USING A CRITICAL REFLECTION FRAMEWORK AND COLLABORATIVE INQUIRY TO IMPROVE TEACHING PRACTICE: AN ACTION RESEARCH PROJECT

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Abstract
This action research reports on a three-year collaborative learning process among three teachers. We used current literature and a critical reflection framework to understand why our teaching approaches were not resulting in increased student learning. This allowed us to examine our previously unrecognized and uninterrupted—and often, problematic—beliefs and values. Our findings revealed key barriers related to unexamined judgments, beliefs, assumptions, and expectations that affected our ability to facilitate effective learning. This encouraged conceptual change and led to a transformation in our teaching practice: We became more socioculturally responsive teachers. Our findings led us to conclude that professional learning needs to move beyond the acquisition of skills and strategies, and include the critical reflection necessary to deconstruct problematic beliefs and thought-patterns that can impede student learning.

Learning begins when students feel their realities are reflected in teaching. This paper reports on a three-year informal action research project that I conducted with two other elementary teachers in a rural community in Newfoundland, Canada from 2010–2013. Our goal was to identify why our teaching practices and strategies were not achieving the improved student learning we expected. Our project involved a systematic three-year collaborative inquiry, guided by a critical reflection framework (Larrivee, 2000). Throughout the process, we discovered that unconscious biases and thought-patterns—ones we had never questioned or investigated—were affecting our teaching. We held unrecognized and uninterrupted beliefs about our students, their families, the school community, and our ideologies about schooling and educating; these beliefs created barriers that negatively
influenced our ability to facilitate increased student learning, and thus hindered our overall approach to teaching.

As a result, we focused our action research on deconstructing the blind spots in our knowledge construction and sense-making that was negatively affecting our teaching and learning expectations. We sought to fundamentally shift our thinking and practices by following Larrivee’s (2000) critical reflection framework, which evolved into a three-stage research process. First, we conducted a literature review to investigate the potential disconnect between the research-based evidence of educational best practices and our current teaching practices. In the second stage, we critically reflected on our own teaching practices and biases, before attempting to shift our perceptions and transform our practices and beliefs by adopting a more autonomous approach to teaching in Stage 3. The overall goal of this project was to become socioculturally responsive teachers—in other words, educators who can respond aptly and appropriately to the social and cultural needs of our students in our teaching practice. In this article, I not only provide the details of our action research project, but also demonstrate that collaborative, long-term learning opportunities have the potential to engage educators in the explicit process of critical reflection—and, ultimately, improve student outcomes.

BACKGROUND
This action project was borne out of frustration: My teaching partners and I were struggling to generate increased student learning. As we monitored our students’ learning using a range of assessments, the students often demonstrated and confirmed that they were not improving. During the three annual reviews prior to our action research project, we were told our students’ test scores remained well below the average provincial level in language arts and mathematics. Like most teachers, our approach to professional development involved attending the sessions offered through our school board and beyond to gain new teaching ideas. We implemented some of these new skills and used new resources. Despite these efforts, it appeared that nothing we did seem to have a positive—or, at least, a noticeable—impact on student learning. This frustration became the starting point of our action research. We asked ourselves two fundamental questions: a) what is missing in our professional development and learning that could improve our practices, and b) what reasons could explain the misalignment in teaching and learning?

My positionality was an important factor in this project: When we began in 2010, I was both a practicing academic and a teaching practitioner. I had also just begun working with the Knowledge Network of Applied Educational Research (KNAER), which is an Ontario Ministry-funded initiative intended to increase knowledge mobilization between research and practice. As a result, my experience placed me in a unique position: I had an increased understanding of theories, research-based evidence, and connecting research to practice. As such, I was able to bring an established critical mindset and academic perspective to the project.
**Key Terms and Theoretical Concepts**

**Key Terms**

I use several key terms throughout this paper that warrant careful definition. They are listed below.

*Professional learning and professional development.* Educational practitioners often use these terms interchangeably, which creates confusion and, more significantly, an ideological problem in the discourse. Recent academic literature, however, has argued for a firm delineation between the two. On the one hand, *professional development* is primarily associated with skill acquisition and development. Typically, professional development involves short, one- to two-day seminars and workshops and, according to existing research, has little long-term impact on education praxis and student outcomes (Hargreaves, 1995; Larrivee, 2000; The New Teacher Project [TNTP], 2015). On the other hand, *professional learning*, while focused on many of the same ideas and goals as professional development, encourages interactive learning strategies and includes space for more long-term, abstract practices such as critical reflection (Earl & Hannay, 2011). For our project, this is an important terminological distinction.

*Knowledge construction and sense-making.* These two key terms should also not be considered interchangeable. Knowledge construction is related to the *processes* people use to construct meaning, which help them explain and interpret reality and investigate and determine how implicit assumptions, frames of references, perspectives, and biases influence the ways in which knowledge is constructed. It is heavily influenced by one’s position within particular social, economic, and political systems and structure of society (Banks, 1995, 2014). Sense-making, on the other hand, is the *frames of reference* grounded in both individual and social experiences a person uses to direct interpretations of situations or events (Weick, 1995).

*Deficit thinking.* The term *deficit thinking* will be explained in greater detail in the findings section, but it is important to provide a cursory explanation here to contextualize its use in education. Deficit thinking uses comparisons to draw attention to children’s inequalities, based on a prescribed standard in schools. Therefore, the ideology is based on looking at children and seeing what is missing rather than seeing what is there (Flessa, 2007).

**Theoretical Concepts**

The goal of our action research was to increase student learning by becoming better teachers. More specifically, we sought to develop a new level of thinking that would lead to “deep and tacit knowledge that resides in thoughts and beliefs” (Earl & Hannay, 2011, p. 192); we believed that doing so would enable us to, as teachers, become more socioculturally responsive to the individualized needs of our students. This concept guided our action research and aligns with *conceptual change theory* (Strike & Posner, 1982, 1985): “An alteration of conceptions that are in some way central and organizing in thought and learning” (Strike & Posner, 1982, p. 148). As scholars have argued, people have a tendency to resist—either consciously or unconsciously—conceptual change (Bedard, 1999; Picower,
Egbo has suggested (2009) that the most predominant barrier to conceptual change is one's personal beliefs and value systems, as these often block pluralistic thinking. Transcending these barriers, she argued, “Requires a deep analysis of the construction of one’s perceptions and sense-making skills” (2009, p. 21).

Another critical concept in this research is, as mentioned earlier, socioculturally responsive teaching. According to Villegas and Lucas (2002), culturally responsive teachers strive to achieve six salient characteristics: a) becoming socially conscious; b) positively viewing students from diverse backgrounds; c) seeing oneself as responsible for and capable of bringing about educational change for students; d) understanding how learners construct knowledge and being capable of promoting learners; e) knowing about the lives of one’s students; and f) using this knowledge to design instruction that builds and stretches student knowledge (2002, p. 21). For us to incorporate these characteristics into our practice, we required conceptual change, a catalyst, and desire. To do so, we used an active collaborative inquiry, guided by a critical reflection framework (Larrivee, 2000); See Figure 1 below.

The term critical reflection is used often but, as it offers multiple interpretations, is not always explicitly understood. In this study, critical reflection is a process used to identify and challenge both external and self-imposed limitations and idealizations. We used critical reflection to shift our focus, to think more deliberately about certain topics, and to articulate the rationale that underlies our thinking and affects our teaching decisions, choices, and practices. Then, we questioned and deconstructed our rationale (or sense-making) to identify our thought processes. Overall, critical reflection involved naming and confronting the dilemmas and contradictions we encounter on a daily basis, which included synthesizing experiences, integrating information and feedback, uncovering underlying reasons, and discovering new meaning (Larrivee, 2000).

**Figure 1. Critical Reflection Framework**
Critical reflection became a part of our process in an attempt to develop what Egbo (2009) has suggested is needed for professional learning: “A new mindset, which can only be achieved through critical and sustained self-analysis” (p. 123). Being a critically reflective practitioner requires inquiry into one’s deeply rooted personal attitudes toward schooling, education, students, parents, and the school community, as well as identifying and challenging assumptions, and a willingness to question existing practices. Our critical reflection involved a process of dialogue and questioning, which led to conceptual change and transformative learning. We transformed our practice by identifying our unquestioned beliefs, thought patterns, and biases—a form of professional learning that, unlike traditional professional development, involves more than acquiring new skills.

**Methodology**

Action research is participatory: “It provides the systematic approach of investigation to find effective solutions to problems that professionals confront in their everyday environment and practice” (Stringer, 2014, p. 1). We used conceptual change theory to inform our research methodology. We used a collaborative and systematic method of critical reflection in an attempt to transform our teaching practice and student learning (Larrivee, 2000). We used this framework and research process as a means to: a) decentralize (a movement away from uncovering generalized truths to a new emphasis on local context); b) deregulate (a movement away from the restrictive conventional rules of research); and c) promote cooperativeness (Guba, 2014, p. xi-xii).

**Participants.** Three elementary teachers, (Grades 4–6), including myself in a rural school in Newfoundland, Canada participated in the study. All teachers had more than five years of teaching experience. Our inquiry group included two females and one male participant. Prior to beginning this three-year action research, the group had taught together for two years in the same school, division, and school board.

**Data collection.** We created a collaborative inquiry community for our three-year action research. Biweekly professional development meetings scheduled during the teaching day were a key part of our data collection. We allotted these times for discussion and followed Larrivee’s (2000) systematic critical reflection framework identified above in Figure 1.

Over the course of our three-year action research project, we collected *narrative data*: a text of remembered events (Clandinin, 2006; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Moen, 2006) detailing how we experienced our professional and conceptual growth and transformative learning. To document our transformative process, we took discussion notes and collected them in a journal file; I used these narrative notes to create this article (Kemmis, McTaggart, & Retallick, 2004).

As mentioned previously, our collaborative inquiry followed Larrivee’s (2000) critical reflection framework: We examined our current practices and the existing literature (Stage 1); identified specific areas that we were struggling with in our teaching practice and our personal beliefs (Stage 2); and then formulated actions to transform our practices and
beliefs so we could become more socioculturally responsive teachers (Stage 3).

More specifically, in Stage 1 we conducted a literature review, which served a variety of purposes. First, it allowed us to identify gaps in our practice, and to compare and contrast our professional methods with the research-based best practices in the existing literature. The review also helped us identify and name problematic elements in our practice, which helped explain why our teaching was yielding such stagnated learning improvement among our students. The findings from the literature review led us to Stage 2: We learned that we had to confront our underperforming teaching practices from a more personal perspective to understand why our efforts and good intentions were not achieving even minimal improvements in student learning. This began a process of deconstruction: We confronted our inner conflicts and fears, and the role we played in the cause and continuation of the problem (i.e., lack of student learning) rather than the solution (i.e., increased student learning). We questioned the barriers preventing student learning from a personal point of view and re-envisioned our teaching and learning practices. We questioned how we constructed knowledge about, and gave meaning to, our teaching, our students, our school community, and the education system.

Our critical reflection initiated a perceptual shift in our thinking that led to a transformation of our teaching approach and practices—Stage 3. We put ourselves in charge of change. We began formulating short- and long-term plans for transformative learning opportunities where our main goal was to provide alternative opportunities for our students based on their individualized needs.

Data analysis. We conducted our data analysis in two phases. The first phase consisted of our literature review: We reviewed the current literature as it related to our guiding questions. The second phase involved a two-year, ongoing narrative that included conversations and observations. As a narrative, our combined reflections and experiences were infused with meaning as we interpreted our encounters for personal meaning-making (Clandinin, Pushor, & Orr, 2007; Cortazzi & Jin, 2006). Characteristic of narratives, it was also an analytical examination of the underlying assumptions and insights of our experiences (Webster & Mertova, 2007). Our conversations focused on our experiences and perspectives based on our personal stories and professional experiences. These narratives exposed a wide range of themes: related and interconnected ideas, activities, and events. As Merriam (1998) has suggested, “Devising themes is largely an intuitive process, but it is also systemic and informed by the study's purpose” (p. 179). An analysis of our experiences, epiphanies, and critical incidents revealed key misconceptions within our beliefs and values. These key themes from Stages 1, 2, and 3 are presented in the findings and discussion that follows.

Findings
Stage 1: Literature Review
We conducted a literature review to better understand potential explanations for our frustrations. As mentioned earlier, we focused on two fundamental questions: a) what is missing in our professional development that could improve our practices, and b) what
reasons could explain the misalignment in teaching and learning? Our inquiry identified three areas of concern: the limitations and focus of professional development, and the educating and schooling ideologies determined by the prescribed curriculum, and the prevalence of deficit thinking.

The missing parts in professional development. It is generally believed that the goal of professional development (PD) is to provide teachers with new ways to teach better, which will result in improved student learning. This definition connects to a commonly held belief that becoming an effective teacher involves accumulating skills and strategies (Larrivee, 2000). This conceptualization of teachers’ PD—or skill acquisition—has preoccupied school systems and educational organizations, scholars, and stakeholders for some time (TNTP, 2015). However, Hargreaves (1995) has suggested that PD opportunities have many pitfalls: Mostly consisting of short, one- to two-day in-service workshops that simply raise teachers’ awareness about new initiatives or expose them to new programs or skills. These forms of PD continue to dominate in practice largely because “they are cheaper, clearer, more visibly concrete, and more easily controlled” (Hargreaves, 1995, p. 149). Confirming the limitations of PD, TNTP found in a 2015 study that, despite enormous and considerable investments of time and money in PD, most teachers do not appear to improve substantially in their teaching practices from year to year. In addition to TNTP’s study, multiple experimental studies in the last decade (see Arens et al., 2012; Bos et al., 2012; Garet et al., 2008; Garet et al., 2010) focusing on sustained, content-focused, and job-embedded professional learning found that traditional professional development activities did not result in long-lasting, significant changes in teacher practice or student outcomes. According to the existing literature and research, something is missing in traditional PD approaches.

According to Larrivee (2000), the missing piece from most conventional professional development opportunities is the integral connection between a teacher’s beliefs and values and the quality of teaching and learning they provide as educational practitioners. When approaches to PD focus on providing ready-made solutions or a prescription for change, they circumvent necessary stages of uncertainty; an integral stage of deep learning and critical reflection. A teacher’s perceptions and beliefs are fundamental to the choices they make in their approaches to teaching (Villegas & Lucas, 2002). Therefore, the missing component of PD is that it does not allow opportunities for teachers to critically examine aspects of their own practices and beliefs, as is needed for personal or professional improvement (i.e., how teachers think about themselves, the education system, their students, or their school communities).

The expectation that exposure to new skills will lead to conceptual change is problematic. In general, PD lacks opportunities for the deep critical reflection needed to deconstruct hegemonic mainstream ideologies or initiate conceptual change: a process that is needed to truly affect change in educational praxis (Brookfield, 1987, 1995; Kincheloe, 2008; Merizow, 1900, 1991, 1997; Merizow & Taylor, 2009). Teachers’ unconscious or suppressed beliefs and biases can result in false ideologies—mainstream ideologies that have been accepted without critical inquiry that may be ineffective or harmful in practice—or deficit
frameworks, which could impact not only their teaching practice but also the process of acquiring new skills during PD opportunities. After participating in PD opportunities throughout our careers, there was a continuing misalignment between our teaching approach and skill implementation and our expected student learning outcomes. As we conducted our literature review, we began to explore the possibility that we held unchecked beliefs and biases that were hindering our teaching practices. We were particularly struck by Earl and Hannay’s (2011) observation that the key to professional learning lies in the need to foster personal and professional growth for deep changes, where the goal is to create new knowledge that contributes to the concept of educators as knowledge-learners.

*Overreliance on the prescribed curriculum.* Within the context of our desire to become socioculturally responsive teachers, we explored the potential causes of the misalignment between our teaching and learning within the expectations set forth by the prescribed curriculum. Mezirow and Taylor (2009) have argued that a teacher’s understanding of their role in successful learning significantly influences their actions; when deconstructing teachers’ understanding of their role, it is critical to grasp how certain teachers interpret successful student learning. Many scholars have argued (James, 2012; Wells, 1994, 1999, 2001; Winton & Tuters, 2015) that far too many teachers depend on the prescribed curriculum—a dominant and hegemonic way of knowing and evaluating—to dictate student success without being aware of or responding to other individualized ways of knowing. This overreliance on prescribed curricula results in a narrow concept of learning that does not relate to many students’ experiential backgrounds, their personal interests and values, and/or their future orientations. As a result, non-majority students (students who are not White and/or middle- to upper-class) are poorly aligned with the curriculum, but are evaluated based upon their success within it. This ideology can create problematic, invisible barriers to student learning because both the teaching approach and student outcomes can be misinterpreted—for example, failing students can be determined as lacking the motivation to learn when it is more about a lack of interest in the topic.

In addition, Ryan (1991) has suggested that learning has become widely focused a presumption of a *functioning meritocracy*: Those who try hard will succeed and those who don’t, won’t. Our literature review led us to consider two further implications of Ryan’s (1991) argument. First, learning is associated with effort and those that do not exhibit effort are considered lazy and incapable, which diverts any investigation into deeper understandings of why students are unmotivated. Second, as Foucault (1980) argued more than two decades years ago, schooling is a process of normalization that is set up to produce inequalities as it continually operates to assimilate or normalize those who are different from the desired standards. We began to question how the presumption of a functioning meritocracy affected our role and the expectations we had for our students, and how it contributes to the ideology of deficit thinking.

*The outcomes from deficit thinking.* As mentioned earlier, deficit thinking is defined by seeing what’s missing from a standards-based perspective (Flessa, 2007). Unfortunately, in their extensive review of Canadian literature, Portelli, Shields, and Vibert (2007) found
Deficit thinking is a prominent ideology among educators. Deficit thinking is characterized by thought patterns that a) support pedagogy of low expectations; b) operate in the context that educators need to “fix” poor kids; c) categorize, punish, restrict, or restrain students; and d) sort students who fail to meet the curriculum standards into needs-based groups (Flessa, 2007). In 2007, Flessa asked: “Do teachers look at children and see what’s there,” (Flessa, 2007, p. 3) or are they trained and required by their respective curricula to look at children and see what’s missing? Supporting a deficit framework has the serious potential to negatively affect student achievement. Moreover, deficit thinking supports a natural progression toward sorting and categorizing students depending on who is achieving the curriculum expectations and who is not.

Reflecting on our findings in the literature, we had to ask ourselves if we truly believed our students had the capacity and willingness to learn, and whether our assumptions about students’ behaviour—especially those without the cultural capital of being White and affluent—produced teaching and teacher behaviours that inhibit student learning. We felt we needed to fundamentally shift our practice and hold all students to high standards of achievement, otherwise harmful myths—namely, that all children who work hard in school, listen to their teachers, and show success through positive test scores will have equal opportunities to get good grades and, eventually, good jobs—would continue to dominate our mindsets and impede our intentions and actions (Bergsgaard & Sutherland, 2003) to increase student learning.

By conducting a literature review, we discovered that ineffective PD and deficit thinking produced a clear misalignment between our teaching and student learning that required our attention. This understanding helped us do two things: It became the catalyst for us to deconstruct unconscious and deeply rooted barriers and biases that were negatively impacting our teaching practice, and it highlighted that change had to start with us. Stage 1 confirmed that we needed more critical self-reflection to understand our sense-making systems more deeply, which led our journey to Stage 2 of the critical reflection framework (Figure 1). We aimed to deconstruct our misaligned ideologies and become more responsive teachers by understanding and reframing any unconscious and/or distorted beliefs, values, knowledge, and sense-making systems that affected our teaching approaches. This called for a perceptual shift—or rather, overhaul—leading to transformational changes in practice.

**Stages 2 and 3: Critical Reflection and Transformative Practices**

Three interconnected themes emerged during the critical reflection dialogues that comprised Stage 2: a) good intentions are not enough; b) we needed to avoid blaming others and take ownership of our role in the teaching and learning process; and c) we needed to seek educational and learning alternatives instead of trying to fit our students into the standardized curriculum.

*Good intentions are not enough.* After deeply reflecting, we agreed that we were not bad teachers. In fact, we possessed many of the characteristics that make good teachers: we cared about our students, we wanted them to have more success with learning, and we
acted with best intentions in our teaching practices. However, our conversations often included statements like, “I work so hard on preparing...the lessons...the unit...the activity...organizing the class group...and the students still don't progress or learn,” which were usually followed by: “I am doing the best I can.” We realized our good intentions were not enough, nor were they resulting in change. In fact, these statements reinforced the idea that we had reached the ceiling of our capability as educators, which prevented the transformative dialogue required for changes in practice.

By critically reflecting, we discovered that we falsely believed our teaching should be effective because we were operating with good intentions. Even though caring is necessary, it isn’t enough; believing good intentions were enough to improve student outcomes prevented us from deconstructing our ineffective teaching practices. As a result, we were unintentionally limiting our students’ improvement. Simply approaching teaching with good intentions and caring about students does not constitute better teaching and learning; good intentions are not synonymous with improved teaching practices and increased student learning. This concept was particularly difficult for us to work through because it connected our efforts with our expected outcomes.

We transformed our practice by deliberately problematizing the idea that good intentions produce positive learning outcomes. This process created a perceptual shift: We realized we are responsible for and capable of improving student learning. If our intentions—regardless of whether they are well-meaning—do not facilitate increased learning, then we are the ones who need to change. We became more mindful about not showing students our frustration when good intentions failed to facilitate learning; when students did not learn from our well-intended lessons, it was our problem, not theirs. We tried to explicitly demonstrate to our students that we cared about them by involving them in our expectations for their future. We needed to question when our good intentions created positive or negative outcomes and why, which meant changing how we talked about our efforts. For example, “Okay, I care, I worked hard at preparing this lesson, but it’s not working. What am I missing? Why are my efforts not successful? How might this be a problem with me? And how can I make changes?”

The answers to these questions pointed to a fundamental problem in our teaching approach: The content of our lessons was not strongly (if at all) aligned with our students’ ways of knowing and did not tap into their prior knowledge, which is critical to activating learning (Dewey, 1902, 1938, 1960). We observed that, for the most part, our students’ sociocultural backgrounds were different from the text content, as well from ours. At this point, we questioned how much we really knew and understood about our students: How could we create better learning situations for our students if we did not know about their lives? We needed to really know them, deeply and without judgment, and keenly focus on understanding how they construct knowledge based on their prior experiences.

In an effort to bridge the gap between our perceptions and our students’ experiences, we held ongoing student discussion groups during break times and shared our feelings about our efforts, good intentions, and how we wanted to offer them better lessons for learning.
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Our honesty made us vulnerable, but we felt it changed our relationships with our students. We created a simple survey to learn more about their interests with the intention of tailoring our lessons to what they felt was important. Showing an interest and building relationships with students had a powerful effect on the classroom environment: We felt that these simple efforts created a team mentality—the three of us teachers and the students—as we all worked toward the common goal of increased learning.

Overall, we learned that, as educators, we must question whether we are sending an implicit message to students that we are not to blame for their poor performance because we have acted with good intentions. It became evident from our dialogues that we were unknowingly hiding behind the ideology of good intentions, and in turn allocated blame elsewhere (i.e., our students, their families, the school). Blaming someone or something else was an easy way to shift problems related to student learning away from ourselves and/or our actions. This became our second finding: the blame game.

**Avoid the blame game.** In the process of deconstructing our good intentions, we acknowledged another undesirable practice: blaming others. We reviewed our dialogue notes and discovered, for the most part, that we were placing blame on everyone and everything but ourselves. For example, our conversations included statements such as: “If only the school board...or the principal...or the parents...or the students...or the community...or the resources would...” Although this type of dialogue is similar to hiding behind good intentions, the difference is that blaming others allowed us to (unconsciously) ignore the ways in which we were part of the problem by shifting the agency to enact change away from ourselves. For example:

This is such a hopeless situation. The school board just keeps sending more resources in hopes that a new reading program is going to help. The parents are not involved in the school or their child’s education. Our students’ behaviour is getting out of control. The principal doesn’t seem to be concerned. No one seems to care whether a little school in the middle of nowhere is making any progress. We are the forgotten about school. What is our motivation to be the only ones who care enough to keep searching for the right formula to increase our students’ learning? We need support and help.

This dialogue demonstrates the loss of control we felt about making positive changes and how we placed blame exclusively upon others. Diverting blame allowed us to think that the locus of change was outside of our control, and there was consequently nothing we could do to help our students. Prior to our project, this was the mindset that informed our thinking and the expectations of our actions.

We easily blamed others, the situation, and the system for our students’ limited learning. King (1991) termed this thinking as: “dysconsciousness; a form of unconscious habit of mind including perspectives, attitudes, assumptions, and beliefs” (p. 135). In our case, the unconscious habit was deficit thinking. Over the years, our lack of critical perspective at both the micro, meso, and macro levels was allowing us to shift blame to external forces
and factors, which led to a sense of helplessness and prevented us from changing our actions. We discovered that our dysconscious assumptions and perceptions diminished the expectations we had for our students’ improvement. We were not acting as agents of change (Villegas & Lucas, 2002); rather, we expected our students to be unsuccessful in their learning for unacceptable reasons, such as where they lived, their family backgrounds, their social experiences, the school board and school’s lack of support, and so forth. As a result, we were anticipating, permitting, expecting, and accepting low performances from our students regardless of our efforts.

We problematized our sense-making that led to blaming and judging others. Doing so changed our outlook, which changed our practice. By being more responsive to our students’ educational needs, we tried to claim control over our situation and create improvement in student learning. Our first approach focused on improving reading and writing skills as the foundation for improvement in other areas. We organized our elementary students based on strengths and needs and, as a team of three teachers, suspended and rejected traditional notions of standardized achievement levels based on age or grade. We formed four reading groups that were based on ability, which meant mixing students from Grades 4 to 6. The groups met every other day for 120 minutes during the morning language block. Each of us taught one of the groups along with our special education teacher. Our goal was to design and adopt more socioculturally responsive practices by building on what we learned about our students’ prior knowledge and their ways of knowing.

Activating prior knowledge gave us the idea of outdoor education. We took our students on multiple outdoor field trips that were directly linked to their interests. For example, we went on snowshoe trips where we examined trees, clouds, and animal tracks, and collected items in nature for art projects. Back in the classroom, we made explicit connections to the trips in all subjects, specifically within their reading and writing groups. We created short stories about our adventures, problems we encountered throughout the day, and why; wrote poems; created art activities; and read further on related topics of interest, such as why some trees were dying and others were not. These trips helped us to get to know our students on many levels. We observed how they were constructing knowledge outside the classroom so that we could later build upon these lessons to strengthen learning. We learned more about their interests, built stronger relationships, and developed supportive views for each of our students, which involved learning about their non-academic abilities. These excursions helped us reconceptualise our teaching approach, which we designed with more content that was relevant to our students’ lives and ways of knowing. In this process, we had to re-examine the ideologies of knowledge associated with the standardized curriculum.

*Not all students fit the standardized curriculum.* The prescribed, standardized curriculum in each province of Canada is intended to reflect the required knowledge for students during their schooling. As James (2012) has argued, however, there is a dark side to the curriculum: It is Eurocentric, creates homogeneity, and presents a narrow and limiting body of knowledge associated with middle-class norms and values. He asserted that the
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Curriculum is nothing more than an incubator for categorizing, essentializing, and disenfranchising those who are limited in the required social capital or who are misaligned with the curriculum expectations within. As a team, we agreed with James’ argument and clearly recognized that our past teaching experiences contributed to this process. First, we had taken on the adverse habit of sorting and categorizing our students in our respective classes—even in our efforts to sort them in reading groups, although the intention behind the groups was completely different. We felt acculturated into focusing on our students’ limitations based on the curriculum standards of knowledge rather than on their strengths. We were perpetuating deficit thinking because we saw the students who were not able to achieve the prescribed standard as less than those who did—often as a result of social and/or cultural capital. Second, we were oppressing our students by expecting them (square pegs) to fit within the curriculum content (round holes). We were rejecting rather than embracing the different lived experiences and cultures of our students. We worked purposefully and diligently to align our teaching with our students’ strengths and as a result became better at evaluating when our pedagogical choices were misaligned. The more effort we made to provide experientially aligned learning opportunities, the more our students demonstrated improved learning outcomes.

Our discussions and observations helped us reframe our thinking and our teaching practices. We became more explicit in everything we did by focusing on how we were going to tap into students’ previous knowledge and transfer their learning to new situations. For example, in the language arts curriculum, one specific outcome was to use cueing systems to construct meaning. We realized that, for many of our students, their cueing system for constructing meaning was watching and listening to their elders. We asked ourselves how we could recreate a lesson that asked them to do this from a text, in the absence of elders about a topic. We first had to help our students identify the skills that they were using while listening and watching, then help them transfer this knowledge to a new context—using text. Unconsciously, we had been expecting them to learn cueing without connecting to their prior ways of knowing; in other words, we were setting our students up for failure. Our approach to teaching had involved assimilating and oppressing our students into a different way of thinking without knowing, respecting, or using how they constructed knowledge. This approach was dangerous because it insisted on only one way of knowing.

Next, we reframed our teaching approach by working backward: We needed to start with where our students were at in terms of their learning and teach based on their experiences, while at the same time focusing on broadening their understandings instead of suppressing them. In this process, we increased oral representations of knowledge by inviting their family members, grandparents, and community members (e.g., a volunteer firefighter) to the school to talk about various topics. After these events, we would explicitly deconstruct students’ cues for meaning-making and help them develop critical thinking skills by asking them to consider and respond to how and why questions.

Prior to our action research, we were teaching the curriculum without considering sociocultural responsiveness or alternate ways of knowing. It was clear that our past teaching ideologies were making us dysconscious (King, 1991), and it was only when we
began to question and shift our thinking that we were able to approach our practice differently. Our students demonstrated to us that they learn best when their education is connected to their social and cultural experiences. We learned and accepted that there are differences, not deficiencies, among our students. We also learned to acknowledge and value difference, and to work toward providing equitable opportunities for our students based on their strengths, values, and lived experiences.

**DISCUSSIONS**

The findings from our action research project have many broad, overarching implications. Our findings help explain why many educational initiatives and programs are not making substantial or long-lasting improvements to student learning. Our literature review identified three factors that promote uninterrupted biases: the shortcomings of existing professional development infrastructure, overreliance on prescribed curricula, and the negative trickle-down effects of unidentified deficit thinking. Conventional professional development promotes the idea that improving teaching and student learning is based on the acquisition of new skills. This ideology is difficult to dismantle, and allows educators to ignore the conceptual change they must embrace to confront their uninterrupted biases and prejudices. A large part of our conceptual change involved engaging in critical dialogues to explore deep-rooted biases in our beliefs and sense-making—a process that remains untapped in conventional professional development.

Our findings confirmed that teachers’ unconscious biases are hindering the goal of increased student learning. Fundamentally, it is difficult to disrupt one’s own ways of knowing and sense-making abilities. However, engaging in a long-term, systematic process of critical reflection (Larrivee, 2000), grounded in the concept of becoming a socioculturally responsive teacher (Villegas & Lucas, 2002), enabled us to examine, evaluate, and conceptualize the key barriers (both conscious and unconscious) impeding our students’ learning. Our research indicates that better teachers need more than skills: They need to be in constant dialogue with themselves and their colleagues about their own biases, and problematic beliefs.

The main practical implication of this action research is the importance of emphasizing and promoting ongoing critical dialogue among teaching colleagues. Based on our findings, there are many uninterrupted biases and beliefs among us. We believe it is imperative that educators discuss how the ideology of good intentions, blaming others, deficit thinking, and curriculum misalignment may be impacting and influencing their own teaching practice. Moreover, based on our findings, we invite educators to question whether they are being socioculturally responsive in their classrooms. Diversity among students is everywhere, even in classrooms of all White students from the same neighborhood who all speak English. Diversity exists in students’ backgrounds, social experiences, and geographical areas. To transform teaching practices, we recommend discussing the six characteristics of a socioculturally responsive teacher: a) working to be more socioculturally conscious of the students you teach by learning to suspend and change judgements and comparisons; b) embracing and accommodating students whose backgrounds are not reflected in the
prescribed curriculum; c) seeing oneself as both responsible and capable of bringing about changes in students’ learning outcomes; d) seeking to understand how your students construct knowledge and provide opportunities that help them build and promote knowledge and become capable learners; e) knowing, but not judging, the lives of your students (and understanding that previous knowledge is central to their learning); and f) using your new knowledge about your students to design and build upon what they already know, while stretching them beyond the familiar to build their knowledge and transfer learning skills (Villegas & Lucas, 2002). As we discovered throughout our project, teachers do not need to wait for professional development or resources to start this transformation. Teachers can be in control of student learning; we recommend starting a conversation based on our findings.

**CONCLUSION**

Feeling inadequate in our teaching approaches, we entered into this action research as a professional and personal journey to become better teachers and improve our students’ learning outcomes. Through ongoing critical dialogue and a critical reflection framework (Larrivee, 2000), we worked through the implications and outcomes of these problematic (and often unconscious) ideologies and made positive changes in our teaching practices that facilitated increased learning.

Ultimately, the findings from our grassroots research project indicate the need for a paradigm shift in professional development: Conventional professional development is not efficiently improving student outcomes, and students’ learning is suffering. Such a shift would also entail taking a closer look at policies and procedures for the criteria used to evaluate teachers’ performance. Our study also points to areas of future research in education scholarship—how could professional development for teachers include critical reflection that promotes conceptual change? How would a conceptual change movement challenge uninterrupted biases and prejudices that affect teaching and learning? Would it create a perceptual shift among teachers? Would it be possible to implement on a wide-ranging scale to improve student learning? Could our study be replicated and have the same effect on student learning in other jurisdictions? Our main finding, however, emphasizes that change begins on the personal level. As educators, we need to ask ourselves if we are truly making a difference in student learning. If the answer is “no,” then we need to begin the change ourselves.

**REFERENCES**


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**Biographical note:**

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