 Philosophy) and one University of Toronto undergraduate credit (SOC 101: Introduction to Sociology). In the research study there were 24 students in the class and they are from eighteen different cultural backgrounds, speak sixteen different languages and practice six different religions. The program has a heavy workload as students balance three courses over the year in one course slot where they would normally manage two courses. As a result, we spend a lot of time together in the classroom, on field trips and after school where we engage deeply discussing, studying and exploring issues. Students self select to be in the class but some of the determining factors of their acceptance are high attendance rates, English marks, and the support of a teacher expressed in a reference letter.

**Design and Approach**

From the very beginning I attempted to make the research and teaching process transparent, so that students were aware of my approach to the curriculum. I explained to them that the curriculum would be more circular in design, allowing them to explore their identities as a tool to further understand social justice issues. In this approach, critical literacy was the means by which students were able explore identity as it related to social justice issues in the classroom and in their communities.

Over the course of the research students were invited to explore their identity in many different activities in class. I invited students, over the course of the year to explore their histories and their understanding of themselves. I worked to create a space to explore who they were in relation to issues related to class content. The projects that they worked on included: Writing poetry, Identity Iceberg and Staging Yourself activities (see Appendix A, B, C). I decided to
work with Linda Christensen’s (2000, 2009) approach to teaching poetry, specifically her lessons on “I Am” poems and “Where I’m From” poems (see Appendix A for a description of the poems). This was a way to begin to interrogate the ways students understood and named the various social, cultural and linguistic experiences that made them who they are. Following this, we embarked on a lengthy task of an individual visual representation of who they were in relation to a social locator. This then became a discussion and a starting point for interrogating and discussing social justice issues in the classroom (for a detailed description of classroom activities refer to Appendix A, B and C). Next, I wanted to find a way for students to articulate their presence in the digital world entitled Staging Yourself. Students crafted a visual web of all the spaces that they held in the digital world and included information such as how long they had been on the platform, what they did on that platform and if that platform was linked to other platforms that they utilized. All of these activities allowed students to engage with issues of identity in a way that was truly representative of their lives. I found, through this research, some common themes emerged as students began to deconstruct, question and engage in this critical literacy work related to their identities. These themes will be explored in the findings chapter. The final activity in the class was a project called “Staging Yourself” (see Appendix B), in which the students were asked to imagine themselves expressed in the multimodal exploration of identity of self, using one format that would best describe them—the medium being as important as the message. Students staged themselves to show who they discovered themselves to be. Other topics covered in their project focused on readings and discussions and were influenced by items that came up in their identity work as a starting point to explore social justice issues. The storying of the curriculum in this thesis is not so much of a curriculum checklist but rather an
exploration of the question: How do students respond to the critical literacy activities in deeply moving ways?

This form of curriculum engagement is influenced by Campano’s (2007) notion of “systemic improvisation” (p. 112). In this approach the interaction of the teacher’s plan and intentions and the students’ experiences and values interact and often change the shape of the lesson. My systemic improvisation informed not only the curricular content but my delivery as well. I had not realized the role that digital technologies would play in their understandings of their identity. I had to shift many topics to utilize digital technologies in a portion of the lesson as well as incorporate learning through digital forums. By allowing my teaching to be in dialogue with the students in the class, I was able to engage the students in the topics and modalities that were of interest to them. The design of this research came from recognizing students as knowledge makers. The classroom activities that emerged came from engaging students as curriculum writers. The ideas and themes that emerged in one Identity activity informed and influenced what we did next, over the course of the entire year (for a more detailed look at all the activities, please refer to Appendix C). In short, both student and teacher participated in creating the course content where the ideas that emerged from the identity work informed the curriculum focus areas.

**Multimodality and Digital Technologies**

This work was influenced by the multimodal nature of students’ lives. Like teachers, students don’t exist in a fixed identity but in a world that is driven by their own expression through art, digital landscapes and digital technologies. I wanted to capitalize on their involvement in these areas to fully begin to explore their complex and nuanced identities. Jewitt (2012) explores multimodality in digital landscapes and how they allow people to make meaning in new ways:
the features of technologies (‘old’ and ‘new’ technologies) provide different kinds of constraints and possibilities for meaning making—technologies, like other tools, shape what we do. In addition, the communicative potentials that shape knowledge and the practices that people engage with are fundamentally connected (p. 14).

Students in the Bridges to University program are navigating through their daily activities in multimodal ways and this research identified some of the themes.

**Ethics**

The research study was approved by the University of Toronto *Social Sciences, Humanities and Education Research Ethics Board* as well as the Toronto District School Board *External Research Review Committee* prior to the start of this project. I selected a pseudonym for the name of the school and the students each selected their own pseudonyms for this project. Each student and parent involved in this process filled out a consent form. The principal of the school also supported this project with much enthusiasm (see Appendix D for the Student and Parent and Administrator permission forms).

**A Note on the Data**

One of the great strengths of the data in this research project and of Practitioner Research is that it allows for the gathering from varied sources (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009). Many classroom sessions were audio recorded and then later transcribed. I kept an observation log over the course of the research and recorded in it two to three times a week, and more in the time when major projects were presented. I also kept a notebook of follow up notes to explore in the classroom. It was with great difficulty that I found myself exploring the data post-research, as
there was so much to review.

Much of the work collected was part of the course material. Students were given an assessment mark for each assignment that went towards their final mark in the course. I did not start to analyze the data until the course was over and the final marks were submitted (as per the ethics requirement). While reviewing the data, I used a process of coding the assignments based on questions that I developed in my records of observations notes. This permitted me to allow the themes to emerge so that I could “organize, manage and retrieve the most meaningful” pieces of information related to my research question (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996, p.26). Coding in this way is a process of “data complication” as described by Coffey et al. (1996) as a method of expanding, transforming, and reconceptualizing data to “open up more diverse analytical possibilities”. It also allowed me to make sense of what I was seeing in my students’ work beyond interesting anecdotes.

I also kept consistent records through analytical memos over the course of the year. Ballenger (2009) describes the uses of reflective memos as a way to capture what is and is not happening in the moment. I also cross-referenced students’ work with my own reflections through a list of themes that emerged from the classroom work in which we engaged. I used open coding for this thesis as a way for the themes to emerge rather than from a predetermined list.

I have also shared a portion of my work and data with some colleagues who are familiar with my work in the Bridges to University classroom and asked them to comment on what stood out to them. This feedback has allowed me to address some of the concerns that can come out of researching one’s own practice. As an insider it is easy for me to put a ‘positive spin’ on my data and it can be hard for me to remove myself from the place of being firm in my observations
Conclusion

This chapter presented the methodology that I engaged in and described how the study was designed in order to answer the questions that I posed in the first chapter. The work was situated within the larger landscape of practitioner research to explain the methodological rationale behind it. I provided a brief explanation on my own positionality as a teacher, as a researcher and in relationship with my students. Urban Collegiate Institute and the Bridges to University classroom were placed in context to situate my study. In the next Chapter, I present the work of the students and my own reflections as a teacher-researcher.
Chapter 4: Findings

In setting up a classroom, I wanted to create a space where students engaged in acquiring new ways to express their understandings, experiences and their concerns related to their identities. I wanted the students to engage deeply and to make meaning of their own discourses as they relate to knowledge and experience. I found that I got push back from students when I said we were going to engage in ‘literacy’ work in class. They linked literacy work to the Ontario Secondary School Literacy Test, a provincially mandated assessment that all Ontario high school students must pass in order to graduate high school, and the other rote methodologies they learn in English class. As a teacher in the social science classroom, I pushed back on their definition of literacy to include ‘reading the world within a word’ (Freire, 1987, p.10). I approach literacy as much more than reading and writing, instead situating literacy in relation to broader political and social contexts. When a student in the Bridges to University class engages in the literacy activities they are asked to bring their whole self into the classroom setting. By centering students’ identity narratives as a core foundation of the course, all learning happens through the lens of their experiences. They bring their home languages, cultures, histories and varied ways of knowing into the class space. Figure

Figure 4.1 Sama’s image of what is in going on in her head
4.1 is an example of how students expressed what is going on inside of their heads\(^2\). Sama describes being ‘stuck in my head’ when trying to articulate her ideas, hopes and dreams for the future. In her drawing, I notice the attention that she has placed on the creation of the maze (with no end) that she has drawn. In this visual, Sama is demonstrating that there is much going on in her head, she knows how to enter into thoughts, but she has a difficult time making sense of what is actually going on. In conversations with her, she uses words such as ‘I don’t know’ and ‘I’m not sure’ when asked to describe her thoughts. It is with this challenge in mind that the activities in class were developed as a way to get to students to move past being ‘stuck in my head’ and into a different place of understanding.

Five main themes emerged in this research. The most striking to me was that a range of themes emerged, suggesting the varied ways that students explored issues of identity, all students were able to engage fully in the material in class. Each student fully engaged in Freire’s (1987) educational approach that “Reading the world always precedes reading the word, and reading the word implies continually reading the world” (p. 10). What I understand Freire to mean by this is that multiple forms of literacy are inherently linked because of the sociopolitical nature of language. The ways in which we come to understand the social world around us through experience is a function of our particular social and historical location. As educators, our notions of knowledge need to be re-opened to allow for students to become knowledge makers in the classroom space. In contrast, the notion that teachers have ‘absolute knowledge’ to impart to students begins to be deconstructed. The following section on findings will introduce the many ways in which students engaged in their literacies that allowed for the creation of space for

\(^2\) All images presented in this thesis have approval through a media release form, including images of students work and photos of the classroom.
students to express their literacies as inspired by Broderick (2015) and Christensen (2000, 2009). The five themes that emerged are: 1) the uncertainty of self; 2) the trusting of others’ voices to find one’s own voice; 3) the struggle with who they are and who their parents want them to be; 4) the place of darkness that can emerge when looking at oneself in the process of self-discovery and trust in oneself; and, 5) the reconciliation with family and decisions that were made for them.

Integral to practitioner inquiry is the practice of taking field notes and writing journal reflections based on my observations in the classroom, to create a space to comment and reflect upon those moments of dissonance. Throughout this findings chapter my own reflections will be woven through to explore the themes of identity that are being presented (see Appendix E for a template of my Classroom Reflection log). The journal activities were coded with the other data and the themes that emerged were similar to the themes of the students work. I have chosen to include them throughout as a way to surface the moments, the conversations, the tensions and the reflections that I had as a teacher-researcher throughout this research.

Before I present the themes that emerged, I wanted to place myself in the research. The following is an excerpt from my classroom reflection log that describes many of the concerns that I was having around my own identity and role in the classroom.

Airin Journal Entry January, 2015

Teachers are often described as wearing many hats during the day – I have never liked this analogy, as a hat is something that you take on and off and on and off and you can put it aside – as teachers we carry with us each and every day our own multifaceted and complex identity and all of those complicated factors make up who we are - the impact how we interact with students
– they affect the level and quality of teaching in a classroom, they are in constant dialogue with our colleagues and they can influence what a student actually learns in the classroom. I liken teaching to one of those cold winter days where you put on the layer upon layer upon layer to keep you warm and protected – sometimes we need to remove the layers to expose more of our songs, to make us more vulnerable to what is happening outside of our body – layers can protect us – but can also limit us in our movement and our understanding – we need to be able to understand identify and talk about her layers without discarding. The iceberg project has just done that - the layers have started to peel away from the students and I am discovering what they are covering up.

This excerpt signifies to me the challenges of this work as it relates to my own layered identity. As I invited students to unpack the layers of their identities, I found that I was also revealing mine to the classroom. The beauty and the challenge of this work was in that it placed both the teacher and the student in a vulnerable position while revealing ideas, stories and experiences.

Throughout the course of the year the students have engaged in various projects and assignments that allowed them to examine, explore and voice their identity (which has been described in a previous chapter). The following is a presentation of the themes that emerged in this thesis research.

**Theme 1: The Beginning of Looking at Identity and the Uncertainty of Self**

“Miss, can you just tell me who I am?” Gon, September 2015

When Gon engaged in the iceberg activity he looked to me as the teacher in the sense of the all-knowing source and himself as an empty vessel to be filled (Freire, 1998a). He did not trust in
himself as having the knowledge to complete the task. He did not believe in his own knowledge and himself as a knowledge maker. He followed my around for three days asking me the question of who he is, who he should be — it was a painful process for him. He would approach me with much struggle in his eyes searching for me to give him answers to “I don’t know who I am”, “tell me who I am” and “who do you think that I am”. The following dialogue is an example of the daily interaction as he struggled figuring out who he is in relation to the iceberg activity (see Appendix C for detailed explanation of the Iceberg Activity).

Gon: I don’t know who I am.

Me: What are some of the ways that you would describe yourself?

Gon: Can’t you just tell me who I am? You have taught me forever, you know me.

Me: I want to know who you think you are. Are there any social locators that will be easy for you to start with? How about your culture or heritage?

Gon: How do I know that?

Me: You might want to start to look at your family members. What do you know about them?

Gon: You mean I actually have to talk to my parents? I never talk to them. They will think this is really weird to start asking all these questions.

Me: Well, you never know until you try. Let me know how it goes tomorrow.

Gon: Are you going to show my mom this final project? You know, if you do, I might not be that honest then.

In this conversation, Gon is struggling with how he has to go about gathering information. He is used to having his teachers (and others) just giving him the information that he needs to complete the assignment. He is looking for the easy way to explore who he is. By asking the people
around him what they think of who he is he was hoping that others will define him. He was unsure about asking his parents the questions to figure this out. His approach to creating his iceberg caused much undue stress in the way that he did everything not to actually reflect for himself as to who he was.

We displayed the icebergs in the class in a ‘museum tour’ fashion where each of the icebergs would be displayed and everyone would walk around as though they were in a museum. When
Gon presented (See image 4.2) his final iceberg to the class they each had to highlight something that was a surprise to them, something that they learned about themselves. Each one of the icebergs was unique and demonstrated the layers and complex identities that each student was exploring. When we got to Gon, he described what struck him about this activity:

I always knew that I was brown but I never really wondered what kind of brown that I am… I knew we ate Guyanese food in the home, but I never thought about where my family came from. Most people think of me as Pakistani. When Miss made me ask my parents what our cultural ancestry was I found out that not only is my mom Guyanese but she is indigenous and my dad, well, I had no clue… He grew up in India and met my mom in his twenties while he was working in Guyana. I never thought about what I was… but to be honest… it’s kinda sick that I know now. I feel like I know more about me just by knowing that. I was secretly hoping they would have said my dad was Japanese because I really like anime.

In his reflection on this piece, Gon wrote:

My family’s culture has an old Indian/Guyanese traditions but for me I don’t find myself being a part of it. I have adopted some of my own household culture but my real culture that I identify with is surrounded by Asian Culture [Japanese, South Korean] because I am very fond of them and they understand me.

Gon was in a place of initial discovery of his identity that went far beyond what he had even known about himself. His Iceberg was a chance for him to uncover knowledge about himself from a place of initial exploration. In the description of his iceberg, not only was he expressing what he had found out about himself (being Guyanese and Indian) but he was also expressing
desire to be something other than what he was. Gon was encountering his own cultural history and identity in new ways. One could easily assume ideas about who Gon was based on his appearance. By engaging in this assignment he was engaging in his own “fund of knowledge”. Moll et al. (1991), describe the premise underlying what Gon was doing as exploring his own funds of knowledge that is based on the premise: people are competent and have knowledge, and their life experiences have given them that knowledge. His exploration into understanding his own ‘fund of knowledge’ is still in a place of uncertainty and in initial exploration. This activity helped to create a sense of understanding and knowledge in himself that he did not have before. This helped to shape how he approached the other activities in class.

Later on in the term I asked students to create a final installation called Staging Yourself (this is described further in Appendix D). In his final identity project, Gon created something he called the ‘Gon Stew’ (Figure 4.4) a recipe for himself. It was presented as if there was a recipe to create ‘Gon’. In this recipe he included not only the ingredients needed but also the instructions as to how to put it all together. In this activity students were asked to find a medium and a message that could represent their whole selves.
I was surprised by his choice and I asked him why he chose to represent himself in that manner.

Me: Why did you choose to represent yourself as a stew? Do you like to cook?

Gon: I am the worst cook… I burn everything. I do not know how to cook and you know Miss whenever I try I get all confused and forget the order and then it is all messy… and it never turns out how I want it to.

Me: So why did you make yourself a stew?
Gon: You know… it is like this…. All these activities are making me more confused and I like what I am learning, but I am feeling like I am a bit overwhelmed and, you know, I am like the stew…. I don’t always put things in the right order, but I try. And hopefully it will all work out in like five or ten years.

Some of the items he chose to put in the ‘Gon Stew’ are various social locators, dreams and hopes, such as: ‘1 cup of dreams, 1 cup of athletic’ as well as ‘a pinch of chubby and naughty’. He was really proud of how this ‘stew’ came together, although he was very aware that it might not be the nicest to look at or understand. That is kind of how he felt about himself right then — full of questions, frustrated that Ms. Stephens would not give him the answers, and a bit messy in understanding who he is.

At the end of the semester, Gon approached my desk; I could tell he was in the mood for a longer conversation. He looked at me with the same look that he did during the iceberg activity. He asked, “I get that all this is about me figuring out who I am and I think I do know that a bit more…. Now… what am I supposed to do with this?”

This question has led me to engage in a process of trying to understand the nature of identity formation and the purpose of reflective activities into understanding identity for students like Gon. If it is truly about the exploration for students and their uncertainty of self then how do educators ensure it is done in a space that allows for students to explore the ‘so what’ and the ‘now what’?

Gon’s concerns were representative of the work of other students in class, who also had some uncertainty as to who they were. In our curricular work as educators, we do not often take the time to engage in these issues for various reasons including: the perceived belief that there not
enough time; the patience required to encourage students to explore and the lack of trust in our students and their ability to find the answers. It is far easier to give the students the answer they want so that you can get on with the lessons and the anticipated outcome of the activity. The exploration into the uncertainty of self is a process that takes time and the ability to trust in their own understanding.

**Theme 2: Trusting Others Voice to Find One’s Own Voice**

“They just say it so much better than me” Jen, October 2015

Writing can be a deeply personal act. Teenagers writing about their own identities can struggle to find the words to express themselves. In her “In My Head” drawing (See Figure 4.4), Taejah described herself as having all these unspoken words waiting to come out of her throat, while what came out were words that presented herself as being very ‘stoic’ in nature. She also used quotes and relied on other people’s words to describe her thoughts. This suggests that Taejah did not feel as though she has her own words to describe what was going on in her head around who she was and who she wanted to be in the world.

*Figure 4.4 Taejah In My Head visual*
Another theme that emerged from work with Taejah and some of her peers was in the trust that was placed in using other people’s words as a way for students to find their own way of expressing themselves. This theme is an exploration of ways students find meaning and understanding of themselves in song lyrics, inspirational quotes and lines from their favourite books.

In the Staging Yourself activity, students were invited to represent themselves where the medium was as important as the message. One student, Liz, found that by using other peoples’ words, she could articulate much more about herself than if she were to use her own words (Fig. 4.5, 4.6). In a conversation about the piece, she stated that she found others to be “smarter than her” but also expressed concerns about how I would perceive her. This is exemplified in the following exchange

Liz: I find it so much easier to use someone else’s words to describe who I am…. Maybe I feel like I will be criticised less. Like if you are questioning it… you are more questioning the words, not me…

Me: Do you find the questions that I ask to be critical?

Liz: No, because it is you, but I am worried that I will say the wrong thing.

Me: Is that why you use other people’s words to describe the layers that you present in your project?

Liz: Yes, I mean the words are all by people who have been published or quoted—so they sounds so much smarter than me…. They just say it so much.

Me: Do you think that is the goal of this activity—to have you feel smarter?

Liz: Miss… no teacher has ever asked me to go this deep with questions about who I am. Most teachers want to know
nothing about me, so I am used to using others people words to express myself.

Me: Do you trust your own words?

Liz: Are you trying to trick me into showing you my real thoughts?…. I do have a journal of my thoughts, but I never show it to anyone… it is just for me.

I wonder then about the schooling that Jen has experienced and how it had taught her to not trust her own words. I wonder how other teachers had engaged or did not engage in conversation with Liz and with her story. As teachers we have the ability to silence students’ voices by implying or telling them that their thoughts are not relevant or interesting. Freire argues that a teacher’s role in the classroom should be to allow for a curriculum to emerge that is ‘emancipatory’ in nature (Freire, 1970): it should allow for the voices of students to be heard in a way that speaks truth to their lived experiences. Liz had been taught either implicitly or explicitly in her schooling that her voice, her experiences and her truth were not an important aspect to her learning. As a classroom teacher working with students to trust in their voices, this is incredibly problematic because it does not allow students to believe in their own funds of knowledge (Moll et al., 1991).

Figure 4.6 Close up of nesting cylinders
Liz’s work has forced me to look at questions around creating space for students to explore their own voice. As educators, how do we allow room for students to explore their identities? How do we create room for students to explore their own voices? How do we support students in using the words of others that they find meaningful and at the same time encourage them to find their own words to describe their own experiences?

![Figure 4.7 Liz’s Iceberg Identity](image)

In the visualizing yourself as an iceberg activity in class (See Figure 4.7), Liz created a beautiful visual of how she understood the many social locators that the activity had invited her to consider. In the written write up of her iceberg, Liz did not use her own words to describe the images that are included in her iceberg. She describes who she is using other peoples’ words in
her explanation:

I love hearing new ideas and comparing them to mind and if need be I have no problem with switching my way of thinking or understanding why other people believe what they do. Other peoples quotes can say it way better for me such as: ‘Nothing in this world can satisfy’ in relation to my religious beliefs; ‘age is overrated’ because I am extremely short very few people know my actual age.

A glance at Liz’s identity iceberg shows a web of ideas and complexities of her life. There is much that can be unpacked in this image. When Liz presented this to the class, she chose to explain her ideas through quotes from other people. When I pushed her to actually explain one area in her own words, she had extreme difficulty in doing so and responded by asking: “Ah, come on Miss, can’t I just read what I wrote down on the paper?” Again, Liz was experiencing not trusting in her own words to explain her iceberg identity—she felt reliant on the words of others to describe the choices she made as an artist.

Another student in class faced this same dilemma in finding their truth in someone else’s words. When faced with having to articulate who he is in the Staging Yourself Activity, Tomas composed a poem made up of some of his favorite song lyrics. He presented this to the class as a handout with the lyrics on it and the songs mentioned in the poem (lyrics from these songs are highlighted in grey) played over a set of speakers in the class.

Again
Some nights are just a break.
Something you just need to take every once in a while to remember to carry on.

Before the Dawn decides to break you, you have to remember to take that sad song and make it better.

No matter how hard it gets you have to keep living on a prayer.

The prayer you made when all hell broke loose and you honestly thought about tying that noose.

Just remember to carry on, remember to stay strong, be calm.

I’ve seen fire and I’ve seen rain, I feel lonely days that I thought would never end, I see lonely times when I could not find a friend.

but trust me, just trust me,

you will always see me again.

When asked why he chose this medium and what message he wanted to convey he said this:

I think the way lines from songs can connect like crosswords and get a message across to a listener can help you find hope in those dark times. Music can express feelings that make me feel hopeful when the things in my life can feel hopeless.

Tomas was using the words from the songs to be present with his own emotions. He used the lyrics from the songs as a way to interpret the world around him. He did not question the words but felt them deeply. A conversation that Tomas and I had about his poem illuminated how reliant he was on song lyrics to explain what was going on in his life:

Me: So you listen to music a lot?

Tomas: Miss, music is my life!
Me: Your life, huh?

Tomas: You know, anything that happens in my life, I can relate it to a song…. It’s like the words in the songs reach out to me and make sense of the shit in my world.

Me: So do you have playlists on your phone for different feelings?

Tomas: (pulls out phone) You have no idea…. I have songs for everything… and everyone.

Me: You like songs so much, do you write music or lyrics?

Tomas: Nah, I wouldn't know what to say and where to start…. I don't think I have anything to say that people would want to hear.

Me: Sounds like you have a lot to say, you should try it sometime.

Tomas: Nah, well… maybe someday.

Tomas has strength inside of him developed from struggling through diverse life experiences with his family, including being raised by a single mom who is has a disability, a father that he has not seen since he was four years old, an older sibling who has a child, another sibling who is in and out of the hospital with bulimia, and a younger sibling. He has had to take on a father figure role in his family, and works thirty hours a week to pay for most for the household expenses. He had struggled, he had failed, had persevered, and had much to say to others about having the strength to go on. Yet he did not trust in his own voice to say what needed to be said. When we ask students to bring all of their selves in to the classroom, we also need to find ways in which they can begin to trust their own voices.
Theme 3: The Struggle with Who They are and Who Their Parents Want Them to Be

“Not another durian fruit birthday cake” Thao, November 2015

Thao’s work emerged in class to represent the ways in which students were bumping against the struggles between identities and the ways in which she and others were trying to understand themselves. This tension was present in all of her work around identity. In the initial days of the class, students explored their identities through poetry writing inspired by Linda Christensen (2000), including her I Am and Where I’m From poems (see Appendix A). Through her poetry, Thao demonstrated this incredible ability to see right into the tensions that she faced when she explored her identity.

Thao’s poems start off in the voice of a kid who had grown up in Canada her whole life- with many mainstream Canadian experiences, but very quickly moved into the tensions of who she is and who her family wanted her to be. For example, in her Where I’m From poem, Thao explores her vision of her own ethnic and cultural identity and her relationship to family and community through a remarkable and memorable series of concrete images and metaphors. The following is Thao’s Where I’m From poem in its entirety, which illustrates the struggles and the tension that she was facing.
“Where I’m From” Written by Thao

I’m from the neighbourhood that leaks of helping hands and bright smiles.
From that Chinese restaurant known for their crunchy, fried chicken wings with a punch of lemon.
I’m from that bowling alley that became a yearly tradition for my elementary school,
From the acquired fact that I am not a good bowler,
Though the place is not there anymore to see if that is still true.

I’m from the dandelions that left yellow stains on my palms as my friends fooled around with me.
From the memories of skipping rope, or clapping along to chants during recess,
The rhythm of “strawberry shortcake, blueberry pie,” or “mailman, mailman, do your duty,”
Still sung in my head by my four best friends.
I’m from the colourful, vibrant images that occupy the pages,
From the vivid, movie-like visualizations that appear in my head when I read,
They stole my heart so quickly, books were my very first love.

I’m from the dragon fruit my childhood friend’s mother made me eat when I had an eye infection,
The refreshing taste and its little seeds dancing on my tastebuds as I forgot about the pain.
I’m from those durian birthday cakes my parents buy for every birthday party up to my ninth,
Bittersweet and creamy to me, but sour and tangy to my other eight and nine year old guests.

I’m from the politeness and greets that I have been told to do,
From the “back in Vietnam...” stories, and the “it’s all because of you.”
I’m from the fear that I might assimilate into the Canadian culture,
Because my elders always told me to do certain things, as it makes me a true Vietnamese girl.

I’m from that time I almost rode my tricycle onto the main road,
Before the hands of my father pulled me back from my shoulders.
From the unforgettable silence that took up all the air I breathed on our way home that evening.

I’m from those small, gold elephant statues from my Vietnamese classes for being the best student,
From that one porcelain doll with rough, curly hair which was my first, and last Christmas present.
I’m from the grey cassette that recorded my hearty, homemade concerts on side A,
And the promises I ended up breaking a thousand times on side B.

I am from those moments.
A tree supported to grow tall and straight,
But leans slightly, now that the support is slowly disappearing.
Thao mentioned to me that up until actually writing this poem, she had found it hard to understand some of the tension that she and her parents had faced. She was an only child of Vietnamese parents who grew up in refugee camps in Malaysia. Through writing this poem, Thao was able to work through these experiences in a new way. She used the process of writing as a way to see how she was growing up in two distinctive cultures that were competing, as represented by a sense of loss and learning in the poem. She told me that she started to read the poem to her parents to convey this - but kept on getting stuck as she had to translate the whole thing. She said she wondered if she should have written one in Viet as well so that her parents could read it, but felt as though she did not know the language well enough to do it.

Thao described feeling stuck between wanting her parents to know who she was as a kid raised in Canada, and feeling as though she was constantly letting them down. As a result, she had a hard time being honest with her parents. The theme of struggle is one that Thao found herself in the middle of very intensely, and one that she explored in all of her work. Through her writing, Thao attempted to cross the borderland that had been created for her by her family. She described inhabiting both realities, where she was constantly negotiating her identity and was forced to live in the interface of the two. Both locations carried a tremendous amount of emotional weight and negotiating those spaces could be tricky for a teenager to navigate. In these processes, Thao and some of her peers engaged in struggle between who they were and who their parents wanted them to be.

In her final assignment in class, called the Staging Yourself project, Thao decided to present herself as if she were neurotransmitters (Figure 4.8). To her, neurotransmitters were the best way she could think to deal with expressing herself to blend her “science side and artistic side”.
Thao chose to explore herself in this manner as she hopes to have a career in neuro-medicine. She chose 4 neurotransmitters which she resonated with and then chose to illustrate each of the molecules that made them up. The following is a picture with Thao and her neurotransmitters as presented in class.

*Figure 4.8 Thao’s Neurotransmitter Identity*
Thao called one of her neurotransmitters ‘y-aminobutyric’, which she described in the following way:

![Figure 4.9 Thao's y-aminobutyric description](image)

**Figure 4.9 Thao’s y-aminobutyric description**

Thao’s notes on y-aminobutyric:

This neurotransmitter is responsible for: calming, mental focus, relaxation, control, vision, sleep cycles, alertness. On my model I have chosen to write things that are in my life that represent y-aminobutyric: photography, learning about Vietnam, music, travelling, sound of rain and the thought of nothing.

Thao explores, in this neurotransmitter metaphor, those attributes in her life that allowed her to
be calm and focused—many of the items are learned activities, but she also included activities such as ‘learning about Vietnam’ that allowed her to connect to the varied aspects of who she was.

Thao called another one of her neurotransmitters ‘noradrenaline’, which she described in the following way in the notes on her project.

*Figure 4.10 noradrenaline*

Thao’s notes on ‘noradrenaline’:

This neurotransmitter is responsible for: concentration, attention, responding action, ‘fight or flight’, increase blood flow, nervousness, energy, sweating. On my model I have chosen to write things in my life that I am afraid of but are important to who I am:
solving trigonometric equations, not enough time, shy, job interview, perfectionist and talking about the future.

In the two neurotransmitters that I have highlighted above, y-aminobutyric and noradrenaline, Thao was able to communicate many of the complex layers that existed within her. Not only did she create a place where she could present the easier elements of her personality (such as her fears ‘job interview, solving trigonometric equations’) she also could acknowledge those elements that made her feel calm such as ‘travelling, photography’. Throughout this final project, she also included those ideas that caused her tension (in relation to how others want her to be) such as ‘figuring out the future and not enough time’. Thao was in a constant state of negotiation and could relate to Halls (1996) description of identity as negotiated through one’s ability to navigate the eye of the needle. Thao was attempting to pass through the eye of the needle, she was facing both the positive and negative, the easy and hard portions of her identity. Through her attempts, she was challenging any notion of her identity being ‘fixed and stagnant’ (Hall, 1996). She was uncovering that her identity could be fluid and can be temporary, and that her reactions to situations could vary based on what idea was taking the forefront in her sense of self.

When Thao first displayed this project in the classroom, I was the only one in the classroom. The following conversation occurred:

Me: Did you show your parents?

Thao: Miss… it was so awkward (hiding behind her hands).

Me: Because you were arts and crafting at home?

Thao: No (in a squealing voice) because they wanted to talk about everything that I was writing on each of the elements.
Me: And that made you uncomfortable?

Thao: Yes…. They keep wanting to give me advice and it all started with… ‘In the old country…’ and they kept wanting to talk and watch me work.

Me: So it was kind of like a family bonding time.

Thao: I guess, something like that…. I felt that they kept wanting me to put more about Vietnam on it, but like I never lived there so how do I write about it? And really, their time there was really difficult, so why would I want to think about it?

Me: That sounds like it could have been a hard conversation.

Thao: Miss, my parents are so embarrassing, you have no idea. Please don’t do this to your kids when they get older.

Thao’s exploration allowed me the space to reflect on the complicated issues of teaching in a multicultural and diverse community. How do we create a space to explore issues related to students’ identities that are not fixed but rather quite fluid? How do we begin to create space to have these conversations that surface many of the concerns that our students face in their daily lives in relation to the lives their parents left behind? The notion of ‘borderlands’ (Anzaldúa, 1987) really applies here: the way that Thao navigated the project with her parents crossed over, spatially and temporally, to places lived in and dreamt about as well as facing her own daily life here in Toronto.

This theme of students exploring and struggling with their identities of who they are and who others expect them to be is one that I find myself thinking to my own mothers experience of being raised in Canada by immigrant parents. As Canada is a country full of people who have immigrated here by either choice or by external pressures, there can be beauty in the coming
together of many cultures. In contrast there could be a danger of assimilation, by which the cultures of ones place of origin is discouraged by the dominant culture. It is through understanding the danger of assimilation that I, as a classroom teacher, tread very carefully. In the spirit of culturally sustaining pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 2014), I have been engaging with students in exploring their home culture and their school culture. I want to create a place that explores and honours home cultures but also can challenge some their understanding and thinking. It is through this process of interrogation in the classroom community do we being to change the way in which learning happens in the classroom.

**Theme 4: The Place of Darkness that can Emerge when Looking at Oneself and How to Find Trust in the Self**

“My daughter is a lion, but she thinks she is a pussycat” Abisha, January 2016

Sometimes, as educators, we come across a student who is struggling very deeply. It is not our role to fix them, but rather a place for us to allow them to explore their struggles and to find a path through or out of them. Abisha is one of those students, with whom I explored issues related to her identity in her written, visual, and digital work. The theme that emerges is one of self-discovery, acceptance and trust. Abisha struggled but stayed engaged in school as she experiences more dark day than light, but her honesty in the space allowed her to explore acceptance. The ideas that emerge in her work look at ideas of trust in herself when she feels down and dark.

In the initial days in the class, Abisha very quickly wrote the opening to her I Am poem:
Abisha identified as a proud Tamil activist and had been speaking out against shadism (discrimination based on skin colour in communities of colour where the lighter skin tone is valued more) in her cultural community, yet she found it hard to accept herself. She had been quite active in the Tamil community and recently had explored the colonial legacy left within the Tamil community in relation to shadism and internalized Western ideals of beauty. Abisha had an edge of darkness that she openly expressed. In her I Am poem, she explored difficult issues through concrete images—‘painful thorn’, ‘voice shake’, and ‘walls of genocide’. She willingly explored the harder parts of who she was in a very open manner. As a teacher I felt drawn to her openness, yet I was also cautious, as I knew that she had been in a depressive state before. Part of being able to see the ‘whole lives’ of students comes with some responsibility to be able to support them (or to find them the support they need) through the darker times.

In her Staging Yourself activity, Abisha staged herself by creating a tumblr page (figure 4.11). This approach to her final project allowed Abisha to explore and share a digital realm in which
she was quite active. Abisha lives in a digital world—it was where she felt she could communicate best. She created a tumblr page called “In The Midst Of Greatness” in which she had her sister ask friends and family about what they thought of her and then she responded to them with her own words.

The image below is a screen shot of her tumble page set up. Actual portions of the text are transcribed below for easier reading.

**Figure 4.11 Screenshot of Abisha’s tumblr page**

Below, I highlight one part of Abisha’s tumblr page. Bold italics are used to mark the words of someone writing about Abisha; the words below are her reactions to these comments:

“Okay, lets see. She’s passionate. Especially about her identity. I admire that. I think that...”
takes a lot of courage. Sometimes when she gets so into it you can see her passion in the way her eyes light up when she talks about something she loves and it refreshing to see that once in a while in someone.”

We are so accustomed to disguise ourselves to others, that in the end, we become disguised to ourselves. Don’t lose yourself in the process of trying to be someone who will be accepted by a few other people. Think of it like this. Can you remember who you were… before the world told you who you should be? We’ve all become inclined to be invisible in this world, to be lowered into believing who we are by an authorization of someone else’s definition of who we should be. We’ve come so far in finding ourselves, then we lose ourselves, our identity, our bare face to these stigmas… and all the stigmas that we have break my heart.

Throughout her writing Abisha was exploring how to trust in herself and how to believe in herself. She has someone saying, “She is passionate. Especially about her identity”, yet she responds by a powerful reflection of “We’ve come so far in finding ourselves, then we lose ourselves, our identity, our bare face to these stigmas…and all the stigmas that we have break my heart”. There is a darkness in her writing, exposing how deeply she felt about this idea of losing oneself based on the ways that others felt about one. The struggle for me is: How, as a teacher, do I hold students in these places as they explore complex areas of struggle as a part of the process of discovering compassion and understanding for who they are? How do I support them when issues arise that are deeply personal? It can be easy for a teacher to swoop in to solve problems for students as they arise—to attempt to be their savior. It is less easy to create a space where you can allow students to explore issues of darkness and to support them as they work their way through it. This process of holding space for students does not happen in one day, one
week, or even one month—it can be a whole year or multi year process. The role of the teacher is to be to solid consistent person whom the student knows will be there for them in the long term. This type of investment in student’s lives goes beyond the classroom, beyond the set course time and moves to time with no limit. Abisha was not looking for my solutions to her explorations but rather to know that I would be there to understand and ask questions far in to the future.

Abisha discussed how she began to understand her life in the excerpt below:

“In Abisha. This is random but okay, last time I seen her she was buried inside a book. We were all having fun and laughing and her head didn’t even come up, she was so focused. I thought that was cool.”

“I am not a bookworm; I’m an escape artist. My escape from reality is by living in the world of the character, just for a few hours or a few days. Depending on how long the book is really. It helps me put myself into another position. Another problem.”

In this excerpt, Abisha explored how when others saw her with her head in a book, they saw her a ‘focussed’ and ‘cool’, while she saw herself in that same moment as an ‘escape artist’ who was escaping the reality around her by immersing herself in the book. When I asked why she feels the need to escape, she responded to me by stating “Miss, sometimes life is too hard…and I just want to leave it…you know”. In a sense I understand she was is talking about: feeling overwhelmed and not able to move forward. However I also know that I do not face the same reality as Abisha did in terms of our power and postitionalty in the world. The following is an excerpt from my own journal entry reflecting on the same ideas that Abisha explores in the above excerpt.
Airin Journal Entry February 2016

Today was a particularly hard day in class for me. I could feel my heart breaking for many of the students in the class. A student shared how the last time that he saw his father was when he was 5 years old and his dad was trying to break into their apartment to steal the TV and other items (which he did). He was worried that he has the possibility to turn out like his father. I wanted to go over to him, look him in the eye and tell him that he has such strength in him, that in this strength of reflection that he is growing in to such a strong man that his peers look to and admire. But the moment passed, I will have to make sure I find time to have that conversation with him. In response Abisha shared that when life gets too rough she questions her place in the world. She said that there feels like so little that she can control, and sometimes thinks that it would be easier not to fight the fight. I get the feeling of being overwhelmed- but how do I begin to have the conversation about how important her life is if she doesn’t feel it herself? Sometimes I do not feel equipped to respond to these students in the way that they need. This goes beyond the role of a classroom teacher, I need to be equipped to engage in issues of self esteem, self worth as well as matters of the heart such as loss of parent and the meaning of living.

I find that I am continuing to explore many of the themes that emerged as the students did in my own reflective writing and struggle with how to respond to the ideas that they present.

Continuing with this theme, Abisha (like some of her peers described above) found that she could explore her dark moments through the words of others. The following is a conversation that I had after a day that was particularly hard day for her:

Me: How’s it going?
Abisha: (in tears) Horribly….

Me: Anything in particular?

Abisha: You know, I was just reading this book and the boy in the book, his sister died, and I was thinking that, what if my sister died? I mean, my sister is my life—she has always had my back and I would not be able to go on if she died.

Me: I think good books can do that, they allow you to experience someone else’s life as if it was your own.

Abisha: Miss… It was like my sister died…. I can’t even handle it right now. I feel so weak, and I do not know how to go on.

In this conversation, Abisha was exploring the loss of a loved one, with her feelings so deep and out in the open. She also demonstrated how she was beginning to process her emotions through others’ writing. In this way that she also explored love and loss in a powerful manner. The following excerpt from her tumblr page demonstrates how solid and powerful she was, even when exploring dark issues:

“my daughter is powerful. She self sacrifice is for a lot of people. She’s hard on herself a lot and I tell her that she’s okay. I got my little girl but she doesn’t listen. But, I know she won’t let that drag her down, I know she’s going to be powerful, more now than ever. She’s powerful because she doesn’t meet people to approve what she does, she knows what she wants.”

“Listen to me, the most powerful people in this world do not need validation from anyone. Don’t base your success on someone else’s definition. It’s pointless to live the life you’ve worked hard
to build, you can’t take a minute to experience it. Don’t focus on what everyone else is doing and you’ll be fine. Don’t let fear control you. You control your fears. Always be willing to cross oceans for people cannot wonder if they’re worth enough. Life is not what you gain what you give. Things will be better in the morning. Maybe one day I’ll take my own advice. (and if I’m being completely honest, what my dad said about me made me cry for about two hours.)”

As I began to investigate the medium in which Abisha explores her identity in the tumblr page, I found myself looking at the meaning-making potential of digital technologies. For example, Jewitt (2012) discusses what she calls “the relationship between text and practice in the learning environment.” This boundary between text and practice is perhaps especially blurry in the context of digital technologies; there, the user is often making the text through their selections, remixing images and other resources, in the process of their own journey through a digital environment (Jewitt, 2012, p. 24).

Throughout Abisha’s posts, she was able to clearly communicate in a digital public realm the ways in which she saw the world. The following are a few of Abisha’s posts to her tumblr page. They are honest, revealing, and powerful notes from a young woman struggling with who she was and finding her place is in the world.

“The way they viewed me compared to how I viewed myself surprised me. I saw myself as a shuttle. I’ve become so accustomed to myself that I forget to take time to realize I’m to have potential. We all are just like butterflies. Butterflies can’t see their wings. They can’t see how truly beautiful they are, but everyone else can. People are like that as well.”
“I used to be afraid. Afraid of myself, of what others have to say about me. What others had to say about my appearance and how I was intoxicated to believe that because of certain attributes I had, it’s set limitations to what I loved. If I am insecure about something, someone has control over me. When I learn to love myself, the minute they mentioned it it has no effect over me. One of my favorite authors, James Baldwin once said, and I quote, “it took many years of vomiting up all the filth I been talk about myself and half believe before I was able to walk on earth as though I had a right to be here”.

“I don’t want to live in a world where we are constantly shackled by the norms of society, Where we’re expected to abide by the rules of what’s normal and what’s regular and what everyone is doing and how we are doing it and where they’re going and if you’re going to make it. There is no set geography, no set timeline, no set amount to life, its all just a jumble of mismatch to street signs and intersections and you can never really protect where you will end up. And if truth be told, I may and being completely lost, out of my god damn mind, putting myself on the road to ruin, but I will be living my truth. I’ll find my path and let it lead me when the time comes, but for now all I can do is live, even if it is dark and messy, that’s exactly what I plan to do.”

“Imagine the tragedy of not living. You must chase your life. You might feel that you’re never ready. You need to be able to love into be loved. Love is like crying, like writing, like dying. I have to do it alone. I know it’s tragic to be tender, I know it’s dangerous to be kind. I know it’s vicious to care. Listen to me. I know what’s going to happen to you. You don’t need a window,
you need a fire escape. You need a skylight to get where you’re going. I can’t tell you where but you need to go. Trust.”

When asked to read these ideas out loud to the class during her presentation, Abisha broke into tears. She could not read her work. She said “Miss, can’t everyone read it for themselves? This is so embarrassing. I feel so much better with writing it and having people read it.” There was such honesty and realness in all of Abisha’s written words, which was in contrast to her hesitancy to speak these words aloud. What had brought Abisha to this place of having strong emotions that could be expressed in her own words, but without the confidence to speak them aloud? What is the role of the teacher-researcher in helping students like Abisha to communicate their ideas, feelings, and writings to others?

**Theme 5: Reconciliation with the Decisions that Family has Made for their Lives**

“The most important things we have are the products of our thoughts” Samantha, January 2015

*Figure 4.12*
*Students watching Samantha’s video*
Samantha was a student whose work in this class represented the fifth analytical theme—the fluid nature of a young person’s identity and the reconciliation with who she was through much change and adversity. Samantha decided to approach her own Draw Your Identity (Figure 4.12, 4.13, 4.14) as a short video: she animated her own drawings on a white board, told a story about her family in a voice-over, and included music. The entire clip, seven minutes in length, followed Samantha’s journey as she discovered who she was and what had happened in her life.

Samantha expressed herself in the seven-minutes Draw Your Identity clip, in a way that was quite overwhelming for the other students in the class. The animated clip was illustrated with a series of images drawn by Samantha with her narration overtop.

Samantha’s video was a chronological narration, starting with her birth in the Phillipines continuing through her transient life living with only her father while her mother tried to establish herself and saved enough money to sponsor the family to move to Canada. The family
was reunited after ten years and Samantha’s journey began anew in a new land, learning a new language and learning to be a family again. In her video, she chronicled her joys, frustrations and her key learnings, all told in her optimistic manner.

One idea explored in Samantha’s identity video is about of having to define who she was. In the narration she stated, “I had come to a new place where students made assumptions about who I am. They asked questions like: Are you Chinese? You must be smart? Are you good at Math?” Samantha discusses how she was constantly bombarded with other people’s ideas of her and she was always in a position of having to describe who she was in terms of what she is not. As a newcomer to Canada, Samantha faced many stereotypes and assumptions about who she was.

The following series of still images from the video, explain the way in which Samantha experienced the feeling of loss that she felt when her mother moved to Canada under the caregiver program. In the first picture (Figure 4.15) she described how her family, all lived together, celebrated together and shared a close family bond. The second picture (Figure 4.16) described how Samantha felt when her mom left and how her family reacted with the ‘hole’ that was left in their family and the sad faces.
When viewing this video in class, fellow students burst into tears. For instance, after one boy in the class watched and listened to the clip, he walked up to Samantha, grabbed her and gave her a big, long hug. When he pulled away from her, with tears in his eyes, he said, “You have just described my life—but you are so much more positive about it. I have only anger about how this happened to me…. Thank you for showing me another way to look at it.”

The video ended with Samantha describing her journey to where she was at that time. She ended with the statement:
The most important things we have are the products of our thoughts. When we can translate our thoughts into words for other to hear, the healing begins. My family has healed and I am grateful for what I have learned so that I can share this with all of you. I am glad for my experiences as they have made me stronger in myself and with my family.

Through sharing this clip with others in the class, Samantha was able to share her understanding, growth and a sense of and peace with her family. In the weeks and days after viewing Samantha’s film, the boy who had hugged her began sitting beside her in class, and talking to her like she was a long lost friend. Samantha’s Draw Your Identity video allowed her to become someone in the class who others could connect with; her courage in exploring her own family history allowed them to share and explore their own identities differently.

This story illustrates the power of allowing students to explore their identities in the classroom space. Not only does it allow for ideas and concepts to be explored, it also creates room for very powerful and meaningful connections between students. When students can begin to see their story in another’s story, they can begin to make connections with others that were not expected. Through this connection, the path their life has taken can be held in a place of acceptance and understanding. Samantha’s feeling were also explored in her written description of the Iceberg activity: Samantha describes her perspective on life as “Do everything in love”. She explained: “My life experience that has had the biggest impact on me was when I migrated to Canada, I learned how to be independent and my views in life drastically changed. I feel that as an immigrant I try to approach each learning and new situation in love so that I can fully embrace
who I am”. In creating a space in the classroom where students were encouraged to bring their whole lives into their assignments, extraordinary moments were shared.

This theme of reconciliation with one’s changed identity was explored by another student in class who was also a very recent newcomer to Canada (within the last 3 years). Eleni, stated that she found the Where I’m From poem extremely easy to write, and she engaged in the process of writing with such enthusiasm. In her poem (below) Eleni described feeling like she was ‘living in two places all of the time’.

Where I’m From – Eleni

I am from the sea and the sun
From the smell of cement.
I am from the village trips every weekend
From the sea bass every summer.
I am from the Dalmatian dog that my mom took away.
I am from the playground as my background
I am from the red dyed eggs and the smell of roasted lamb.
From the presents under the tree and the family gathering every New Year’s Eve.
I am from the tradition of flying the kite every first of the May and eating bread and bean soup.
I am from seven periods of school
From the heated English classes after school.
I am from the school trip for three days in the capital.
I am from leaving everything behind and start from zero.
From the complicated TTC and construction all the time.
For many students like Areti, poetry allowed them to reconcile with their families’ process of movement and migration. In the poem, Areti explored her life back in Greece: ‘I am from the sea and the sun’ and ‘I am from the red dyed eggs and the smell of roasted lamb’. She also described her life in Canada: ‘I am from the complicated TTC and construction all the time’ and ‘I am from all types of school (day, night, Saturday).’ Interspersed are lines that show longing, such as ‘I am from leaving everything behind and start from zero’. Near the end of the poem, Areti combined her past and her present in the line, ‘I am from these moments, That’s become memories and exist to remind me’. By inviting students to critically engage in the process of writing and representing their cultural histories and bringing all parts of their lives to class in this way, teachers can begin to explore students nuanced relationships with identity and learning that occur in our classrooms every day.
In her final Staging Yourself project, Areti chose to create herself as a Greek Salad (Fig. 4.17). In this piece, she describes the ingredients from her home country that are included, as well as some Canadian ingredients—a true blend of old identity/new identity. When I asked her how it tasted, she said this: “You know, I used to like true, pure Greek Salad from my home country best, but, I have come to like the Canadian version of the salad”. In this quote, Areti was expressing her contentment in the place that she found herself in. It was still filled with longing for another time and place, but it was also coming to terms with who and where she was right then. She chose to explore herself in a way that acknowledged the many different layers to her identity in a way that both crossed ‘borderlands’ and accepted where she was in her life.

**Conclusion**

The five themes that emerged during this research clearly demonstrate ways in which students were curious to explore how they ‘read the world’ and how the world reads them (Freire, 1998a). The students had begun to make connections between school tasks, themselves and their lives in a way that was greater than themselves, beginning to place their lives and experiences in a larger
context. The connective thread in all this work is my interest, following the inspiration of practitioner inquiry, in the students’ voices, experiences and ideas. These ideas and creations of youth have been historically excluded in education and as I have documented in this chapter, they can be powerful tools for exploring issues related to identity. These findings demonstrate the powerful and transformative nature of inviting students’ lives and identity exploration into the classroom. In the following chapter, on I discuss the ways in which this work has impacted the lives of the students and my own practice as a teacher and researcher, and read across the examples to describe implications for the field.
Chapter 5: Discussion and Implications

In the Findings chapter, I presented the work of many of the students in the Bridges to University class that I facilitated as they explored their identities through critical literacy practices. In doing so, I presented how students drew upon their diverse experiences to create and communicate knowledge about themselves and the world around them. The students in this space were able to take a critical stance on literacy and to explore their own identities within the social, cultural and political contexts that they are engaged in and their own stances on those contexts. In this final chapter, I discuss the implications of this work for teachers, teacher-researchers, and students. I explore how this work lends support to arguments for the necessity of a shift in classroom engagement for both teachers and students. This is followed by a brief discussion of the limitations of this study and opportunities for further research and concluding thoughts.

The secondary students in my classroom have demonstrated that, when given the opportunity to bring all aspects of their lives into the classroom they can engage in deep, critical and transformative education. The pedagogical strategies in the classroom—such as the diverse range of texts and communication modalities, visual and written work, and students’ input into class material and collaboration with each others’ work—created a space in which students could bring their own and each others’ voices, experiences, and stories to bear on their learning.

Teacher and Teacher-Researcher

In the process of completing this study, I have experienced an enormous shift personally from how I was as a teacher in my earlier classroom experiences to where I am now as an educator.
Much of this shift occurred over time, and involved trying out new approaches, often with variable success. My most recent experiences as a teacher-researcher have allowed me to deeply engage in taking an inquiry stance in my practice: this has been transformative for me. In the process of conducting this research, I found that the more that I embraced teaching as a relational act (as discussed in prior chapters), the more that I was able to shift from being solely the teacher in this classroom, to being a teacher-researcher who attempted to document my own and my students’ learning in the process of completing this study. This research experience has a lot of implications for me as a teacher and speaks to the expectations that I have of my students and myself.

I have always wanted to create a classroom space where students felt safe and supported in their learning. By working on the relationships that I had with the students, I found that as soon as they felt a connection with me—e.g., when they saw me as understanding the struggles they experienced and documented in their writing and artwork—they were inspired and motivated to explore and engage with their own abilities, voices, expressions and experiences. I am reminded of how Freire and Macedo (1995) describe the role of educators as having the “right to think and dream about a world that is less oppressive and more humane towards the oppressed” (p. 390). This study created a space to explore what this means for me as a secondary teacher in an urban setting.

This work has highlighted the importance of allowing students to explore their own cultural histories and identities in the context of secondary school. This has implications both for teaching as well as for teacher education and professional development. Allowing and creating
space for this kind of exploration by students, also encourages teachers to do their own work around identity. In this classroom space, I engaged in each of the activities with the students. A core principal of culturally responsive pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 2004) is encouraging the identity of the teacher to be brought into the classroom space to be used as a place for connection as well to create understanding and awareness of others. This has the potential to lead to a deeper understanding of power relationships in the classroom, and supports the importance of more democratic teaching relationships, something that Freire (e.g., 1998a) has highlighted.

An integral component of this work is that it required a shift in focus from the teacher to the students in two ways. First, I had to give up the control in the class to allow the issues related to identity to emerge, before I could make the curriculum connections. This meant that I no longer could plan out and photocopy lessons weeks ahead—I had to go day by day and allow the themes to emerge. An example of this is Samantha’s Draw Your Identity project (as discussed in the previous chapter). When Samantha presented her video to the class, we were entering our unit related to class inequalities. From her Staging Yourself video, I was able to take up the idea of transient labour and specifically her family’s story of coming to Canada. Through this exploration three other students in class told their stories of how their families also had come to Canada with the goal of finding work. In the past, I might have addressed similar issues by looking at minimum wage issues in Canada (an important topic to learn about). However by making personal connections to the subject matter, the students were thoroughly engaged.

The second pedagogical challenge that emerged was related to trust. In the process of teaching in this way, I had to learn to trust my students and give up my control of the topics just as much
as they had to trust me and each other enough to share aspects of their identities and personal stories. By standing back and allowing students to explore the range of difficult and personal issues they took up in their work, I saw how much they enjoyed the freedom. It was as if they were looking to me to give them permission to explore. By creating a classroom space where both teacher and student were able to bring aspects of themselves to class that they would normally not discuss allowed for trust to be built. I found myself wondering what they would think when I would reveal an aspect of myself that is often kept hidden in my teaching practice. In this space, revealing who we were allowed for us to connect and begin to share our stories.

I was surprised at the range of entry points that the students demonstrated towards exploring their identities. More surprising was that the same student often shifted their entry in their understandings between the 5 themes depending on the work that was being completed. By creating a variety of multimodal explorations, students could engage in aspects of their identity that would feel fitting to the modality. I think that this movement among themes demonstrated that the medium that the students chose to represent themselves is as important as the message when exploring identity work. I was also surprised at how eager the students were to explore these issues and topics. I anticipated some push back or resentment from some of the students. I had taught many of these students before and was waiting for some critical feedback but it never came. I am not sure if this research were to be attempted again within the same context, that the results would be similar. Such generalization is not the purpose of practitioner research of this kind. I would like to think that the strength of this is in how this work allowed my students and I to build stronger relationships, which supported them in the creation of the work I share in this thesis.
As a social science teacher, I never considered myself as teacher as literacy, I had some of the same aversions that my students had towards literacy. Throughout this research project I was able to engage with students in their understanding of themselves and how they read the world. By embracing Freire’s (1970) pedagogy around allowing students to read the world around them as a tool for understanding issues related to their lives, I have become a teacher of critical literacy.

As demonstrated in the previous chapters, while the students’ experiences were diverse and their entry points to our conversations varied, they all had to trust in the process that I set up in the class. Both of these factors have influenced me greatly as an educator and have shaped my approach to my future teaching. There were many moments in class when I was able to sit back and the class would take shape all by itself. Students would ask each other questions, make links to what we have done before in class, hold space for students to reflect and create spaces of discovery. All of this happened outside of my facilitation—I became a (very) willing participant in the process. It is through this experience that I have this deep understanding about trusting the knowledge that the students bring with them as well as their ability to engage with each other and class material in a respectful and trusting manner. It is through this learning that I will bring these experiences to other classroom spaces that I teach in.

**Student Learners**

Over the course of our work together, I often asked students to come to class and perform in ways that were contradictory to what they were asked to do in their other classes.
I am drawn to two of the students and their relationship to coming to Canada—Thao and Areti (the ideas and literacy work of both presented in the Findings Chapter). They both came to Canada for a better life and each of them struggled with how to maintain both their ‘home’ identity and their ‘Canadian’ identity. In her Where I’m From poem, Areti describes this tension in relation to her feelings of longing and struggle: “I am from all types of school (day, night, Saturday), I am from a room for four, from following traditions from another continent. I am from these moments, that become memories and exist to remind me.” Similarly, in a conversation with me, Thao told me that she wondered if she should write a version of her Where I’m From poem in Viet as well. When I asked why, she described wanting her parents to be able to read her poem and understand her better. She then went on to say, “I don’t think that I can ever do it [write in Viet] because my Viet is not good enough and I would just ask them to try to help me translate everything.” These examples highlight how both of these students are exploring what Anzaldúa (1987) described as borderlands: the movement of one identity with another based on temporal and spatial situations. These students speak to a way of understanding themselves and their families that is complex. By understanding all of these pieces they are beginning to see themselves more ‘whole’ than ‘bits of pieces’. They are understanding their identities as hybrids and fluid, yet remain whole. Both of these students also struggle with the role that language plays in their lives—their home languages, their school languages, and the language they use to talk to their peers. This is related to Gee’s (2008) notion of Discourse, in that our language is understood to be more than words, but includes the complex interactions that are socially, politically and culturally connected to our identities. Both Thao and Areti are in the process of struggling to make sense of the complexities of their lives through language. Their
work, as well as the work of other students I have explored throughout this study, illustrate how multiple, often competing, discourses play out in students’ lives, and how critical literacy work based on trusting and caring relationships with teachers and peers can help students to understand and accept these aspects of themselves.

I am struck by the ways in which students engaged in this identity work and made it a part of their lives. I overheard a conversation while we were working in class: one student was talking through what her reaction would be if she were to become a nurse and a transgendered person would come into her care. In the conversation, she described how she would react from the perspectives of all of the social locators we had talked about in class—she discussed how her Somali community felt about trans people and how Islam felt about trans people. She was genuinely working through this issue at a level that was deeper that the other conversations that she with her peers. In the process, she was negotiating her identity in relation to social justice issues. Student’s identities are inextricably linked to the multiple perspectives on social justice issues. Critical literacy work created a space for students to engage in issues related to social justice in the classroom (and in their lives) connected to their identities.

I am also aware of how students who were a part of this class felt about going to other classes. One day when leaving the class, Gon said to me, “You know miss, I hate going to math class after this. My math teacher says that he doesn’t care about who I am, or my social locators. Are you proud of me for using that term, Miss? He told me that he is here to teach me math only, not to learn anything about who I am.” Other students have mentioned that they have to do a ‘mental shift’ in preparing for another class after this one. I wonder how much I set my students up for
failure in other classes after they engage in a class that allowed them to bring their “whole selves” into the classroom. What are implications of this for my own or other teachers’ attempts to invite students to explore issues of identity through critical literacy in the classroom?

The lessons that can be drawn from this can be explored in two ways: students’ resilience as learners in a variety of spaces and the efficacy of teacher student relationships. Students are incredibly resilient in their learning as they are managing differing expectations in a number of classes throughout the day. They understand that what is acceptable in one class might not be acceptable in another. This allows them to be able to engage in a variety of spaces which can lead to strength and success in being able to navigate learning spaces, it can also lead to failure and confusion in the differing learning spaces. A dialogue among teacher needs to talk place recognizing the differing expectations and the possibility for success and failure. Teacher student relationships are central to all learning. As described in previous chapters, pedagogy that facilitates sharing and growth between teachers and students results in transformative learning experiences for both the teacher and the student. Lessons learned from engaging in culturally relevant pedagogy and teaching as a relational act provide an incredible set of tools for creating a classroom space that is full of trust and connections. Student learning around identity through critical literacy in this thesis has provided a solid testimonial on the power of learning in spaces where teacher and learner are engaged in the process of discovery together.

**Shift in Engagement**

As I have highlighted previously, by shifting my approach to the class, students’ increased levels of engagement became evident. By engaging in practitioner research in a space where the class itself was shaped and designed by the research, this shift in engagement demonstrates the ways
in which a critical approach to students’ identity changed the outcome for the students as well as the teacher-researcher. In the process, I critically engaged with the question posed by Campano (2007): “Can there be genuine and open conversation when children feel vulnerable to authority?” (p. 54). Practitioner inquiry and the pedagogical tools described in the previous chapters allowed both the students and myself to engage in open dialogue. By engaging in dialogue in class around issues that could be sensitive or controversy, many issues arise.

Bickmore (2014) describes the various ways in which students and teachers choose to engage in sensitive topics around peace building and democratic education in Canadian classrooms. In classroom spaces where teachers are discussing conflictual topics and situations, Bickmore finds that “Teachers frequently report feeling unprepared to lead such discussions, and yet teacher professional development rarely addresses this challenge” (2014, p.553). Dialogue in the Bridges to University classroom includes the space to engage in these exact topics in a manner that is respectful and engaging to all who are involved.

Engaging in conversations around difficult topics filtered into the ways in which students engaged with myself in the class. At the end of a particularly long week, Thomas approached my desk as the bell rang. He said, “You know Miss, I think it is cool that you are also sharing things about your life. I mean, when I first walked into this class I thought you were one thing, and now, well, you are just so different than what I first thought, and that is a good thing…. Trust me.” I take from that comment that Thomas felt comfortable to tell me that his assumptions had changed about me throughout the period of the course, and that this might not have been possible if the course had been structured differently. For example, he may have felt
like he was placed in a ‘vulnerable position’ if I did not share aspects of my own life and identity, or took an authoritarian stance to what he said.

Throughout this research process not only did my own engagement with students shift, but it also allowed students to shift how they engaged with each other in classroom spaces. Inviting students into a process of inquiry, including inviting them to learn about my own process as a teacher-researcher, allowed them to begin to learn from each other in a constructive way. By participating, reading, and listening to what was produced in the classroom, students’ experiences, lives, and identities changed in ways that they might not have imagined before engaging in this work. This learning speaks to the importance of believing that the students themselves are ‘knowledge makers’ who possess vast ‘funds of knowledge’ that can create spaces for peer-to-peer and teacher learning (Moll et al., 1991). By centering students’ identity narratives as a core foundation of the course, all other learning happened through the lens of their experiences. I think, for example, of how our class explored issues of immigration and migration through the window of Samantha’s family narrative of coming to Canada. Moments like those, when students find connections between their own histories and those moments where they learn about someone who has experienced a life so differently than themselves, are evidence that critical identity work allows students to learn as much about themselves and the world around them as they are learning from each other.

While doing this fluid research, I read a lot of literature related to youth identity and youth engagement with identity issues. As a teacher, I am very comfortable around teenagers and can engage them with where they are at regardless of their interests. That said, after spending a
whole school year with teenagers engaged in the process of using critical literacy to explore their own identities, I do not feel as though I am closer to understanding youth identity formation, except to say that I have learned that the lives of students are fluid, ambiguous, and often contradictory in nature. There is an honesty that these students—and resultant myself as teacher—experienced in the midst of our realizations of our own identities and how they can shift spatially and temporally. All the students in my class demonstrated noticeable shifts in their understanding of their social locators and of how these impact their lives. While I can only imagine how this experience will influence them in the future, I believe that this identity work will take root, and that students will experience the impact in a number of years as they move forward with their lives.

**Limitations**

While this study went beyond any expectations that I had for the research, it is not without its limitations. So much of this study depended upon the interactions between students, between students and teacher, and between students and the material that they were learning. It is difficult to make generalizations that would suggest how what was done in one classroom space would be solid pedagogically in another classroom space. For example, this research was conducted in a social science classroom, in which students entered with the mindset of critical inquiry as the discipline encourages. This same study may not be translatable to a math or a science classroom space or a business or computers class. That is not to say that there are not principles to look for when engaging in research into one practice. Principles of honouring students as knowledge makers in classroom space go hand in hand with the principles of teaching as a relational act. Those can be translatable into any classroom space but are often hard to teach to teachers who are not willing to engage in critically reflect on their practice.
Teaching is a relational activity, as I described in a previous chapter (e.g., Ladson-Billings, 1995; Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009). If a teacher does not attempt to engage with that idea, with the dynamics of teacher/student exploration in the classroom space, then this approach to critical literacy is not easily transferable to all teaching spaces. This work was informed by the interests of the students and their willingness to explore where they were from, the stories of their lives, their limitations, and their longings. As a classroom teacher in this space, I needed to meet students where they were at and be willing to make changes to the lessons plans that fit with the mandated curriculum. This inquiry-based approach requires that a teacher let go of the control and embrace the uncertainty, something not many teachers are willing to do.

This research project was completed in a diverse classroom—linguistically, culturally, ethnically, and religiously. This created a dynamic and fluid space within which students and teacher could bring their understandings of themselves, a space in which there were many similarities and differences among us. I am not sure how this would pedagogically play out in a classroom space that was more homogenous. Would a more homogenous space alienate those with visible differences? An important tenant of culturally responsive pedagogy is that students’ diversities (visible and not) are seen a valuable resources in classroom space. In a more homogenous space, conversation would need to focus around surfacing the diversities.

Another limitation of this research is that the teacher and students were together one class period a day for the entire school year. This allowed for a lot of time to develop relationships and to create a safe space to explore the concepts of identity, teacher-student relationships, as well as
students’ understandings of critical literacy. The way that the students were able to interact with each other was unique to this classroom space. I often would hear students say ‘this would only happen in this class’ or ‘no other teacher wants to get to know us like the teacher in this class’. Being able to have so much time with the students allowed them to engage into class material as they believe that I was a teacher who wanted them to empower themselves to critically engage in their lives. A shorter class would have impacted the methods of instruction and the time that it would take for students to engage in this process of discovery. Shorter time would mean less time to create the space for trust and connections. It should be noted that this inquiry-based critical literacy pedagogy still could be done in a shorter timeframe, but it would require considerable reworking of how classroom lessons and assignments unfolded.

The Bridges to University classroom is also a unique space in that students self-select to be in the class. They are all students who have good attendance, and are keen to work towards two high school credits and one university credit over the course of the year. They are not always the most academically strong or outgoing students, but they are enthusiastic about looking towards their future. Even though some of them struggled with the academic component of the class, they all wanted to be there and were willing to participate. The class has a reputation in the school as involving a lot of work and that discourages those students who do not want to do much schoolwork or those looking for an easy grade.

A unique dynamic was set up in the class by having their classroom teacher also be the researcher. In the role of classroom teacher, I am responsible for formative and summative assessment and evaluation to give them a grade in the class. In the role as researcher, I gathered
work, recorded classroom discussions, and commented in a Classroom Reflective log of my own. I made it very clear to the students that I was not going to analyze any of the materials that we did in class for my research until their course was over. I did not want them to get the idea that there was added pressure to perform outside of the norm because I was also researching the process between teacher and student. While being an insider-outsider in the classroom space that was facilitated by the practitioner inquiry dynamic (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009), I was able to openly discuss what it was like with my students during this process. Three months into the research, I asked the class if they noticed anything or felt like I was researching within the class. One student responded honestly, stating, “Miss, at first I wanted to sound good on tape, so I was always trying to say something smart, but that became too exhausting, so I gave up and just became me.”

There are some bigger limitations of this study that should be mentioned. Although practitioner inquiry helped me to engage in a manner that allowed students’ identities to surface and challenged some of the work that was being done in a class, it still was a class within which students were receiving marks. This could have influenced how some students interacted with the course material. In terms of my own interpretation of the data, it is possible that my own bias in my interpretations of the student work was present. As a part time Masters student, the analysis of the work would be done in short periods of time which could also have influenced my interpretation of the data.

**Further Study**

When engaging in critical literacy work that encourages the real issues in students’ lives to come to the forefront, one cannot anticipate the results. The kinds of conversations that occurred in
this classroom space during this research study allowed for students and teacher alike to be surprised by the results. One area in which further work could be done is around understanding the role that digital media have in student identity. One thing that surfaced in the course of my research but was not explored in this thesis was the ways in which students would express their identities in the digital realms. An example of this was Abisha’s tumblr page and Samantha’s video, which she published on YouTube. When I asked the students how much time they spent on digital platforms a day, the answers ranged from four to twelve hours. Their digital identity is one that uses a different language and different notions of private and public, all of which could be issues to explore in another study.

As a teacher in this class over the course of a whole school year, there was so much work to draw from in this research study, from the actual student work, to my classroom reflection logs, to the recorded classroom activities. The sheer amount of data I collected made representing the data I included in the write up of my study very difficult. Further analysis could be done utilizing the coded data already collected in my classroom, which may include but is not limited to: the role that the mode of expression- both digital and print based plays in identity expression, the function that teachers’ and students’ classroom conversations have in the uncovering of identity roles, and how multimedia and digital technologies influence the shape of students’ identity displays online. All of this analysis would allow a teacher-researcher to further understand all the variables that influence students’ engagement in critical literacy related to identity making. A few bigger questions have emerged from this study that would be further this research, among them:

How do students digital online presence influence their understanding of their identities?
What is the level of engagement that students have when they are allowed to express themselves in multimodal ways?

What is the role of critical literacy work that is done outside of an English classroom?

How do students move between methods of expression? Are some of the core characteristics lost when you move from digital to print methods, or vice versa?

What impact does practitioner research have on the teacher in the classroom? As a teacher engaged in practitioner research can you choose when and how to engage with it?

**Conclusion**

In this research, I set out to explore what would happen when students bring aspects of their lives into the classroom to engage in critical literacy work. For each student in my class, their journey was unique. They entered into our exploration of identity issues from where they were in their understanding at a particular fluid moment in time. As I have attempted to document in this study, the students involved in this research demonstrated their strength and ability to challenge assumptions and ideas related to their identities, and shifted their understandings of themselves and others in the process. It is my hope that research projects like this can open dialogue at many different levels about the complexities of students’ lives, as well as the incredible links that can be made when teachers and students are willing to take an inquiry stance on identity issues in the classroom.
Appendix

Appendix A: I am Poem and Where I’m From

This is a poem that can be used to describe any character, setting, idea or concept. The possibilities where you can use it with your class are endless. There is a prescribed template where students fill in the blanks as inspired by Christensen (2000)

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**Writing an "I Am" Poem**

**MODEL**

**FIRST STANZA**
- I am (2 special characteristics you have)
- I wonder (something of curiosity)
- I hear (an imaginary sound)
- I see (an imaginary sight)
- I want (an actual desire)
- I am (the first line of the poem repeated)

**SECOND STANZA**
- I pretend (something you actually pretend to do)
- I feel (a feeling about something imaginary)
- I touch (an imaginary touch)
- I worry (something that bothers you)
- I cry (something that makes you sad)
- I am (the first line of the poem repeated)

**THIRD STANZA**
- I understand (something that is true)
- I say (something you believe in)
- I dream (something you dream about)
- I try (something you really make an effort about)
- I hope (something you actually hope for)
- I am (the first line of the poem repeated)

**EXAMPLE**
- I am polite and kind
- I wonder about my kids’ future
- I hear a unicorn’s cry
- I see Atlantis
- I want to do it all over again
- I am polite and kind
- I pretend I am a princess
- I feel an angel's wings
- I touch a summer's cloud
- I worry about violence
- I cry for my Gram
- I am polite and kind
- I understand your love for me
- I say children are our future
- I dream for a quiet day
- I try to do my best
- I hope the success of my children
- I am polite and kind.

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**Where I’m From**

The purpose of this activity is to give students a creative opportunity to express their cultural background. By actively participating in this activity students will be able to explore and understand the self perception of culture, be able to communicate to others their experience and background, and connect to their past and recognize the impact it has on today. This is an activity where students should be fully present and be able to participate at their own comfort level. While introducing this activity I asked students to push themselves outside of their comfort zone—as I believe that the most learning happens when we are a little bit uncomfortable. We explored as a class a few examples of the Where I’m From poems and it was discussed how these homes can be interpreted in any way. The examples read together as a class allowed the
students the opportunity to reflect on their own background and put into their own words what it means to them. Students were asked to recall important moments in their family and in their lives and to try to incorporate them into the poem. The students were required to write a minimum of 20 lines and a maximum of 30 lines and were encouraged to include specific details and images throughout their poem. This is inspired by the work of Linda Christensen (2000).
Appendix B: Staging Yourself

Who you are is who you define yourself to be. The Staging Yourself project will be the final culminating project looking at your identity. You are to build from all of the classroom activities to Stage Yourself.

The medium is as important as the message- so take your time figuring out what it is that you actually want to present.

Your Staging Yourself Project can be any of the following, but not limited to:

- Series of curated images
- PowerPoint compilation
- Song compilation- with annotation
- Creative expose
- Digital file
- Podcast
- Your choice

Please come and talk to me before you commit to your staging yourself activity.
Appendix C: Classroom Activities Related to Identity

**Diversity Iceberg**— Students are to imagine themselves as an iceberg. 10% of what we can see of the iceberg is above the surface and so are many of the social locators such as skin colour, age and gender. Using the template listed below, students are asked to create their own identity iceberg which allows them to explore the 20+ social locators.

### Exploring your own Diversity Iceberg Model

**Assignment #1**

Context: Identity refers to the essential character that identifies somebody, the set of characteristics that belong uniquely to oneself (e.g. identity card). But on the other hand identity refers to ‘sameness’, the fact of being the same or alike (e.g. ‘identical’). Identity is what at the same time distinguishes us from others AND makes us the same as others.

Tasks:
1. Using the exemplar shown to you in the previous class and shown in the diagram below, create/draw your own Diversity Identity Iceberg which illustrates the various components of your identity. You are to draw your work on a piece of chart paper.
2. Accompanying your diagram, you are to write a descriptive paragraph which provides additional background/context to explain the various components of your identity. I am most interested in reading about what components of your identity are more visible and which are more hidden and why.

Evaluation: You will be evaluated holistically on your work based on the clarity of iceberg diagram /10 marks and on the ways in which you can describe your Identity iceberg in your paragraph /10 marks.

![Diversity Iceberg Diagram](image)

**Common denominator**—this is an activity where students partner up with another student in the class and they have one minute to talk to each other and find one thing that they have in common.
Each of the groups share it with the class. Each of the payers then partner up with another pair and have 1-2 mins find something that they have in common. These groups then share their ideas with the class. Each of the groups of four them partner with another group of four and have 2 to 4 minutes to find something that they all have in common. They then share this with the class. This activity continues until the whole class is together and they are finding the one thing that they all have in common. This activity is a great way for students to get to know each other and find what they have in common with each other. So often students are in the position where they find what is so different about each other.

**Online Identity**—Using a mind web, create an online identity map that located yourself at the centre and lists from the centre all of the places in which you have had an online presence. It could be active or inactive (please list if it is active). Create connections between online sites that might communicate with each other. Create this for as many sites that you can remember.
Appendix D: Informed Consent for Participants and their Families and School Administrator

Letter of Informed Consent for Participants and Their Families

Dear Student and Your Parents/Guardians,

My name is Airin Stephens, and I am a teacher at cybridge@George Harvey Collegiate Institute as well as a master’s student at Ontario Institute of Studies in Education at The University of Toronto. I would like to invite you to participate in a research project. The purpose of this research is to look at how students engage with issues of social justice and identity in the Bridges to University classroom and explore how teachers might use their classrooms as spaces to engage in these issues.

You have been invited to participate in this research because of your involvement in the Bridges to University class. This research is a chance for me to learn more about your creativity and engagement with social justice and identity issues, and inform how other teachers can address issues of social justice and identity in their own classrooms. I hope that by sharing this work with other educators, they can learn how youth can inform classroom teaching. Participation in this research will include multiple interviews over the semester about your individual notions of social justice and identity making, including your experiences inside and outside of school. I am also interested in seeing any examples of your written work, drawings and resources that you produce in class related to identity making and social justice issues.

Your participation in this research is entirely voluntary. For example, you may refuse to answer any questions during the interview, to stop the interview at any time or withdraw from the study at any time for any reason, even after you have consented to participate. Please review this letter with your parents/guardians.

If you are willing to participate, please sign the form below and have your parents/guardians sign as well. Signing this form means that you and your family grant permission for written, artistic, and other digital work you have chosen to share with me (your classroom teacher-researcher) to be included in this research. If at any point you would like any material NOT used as part of the research, please let us know. As a research participant, your parent/guardian can contact the University of Toronto Office of Research Ethics at ethics.review@utoronto.ca or 416-946-3273 at any time if you have questions about your rights as a participant.

If you have any questions about any aspect of this project, please do not hesitate to email me at airin.stephens@utoronto.ca or rob.simon@utoronto.ca, or respond in writing on this form.

Sincerely,

Airin Stephens
ACL School Leadership and Transitions- GHCI
TDSB employee and Current MA student working with Dr. Rob Simon

Dr. Rob Simon
Assistant Professor, Multiliteracies in Education
Department of Curriculum, Teaching and Learning
University of Toronto/OISE
252 Bloor Street West, Toronto, ON, Canada M5V 1J6
rob.simon@utoronto.ca

Name

YES I agree to be interviewed and for examples of my classwork, art and writing to be included in this research. I understand all recordings and work collected will be kept confidential and stored in a locked cabinet at University of Toronto, or secured digitally on a private, encrypted hard drive, only to be decrypted when in use by the researcher, and will be disguised in any written reports.

Signature __________________________ Date __________________

Signature of Parent/Guardian __________________________ Date __________________

Email/Phone of Parent/Guardian __________________________
Letter of Informed Consent for School Administrator

Dear ____________,

I am asking for your consent to allow myself to research the work of students in the Bridges to University class. This proposed study investigates how adolescents in a high school program called Bridges to University address issues of identity and social justice in the classroom.

This research is a chance for myself, to learn more about how the incredible work created by students in the Bridges to University class around issues of identity and social justice. I hope that by documenting this work, other educators can learn how everyday literacy practices like self reflection and identity activities can shape curriculum and instruction in schools.

I plan to get informed consent for this research from children and their parents/guardians who are involved in the Bridges to University class. These students and their parents/guardians will be fully informed of their rights under the University of Toronto’s Office of Research Ethics. Participation in this research is entirely voluntary. This research will in no way interfere with or negatively impact the quality or content of classroom instruction. Any reference to the school, children, and teachers will be blinded in all research reports.

Signing this form means that you grant permission for written and artistic work, including audio and video recordings that students at your school have voluntarily shared with myself (their teacher) to be included in this research. If at any point you would like any material NOT used as part of the research, please let me know. You can contact the University of Toronto Office of Research Ethics at ethics.review@utoronto.ca or 416-946-3273 at any time if you have questions about participant rights.

If you have any questions about any aspect of this project, please do not hesitate to email me at airin.stephens@utoronto.ca, or rob.simon@utoronto.ca or to respond in writing on this form.

Sincerely,

Airin Stephens
ACL School Leadership and Transitions- GHCI
TDSB employee and Current MA student working with Dr. Rob Simon

Dr. Rob Simon
Assistant Professor, Multiliteracies in Education
Department of Curriculum, Teaching and Learning
University of Toronto/OISE
252 Bloor Street West, Toronto, ON, Canada M5V 1J6
rob.simon@utoronto.ca
YES I agree for interviews with students, as well as examples of student art and writing to be included in this research study and understand all recordings and work collected will be kept confidential and stored in a locked cabinet at University of Toronto, or secured digitally on a private, encrypted hard drive, only to be decrypted when in use by the researcher and will be disguised in any written reports.

Name

__________________________________________  Date __________

Signature ____________________________________________
Appendix E: Classroom Reflection Log

Data Collection Forms

Template to guide the collection of observations and field notes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Descriptive Information</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Date:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Setting:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Actions:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Behaviours:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conversations Observed:</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

General Guidelines for the Descriptive Content

• Describe the physical setting.
• Describe the social environment and the way in which participants interacted within the setting. This may include patterns of interactions, frequency of interactions, direction of communication patterns [including non-verbal communication], and decision-making patterns.
• Describe the participants and their roles in the setting.
• Describe, as best you can, the meaning of what was observed from the perspectives of the participants.
• Record exact quotes or close approximations of comments that relate directly to the purpose of the study.
• Describe any impact you might have had on the situation you observed.

Template for reflection

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Descriptive Information</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Date:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Setting:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reflecting upon:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thoughts:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ideas:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Questions:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Concerns:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aha’s:</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

General Guidelines for the Reflective Content

• Note ideas, impressions, thoughts, and/or any criticisms you have about what you observed.
• Include any unanswered questions that have arisen from analyzing the observation data as well as thoughts that you may have regarding any future observations.
• Clarify points and/or correct mistakes and misunderstandings in other parts of field notes.
• Include insights about what you have observed and speculate as to why you believe specific phenomenon occurred.
References


