From Despair to Hope: A Narrative Journey to Becoming Amateur Intellectuals During COVID-19

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Abstract

In this narrative paper, we explore our coming-of-age as amateur intellectuals through our collaborative engagement with reflexivity during the COVID-19 pandemic. Situating our reflective acts within technology and our educational contexts we address and analyze feelings of persistent tug of war between despair and hope. Through collaborative autoethnography, we challenged our perceptions and investigated our views on educator identity as “teachers” to challenge perceptions of educator roles and responsibilities. We discuss how the COVID-19 pandemic response narrowed the role of the teacher, ultimately diminishing and destabilizing teacher identity while limiting their sense of agency. We draw on our collective experiences during the pandemic to draw a thread between the pandemic response’s effect on teaching and teacher identity, a conflicting awareness of both complicity and resistance, and our battles with the despair of necessity. By engaging in collaborative doubt and reflexivity, we discovered that we were consistently instilled with an astonishing sense of hope within our community.

Keywords: Collaborative autoethnography, COVID-19, teacher identity, amateur intellectual

INTRODUCTION

The winter of 2020 and COVID-19 ushered in an unanticipated set of sweeping challenges to the status quo in education. In Canada, like the rest of the world, school buildings closed as education moved into online spaces. Educators in all fields had to simultaneously confront an abrupt shift to distance/online education while attempting to navigate the distress, grief, and upheaval caused by the global outbreak. Instruction briefly paused as stakeholders pivoted to the realities of online education. Teachers who had never used any video conferencing software needed to make immediate decisions about things such as synchronous versus asynchronous learning (Llewellyn & Llewellyn, 2020) and how to protect student privacy in the digital classroom (Bogart, 2020). While some educators had experience navigating these issues in the online learning

environment, classroom teachers reported feeling overwhelmed and underprepared (Cipriano & Brackett, 2020). One result of these unprecedented and disorienting circumstances was that educators mobilized to support each other.

In this narrative (Wang, 2020) paper, we explore our purposeful coming together as nine education graduate students and one professor at Ontario Tech University. We came together during COVID-19 to conduct a collaborative autoethnography to try to understand and learn from our experiences. We use the conceptual framework of mutually collaborative reflexivity (Finlay, 2002) to frame our narrative of “story, interpretation and discourse” (Wang 2020, p. 8). We first situate our story through our process of coming together as amateur intellectuals (Said, 1994), and then we interweave interpretation and discourse into a narrative that explicates our experiences to better understand why we experienced despair as theorized by Kierkegaard (as cited in McKnight, 2009). Our process of reflexivity has presented us with a unique opportunity to challenge and reflect upon our own identities as educators and educatees within education.

In the following sections of our narrative, we highlight some of our issues with decision-making and discuss the minimization of the role of the caring teacher (Noddings, 2010). We also explore our experienced transformation and developing awareness through a coming of age as amateur intellectuals (Said, 1994). We recognized that we were instrumental in the perpetuation of norms embedded in the education system (Giroux, 2003) that did not necessarily align with our own ideals. Hence, becoming aware of the discrepancies between our ideals has become a bittersweet embedded part of the transformation as educators. Bitter because we felt powerless against the rigidity of an education system much larger, and sometimes in opposition to, our individual selves. And sweet because through the power of knowing, or coming to know, as amateur intellectuals, we were able to curate a sense of agency and hope. This empowerment inspired us to continue challenging the education systems as well as our perceptions to better understand the intersection of self and practice.

Our Beginnings

As we began to consider the prospect of exploring our shifting identities during the COVID-19 pandemic, it became clear that each of us brought a unique perspective and set of experiences to the conversation. To help us “negotiate the perils of the swamp” (Finlay, 2002, p. 212), we decided to explore the concept of reflexivity. Simply put, to be reflexive as a method of research is to account for one’s humanness (Dean, 2017) while situating the researcher and the researched within a broader social context (Finlay, 2002). As researchers, we needed to recognize the minutiae of our biased selves, ranging from which methodology would be best used, to personal beliefs about teaching and learning. In doing so, personal experience became less subjective and more trustworthy, transparent, and accountable (Finlay, 2002).

Despite a general agreement that such reflection and self-awareness are necessary for qualitative research, there is no definitive method for reflexivity. Therefore reflexive practise remains a challenge for many researchers (Dean, 2017; Finlay, 2002; Maton, 2003; Ryan, 2007). Our initial obstacle was separating reflection from reflexivity, as we confronted the complex task

of developing our agency as a group and as individuals through interrogating the past and present. This is a common struggle for teacher-researchers (Ryan, 2007). Whereas reflection involves looking *back* on past experiences, reflexivity is “interactive introspection” (Ryan, 2007, p.367) and is the process of looking *in* toward the self. As Finlay (2002) puts it, “the process of engaging in reflexivity is perilous, full of muddy ambiguity and multiple trails” (p. 212). When done incorrectly, it can lead to self-centred and narcissistic conclusions (Maton, 2003). To avoid navel-gazing, we repeatedly returned to the distinction between reflection and reflexivity, though it was a fine line to walk.

Beyond our considerations into the concept of reflexivity itself, we considered various approaches to carrying out reflexivity. Finlay (2002) offered a typology of contemporary practices and listed five types of reflexivity in qualitative research, of which mutual collaboration best describes what we undertook. Mutual collaboration is a shared inquiry where researcher-participants “engage in cycles of mutual reflection and experience” (p. 218). During these cycles, we used reflexivity to address the various concerns that arose. In particular, we considered how personal identity characteristics (Dean, 2017) such as gender, race, socioeconomic status, and position within academia shaped our collective lens. And so, the influence of reflexivity is evident from start to finish, as we considered how identities, approaches, objectives, questions, and methodology steered our conclusions.

Our Process

Our collaborative group of ten people, nine graduate students and one professor, grew organically out of a previous curriculum studies course. After the course, we sought to continue course discussions of identity and systemic structures embedded in education in a more informal environment. COVID-19 had just erupted as the previous course ended and we began to situate our questions and our developing identities within the context of the pandemic. The group arose in a true collaborative sense where we all shared authority and roles of leadership. During our seven meetings over four weeks, we created a safe space for sharing and discussing. Aside from recording each meeting, we each kept detailed reflections that documented our developing thoughts and ideas. The gravity of shared and individual experiences and the changes in our identities as educators during the COVID-19 pandemic inspired a myriad of research interests. In order to create a space that would be representative of all of our voices, we chose to take a collaborative autoethnographic approach. Collaborative autoethnography (CAE), as described by Chang et al., (2016), is “a qualitative research method that is simultaneously collaborative, autobiographical, and ethnographic” (p.17). CAE can be considered a subset of, or sister, to autoethnography. In CAE, instead of a singular researcher, multiple autoethnographers join together to analyze their shared lived experiences during a specific social phenomenon (Chang, 2013; Chang et al., 2016; Hernandez et al., 2017; Lapadat, 2017). Expanding on Chang’s definition of CAE, Lapadat (2017) sheds light on autoethnography’s transformative potential. Lapadat (2017) describes the method as a “polyphonic approach to writing, telling, interrogating, analyzing, and [...] writing up research on personal life challenges and on negotiating personal and professional

identities" (p. 597) giving value to the method as a form of narrative inquiry, and a tool for personal growth through reflection and reflexivity.

Narrative inquiry, as explored by Wang (2020), involves the reconstruction of meaning through narrative accounts of their lived experiences. As a method, this offered us a way to document our experiences and reflections as research data and situate them within larger more complex contexts (Soto, 2005). It is through the process of collaboratively situating and analysing our shared experiences, that we found ourselves engaging with our experiences and ideas through thought-provoking and evocative discussion. This led to our engagement in reflexivity (Dean, 2017; Finlay, 2002; Maton, 2003; Ryan, 2007), and began the process of becoming amateur intellectuals (Said, 1994).

Our data analysis revealed a mutual collaboration (Finlay, 2002) of shared reflection and experience. As Kanu and Glor (2006) express, the process of collaborative dialogue fosters the action of reflection by allowing those involved to share, expand and reflect on each individual's experience. Each of us noted through our analysis when key themes appeared in our respective field notes and then we re-watched our recordings to identify what might have prompted our reflections in our field notes. We compared observations, evaluated whether our proposed themes had changed, and then coded the data using the themes of despair, amateur intellectualism, and teacher identity. In this narrative, we interweave our experiences with the intellectual discussions that helped us understand the complexity of our identities. Although this is a story of us, the authors of this paper are a small subset of the whole group of ten researcher-participants. Given the intimate and vulnerable nature of some of the discussions that we had throughout the course, we use pseudonyms to protect the individual identities of the contributors.

Despair

"Human nature..." according to Kierkegaard (as cited in Gupta, 2005) "consist[s] of two opposing poles that stand in relation to one another. The one pole of the self can be called necessity and the other possibility. All other categories could be found to be reduced to or be in kinship with these basic concepts" (p. 8). Necessity are the actions we do to survive in the context we are in, while possibility is our vision of our possible selves. These two, necessity and possibility, constantly interact in our efforts to realize our selves. Despair of necessity comes as a consequence of becoming aware that the goal of realization of our possibilities is an arduous task (Gupta, 2005; McKnight, 2009; Zimmerman, 2019). Despair of necessity can therefore be understood as an imbalance within the inward and outward self, and the imbalance between necessity and possibility. In other words, to experience despair in this context is to be required by necessity to act in a way that is against one's beliefs and ideas.

As a group of educators whose roles were very rapidly shifting during the pandemic, we latched onto the concept of despair with unexpected urgency. Through our discussions, we recognized a disconnect between what we accepted as good pedagogy and what we were actually practicing in the newly mandated distance-learning environment. As Maria pointed out, we had

become “the biggest hypocrites of life” by giving students the exact experience that we despised. She expressed how as a student she did not like completing “asynchronous tasks” that felt like time-fillers and did not allow her to truly engage with the material. But as a teacher, these were the type of activities she was giving her students because they seemed the most well-suited for rapid online learning. Moreover, through discussion with her colleagues, it seemed wildly inappropriate at the time to have students under the age of 6, sitting on a Zoom call for 200+ minutes per day. There would be major issues with accessibility for all students, as well as screen time. Yet we had arrived at this position not by choice, but by necessity. There was no time to devise an ideal universal approach to pandemic learning. Not having the tools or time to prepare was a catalyst for our “moment of realization” (McKnight, 2009, p. 504) that signified the onset of despair. Being forced to act in a way that is against our own beliefs can cause a great rift or a profound discomfort that McKnight (2009) labels as the “distinctive existential condition of despair” (p.500). Liston (2000) argues that despair is an occupational hazard of the vulnerability of teaching; there is an inextricable link between love, despair, and being a teacher.

As students and educators engaging in reflective and reflexive practices, we risked gaining an awareness of the disharmony between our pedagogical practices and theory. This, at times, manifested as periods of silence, trepidation, and discomfort. However, several participants voiced a satirical skepticism in the value of documenting their evolving thoughts. Lori went so far as to jest in reference to the repeated government updates: “Dear diary. Today [there was] an announcement, and I decided to burn my laptop.” The collective uproar of laughter dispersed the tension momentarily. Critically reflective practices, being affected by *personal* characteristics (Dean, 2017), can cause significant existential discomfort (Larrivee, 2000; McKnight, 2009; Roberts, 2013, 2015). As a result, whether we made vain attempts to mitigate worries, we were witnessing a widening gap between our professional and personal selves. Whatever our personal beliefs, we had to follow the more restrictive provincial guidelines that sometimes conflicted with our evolving thoughts about teaching and learning.

Part of this worry stemmed from the very public nature of our roles as educators. We nervously laughed whenever someone mentioned the many “blame a teacher” conversations that were taking place on social media. We likened the accusatory trope to the Greek mythological Titan, Atlas, holding the weight of the world on his shoulders. We questioned why the public was wishing for things to return to normal when Allie pointed out, “normal does not work for everyone within a system designed to support no one.” COVID-19 and the unprepared move to online education had magnified systemic inequities hidden and inherent within our education systems. For example, questions of who has access, racism, lack of digital equity, all already in the system became magnified when COVID-19 changed the mode of delivery in our education system. While the general public was eager for COVID-19 restrictions to be lifted, and for us to return to our pre-COVID-19 modes of delivery for education, we worried that a rush back to in-person schooling would also mean demagnifying and ignoring the systemic inequities brought to our attention during the pandemic. As insiders, we know that the education system is flawed. There are far too many students who are disproportionately deprived of a fair and valuable education (Darling-Hammond, 2010). Yet paradoxically, we were trying to make the best of a broken system and

feeling the weight of failure for not “getting it right.” Social pressure and societal ideals have constructed the need in us as educators to be perfect without flaws (Prilleltensky et al., 2016) in our moment to moment responses. We asked ourselves: What is the right course of action? Do we follow directions and accept the *despair of necessity* as a workplace hazard? Or do we risk unemployment by contravening contractual obligations through acts of transgression (hooks, 1994), such as ignoring provincially mandated home learning plans that focused on literacy and numeracy and, instead, doing an art lesson?

We came to see how the pandemic forced a redefinition of what matters most in education to different stakeholders. We came to see that continuing to adhere to social pressures associated with the “blame a teacher” narrative was and is unsustainable. We exchanged knowing nods and smiles about the shared understanding that teachers are constantly blamed for the systemic pitfalls of the education system. “Panic-stricken by the demands of our day” (Palmer, 2007, p. 3), it is a narrative that is so entrenched that specific examples need not be given. One in which teachers become an easy target scrutinized for being unable to remedy unsolvable problems (Palmer, 2007). Much of our discouragement resulted from the distance between the decisions of policymakers during COVID-19 and what we, as educators, believed was most important, for example, directives by policymakers to focus on numeracy and literacy to the exclusion of all other learning including social-emotional learning. This tension in our professional worlds was mirrored within, as it necessitated an improper relationship between the potential and material conditions that make us who we are. As McKnight (2009) pointed out, “this relation tends to collapse into conflict when beliefs come into contact with the material demands of a daily existence that normalizes certain acts as the only ethical ones” (p. 509). Teachers were forced to choose between doing what they felt was best for their students and following the mandated emergency plans. As a group, we went so far as to equate this conflict as a choice between, what Pietro described as, “being a good teacher and being a good employee.” We expressed feeling a lack of passion and felt that “taking a step back” might allow us to rediscover ourselves, redirect our teaching, and redefine our pedagogy. But time did not allow us space to pause and reflect (Rose, 2013). We were experiencing multiple identities with differing perspectives while education was rapidly undergoing large changes. As students, we were engaging in critical reflection during our graduate studies while as educators and agents in systems of public education we were recognizing how public education stifles reflexivity. As a result, we could not fulfill our existential charge of becoming. We had only just discovered the existence of this dichotomy as a result of our rush into the world of critical reflection, working against the grain of that system that does not typically allow for “superficial forays outside the “official knowledge” (Apple, 1999 as cited in McKnight, 2009). If we had not confronted our uncertainty and uncovered our developing feelings, we would have risked staying “trapped in unexamined judgements, interpretations, assumptions and expectations” (Larivee, 2000, p. 294). Yet we, at times, felt as though we were trailing behind, racing to reflect on what felt like a perpetual state of change.

We realized, somehow, that the condition of despair is not one that should be feared but embraced as both humanizing (Roberts, 2015) and as a vehicle for forming a critical understanding of ourselves and our practices (McKnight, 2009; Roberts, 2013, 2015; Zimmerman, 2019).

Through despair, we became aware of previously hidden faults in the system. We always knew that the system was not designed to support all students; a student's family's social capital has always played a role in the quality of education that they receive. Having had to make a rapid, relatively unassisted shift to online distance education led the pre-existing social gaps to widen. The student who did not hear stories at bedtime became the child whose parents could not help in their online classes or the student who might not have access to a computer. We also had to acknowledge that we cannot become unaware of these challenges.

Despite our many different roles and identities, we often felt reduced to one role during COVID-19. This experience felt like a reduction of ourselves, especially in light of our new awareness about our paradoxical and conflicting identities. A practice known as passionate inwardness (McKnight, 2009) can help navigate the pluralistic and paradoxical nature of an educator's identity and their role within the system of education. This passion manifested in us in numerous ways. Maddy and others began initiating theoretical discussion by "spreading the gospel of Bourdieu" and accepting the risk of alienation from school colleagues by actively challenging superficial claims to universal ideas that are instead rooted in the cultural arbitrary (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977). Others rejected the overly narrow reinterpretation of the curriculum, which was skewed towards math and literacy. Vince pushed back, for example, with "little baby steps," nurturing student creativity and the arts by making attempts to reintegrate them into the new limited curriculum that excluded all but mathematics, language, and social studies in his classroom. In this sense, the pandemic had helped us to recognize the existing inequalities within a system that we knew did not work. We recognized a chance to redefine whilst acknowledging the ever-present constraints designed to maintain the institution. By identifying despair and confronting the despair of necessity, we had taken the first step on the uneasy path toward becoming amateur intellectuals (Said, 1994).

Amateur Intellectualism

From the outset of this project, we embarked on a journey towards amateur intellectualism (Said, 1994). To be an amateur intellectual is to be "moved neither by reward nor by the fulfillment of an immediate career plan but by a committed engagement with ideas and values in the public sphere" (Said, 1994, p. 109). Amateur intellectualism requires a commitment to rethinking both how we were taught and how we teach, a process that requires continuous reflection and openness to learning (Kanu & Glor, 2006). Palmeri (1996) likened the amateur intellectual to an "ethical rhetorician," which is someone who uses rhetoric to "ensure that truth and justice win out over their opposites, to teach difficult concepts, to bring out all sides of an issue, and to defend oneself" (p. 12). In this way, we might disrupt "taken for granted notions of teaching" (Sumara & Iftody, 2006, p. vi) and be open to taking risks (Palmeri, 1996; McLaughlin, 2005). We would also generate critical thought by raising "moral and ethical issues in the world" (Kazanjian, 2013, p. 51). Thus, when we felt "stuck within our circle," (Said, 2015, p. 186), amateur intellectualism provided a much-needed escape.

One way for teachers to negotiate self-examination that is both reflective and forward-thinking, as supported by Kanu and Glor (2006), is through Pinar's (1994) *currere*. Pinar divided *currere* into four moments: regressive, progressive, analytical, and syncretical. To better understand ourselves as amateur intellectuals, the roles we played, the choices we made, and the things we believed, we needed to engage in a reconciliation between the temporal and the conceptual. We achieved this reconciliation by reflecting on the past, "to capture it as it was, and as it hovers over the present" (p. 6) before looking towards the future and how our perception of it might influence the present. Only then were we ready to analyze the present by listing the ideas or "fields of study" (p. 11) that drew us in; a crucial step before synthesis could occur. For example, our shared interests and conversations about eradicating systemic injustices led to more specific topics such as identity, policy, and mental health in the context of teaching. The narrowing of these topics of discussion ultimately led to our large group of ten researcher participants splitting up into two different groups and methodologies for writing about our experiences.

Currere, like reflexivity, "attempts to reduce the distance between the researcher and his subject" (p. 13). Although collectively, we did not formally engage in the method of *currere*, we did, however, engage informally by collaboratively analyzing the temporal dimensions of our experiences as they progressed. Thus, our process towards amateur intellectualism was dependent on a devoted penetrating inward gaze and a concerted effort to get to know ourselves: past, present, and future. Past: in our limited and potentially distorted perceptions of education before the pandemic; present: the anger and frustrations developing during the pandemic because of the tug-of-war in the ways we wanted to lead our students versus what the ministry mandated for us; and future: how these experiences and discussions have helped shape our beliefs and change our thoughts for the future.

Teacher Identity

Knowing oneself - intellectually, spiritually, and emotionally - is to know one's students (Palmer, 1997). Each of the knowings, intellectual, spiritual, and emotional, contributes to one's identity and all must be present in some way. However, in the face of an education system that Giroux (2003) describes as monopolized by neoliberal, capitalist ideologies that operate according to market logic, knowing oneself can be difficult. This type of monopolized system forces teachers to conceal rather than reveal parts of their *personal identity* that they know is an integral part of their *teacher identity* (Palmer, 1997). It was no surprise that optics emerged as a recurring theme in our discussions. The strain between public image and teacher identity is well-documented (see Beyerback, 2005; Garcia, 2015; Goldstein, 2010; Swetnam, 1992). With the added stress of delivering public education during a pandemic, Maddy voiced an escalating fear of public perception outweighing sound decision-making:

The thing that trumps, oh, I don't know, good judgment, is optics... It seems like the building, and like the structure, is what is important right now as opposed to what we do in the building... It seems like we have to focus on some details that are so tiny, or at least they feel like they're insignificant now. (Maddy, May 26)

What does it mean when teachers are categorized as government employees, rather than by what they do? In this sense, we were coming to see how the very structure of public education was working to stifle our identities. Abby likened it to Russian nesting dolls, where the innermost and smallest doll simultaneously represented both the perceived role of the teacher and what we considered to be the most inconsequential aspects of it. The nesting dolls stood as a metaphor for the condensed space whereby teachers could foster and present identity. The nesting dolls represented a physically concealed identity hidden under layer upon layer of the shaping by culture, regional policies, institutions, peers, and perceptions of self that teachers experience in their professional and personal lives.

Teacher Identity-Caring

Not only could this shaping by outside forces stifle teachers' abilities to practice passionate inwardness (McKnight, 2009), but it is also antithetical to the necessity of caring and moral education as described by Noddings (2010). Noddings (2002; 2005; 2010) describes four components of moral education: modelling, dialogue, practice, and confirmation, that are "all activated within, and depend for their success on, the establishment of caring relations" (2010, p. 147). Teachers have a special responsibility to serve as models of care for their students (Noddings, 2010). This responsibility explains why Maria decorated her car and participated in a teacher-organized car parade and why Vince was practicing yoga online with students from his school. This underlying responsibility is why Lori was stressfully organizing a celebration for graduating students "to elevate everybody just a little." Simply put, "we do not 'care' in order to model caring; we model care by caring" (Noddings, 2010, p. 147). Despite the many constraints and challenges, we continued to seek opportunities to model care for our students. A great source of our collective despair was the difficulty of this task.

Noddings' (2010) second component of moral education, *dialogue*, was especially problematic during the pandemic. Dialogue involves speaking and listening by all parties involved (Noddings, 2010), whether that be teachers, students, administrators, or policy-makers, to identify needs and work cooperatively on meeting those needs. Having lost the shared physical space of a school building, we lamented the loss of personal connections that sustained us on the most challenging days. Somehow, we had entered a new world where parents mediated most instruction, students could opt out of learning, and policymakers preferred one-shot public announcements over dialogue with teachers. A large part of teaching includes the workplace environment that one engages in each day at the school. Teachers are deprived of meaningful *dialogue* with their students and also lose the opportunity to share concerns with fellow teachers when separated from the school environment. Prilleltensky et al., (2016), share that these missed opportunities can foster feelings of helplessness, "despair and "meaninglessness" (p.105), especially for new teachers.

Caring is an active practice. *Practice* is a component of moral education that requires both empathy and sympathy, and it involves active recognition of positive, helpful behaviours (Noddings, 2010). Part of being a caring teacher is to encourage children who demonstrate care, and it is the teacher who models caring relationships to foster students' understanding of how to

care. During this pandemic, the caring relation was hard to maintain as students and teachers were no longer in the same physical space. We noted the disengagement of our students because of the sudden and unstructured transition to distance learning. This disengagement impeded all of our abilities both student and teacher, to exemplify and receive feedback on how we learn to practice empathy and sympathy. The disengagement also hindered our abilities to practice. Noddings (2010) heeds caution to the temptation of treating the component of practice as something to be awarded or congratulated; instead, it is something to be acknowledged. Recognizing rather than rewarding kind actions is to prevent replacing the genuine impulse to care with the desires of superficial and external validation and praise (Noddings, 2010). This warning is congruent with Giroux's (2003) idea that schools are not about genuine love and desire for learning, but rather a tool to pump out individuals that will continue to uphold capitalist, neoliberal societal ideals, much like products built on an assembly line. For example, Lori spoke of her experience with her students that she felt were engaged and academically motivated before the move to online learning, completely unravelling upon hearing the news that distance education was optional and that grades would be calculated based on the learning done before the beginning of distance learning. Students who have been conditioned to only focus on their grades have completely disengaged from the now "pointless" learning process.

Lastly, *confirmation* is the step of the process concerned with helping students cultivate moral sentiments. Teachers are not strangers to having difficult conversations about academic integrity, bullying, or disruptive behaviours. However, as Noddings (2010) writes, *confirmation* aims to bring about "a better self already present in a potential, shadowy form" (p. 148). Efforts to enact *confirmation* in a way that does not induce guilt, shame, or cause harm amongst our students is essential in ensuring that we maintain caring relations with our students (Noddings, 2010). Thus, we can expect that a caring relation must first exist with the students we plan to mentor. The presence of caring relations with and among our students makes all this possible.

These components are essential parts of being a teacher. However, since we could not do this "properly" right now, we collectively expressed being in identity limbo. In being physically disconnected from our students, we collectively awakened to the hidden complexities of our teacher identities. While some might suggest that learning is an easy process in the digital age (Bingham, 2012), such an assumption fails to consider the heart of the teacher (Palmer, 1997). We also act as parents, trusted friends, and mentors. Through realizing the extent of the roles we played as teachers, we simultaneously came to the realization that we no longer understood the purpose of ourselves as teachers. We grappled with how to be moral and caring educators while coping with being thrown into a new way of teaching and a new way of life that occurred during COVID-19.

From Despair to Hope

We offered ourselves as the context of this narrative; our journeys "show the value of using introspection and being reflexive about one's own personal reactions" (Finlay, 2002, p. 215). Instead of employing reflexivity as a strictly "intellectual exercise" (p. 220), we attempted to put

it into “direct, practical use” (p. 220) by taking a mutually collaborative approach. By positioning ourselves within the research, we embarked on a murky but intentional quest to “unpick” (Dean, 2017, p. 5) our subjectivity from “the world of others” (p. 5) to “understand our relation” (p.8) to the ideas that shaped us. Reflexive work is about context and considers both the personal and structural conditions that shape us (Dean, 2017). Our context was technology during COVID-19 embedded within the larger structural forces of education. When we discussed the Ontario Department of Education’s decision to reduce kindergarten to numeracy and literacy during COVID-19, we examined the underlying structural conditions and technologies that shape the institution of education.

In this collaborative autoethnographic study, we demonstrate a coming of age as amateur intellectuals and imply a critical value towards creating supportive and developmental relationships for the purpose of reflection. Our process of growth was continuous throughout our process of introspection, including while writing the narrative you are reading. We have both participated in, and are agents of comprehensive growth, understanding, and reconstruction of our own identities.

Unexpectedly, in performing collaborative autoethnography, we have discovered ourselves as both researchers and the ones being researched. We grew into more purposeful researchers as we anchored our developing thoughts and understandings, essentially our developing identities, within the intellectual conversations of academia. Similar to that of Chang et al. (2014), who discussed CAE as “an opportunity to engage in scholarly endeavours at a very human level that enriched our lives personally and strengthened us professionally—both individually and collectively” (p. 386), we found a community of support and growth. Within this enrichment, we were able to form personal and meaningful connections to our work and each other. We became saturated with a sense of support and empowerment through our growth and change. Importantly, through negotiating our amateur intellectualism, we realized the deep connection between our own despair and our own hope.

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