RESEARCH ARTICLE

Using communities of practice to build academic interdependence in a middle school classroom

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ABSTRACT

Teaching practices characterized by a cultural orientation that emphasizes independence may simultaneously threaten cultural reproduction and socioeconomic inequality. While individual merit and competition are rewarded, the space between us grows. This research aimed to challenge the widespread meritocratic narrative by implementing Wenger's (2010) communities of practice to illuminate the experiences of middle school students working interdependently. Understanding the general implications of a de-centered, cooperative classroom on teaching and learning can influence an educator's approach to small group work and classroom discourse.

KEYWORDS

Communities of practice, community, interdependence, discourse, collectivism

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Do unto others what you would have them do unto you. As young children, we were raised to adhere to this "golden rule," to treat others as we would want to be treated. Even in adulthood, this philosophical precept governs ethical standards, often quoted as a reminder to "consider our impact on others" (Puka, n.d., para. 7). Invoked in the golden rule is a core, universal morality that supports survival. Singer (1981) summarized the ideas of moral philosophers, psychologists, and biologists: Acting with altruism, characterized by authentic care for others, is evolutionarily advantageous.

While our perception of social capital has evolved, researchers agree that trust and reciprocity remain critical factors in its development (Tuominen & Haanpää, 2022). Even so, the "cultural system of communality and sociability may be pulling back" as a result of the booming attraction to contemporary and individualistic pursuits (Jafri & Isaad, 2022, p. 9). Validated by a dominant cultural orientation characterized by atomization, we prioritize ourselves over "any potential collective we could become a part of" (Jafri & Isaad, 2022, p. 9). Isolated, polarized, and divorced from their communities, Putnam (2000) contends that Americans suffer from "civic malaise" (p. 25).

The realization of one's humanity hinges on deliberately disrupting the indifference and anonymity and recreating our collective space (Greene, 2016). By emphasizing the interplay of the young adult and their community, value education has the potential to elicit such a disruption (Hargreaves, 1980). A carefully crafted learning environment provides a "context for social relations and [the] staging area for human community structure" (Enright et al., 2008, p. 41). Since pre-adolescents are beginning to develop a "sense of being part of a larger civilization" (Enright et al., 2008, p. 38), middle schools, in particular, present an ideal opportunity to scaffold the "emergence and growth of a consciousness within" (Cotter, 2013, p. 174). This study intentionally capitalized on middle schoolers' improving abilities "to infer the perspective of others, to understand the self, and to solve social problems" by enhancing opportunities for them to build interpersonal trust with one another through cooperative experiences (Hart & Carlo, 2005, p. 225).

Yet, disparities exist between the developmental needs of adolescents and the design, instructional practices, and moral climate of their classrooms, which inhibit collective humanization and result in a disconnected community of apathetic learners (Booth & Gerard, 2014; Hargreaves, 1980). To rectify potential discrepancies in my own practice, I considered adopting Wenger's (2010) communities of practice (CoP).

However, a preliminary investigation revealed a gap in the CoP research; much—if not all—of the existing literature was limited to adults' experiences in business, higher education, and healthcare. Addressing this gap required the development of an adapted cooperative structure that recognized the social, cognitive, and moral needs of pre-adolescent learners.

Johnson and Johnson's (2008) social interdependence theory (SIT) provided the framework for such a pursuit. Emphasizing the social nature of human learning, social interdependence is the "foundation on which cooperative learning is built" (p. 365). Specifically, SIT highlights the impact of one individual's behavior on the outcomes of others. Coordinated efforts to reach a shared outcome engender mutuality. Paired with the SIT, communities of practice provided an opportunity to resist modern "ideological and pedagogical impositions" and influence the common good (Giroux, 1985, p. 28).

This study endeavored to illuminate the experiences of middle school students working interdependently in a community of practice by addressing the following questions:

1. How do middle school students describe their experiences in an interdependent community of practice?
2. What are the general implications of the shared creation and implementation of interdependent communities of practice for middle school students and teachers?

Literature Review

Learning is a social system, and communities are the "social containers of the competence that make up such a system" (Wenger, 2010, p. 229). Through role modeling, observation, and imitation, we define competence; we know what we need to do, we establish the expectations, and we work together to achieve it. Essentially, competence is negotiated through "direct partnership" (p. 229). When "this collective learning results in practices that reflect both the pursuit of our enterprises and the attendant social relations," it is called a community of practice (Smith, 2003, p. 2).

Such "communally situated individuality" is characteristic of a democratic culture, and as Bloom (as cited in Fielding, 2005) argues, it values students' capacities to contribute to the collective good (p. 122). In contrast to the regimented formality of "membership in an institution," the engaged participation of a democratic community is

characterized by reciprocity and shared responsibility (Edelstein, 2011, p. 131). The community's collective efforts, marked by concern and trust for one another, support the development of egalitarian partnerships (Gordon, 2022). These cohesive and safe partnerships invite "free interaction" and interdependence, as "members provid[e] and receiv[e] assistance from each other" (p. 87). Thus, each community member is responsible for themselves and to the greater good (Gordon, 2022).

Still, meritocratic individualism is "deeply entrenched in the contemporary educational system" (Hargreaves, 1980, p. 191), making it "inevitably challenging" to engage with communitarian values (Fielding, 2005, p. 123). Under such conditions, knowledge is considered an asset, and hoarding it ensures a competitive advantage and self-preservation (Oliveira et al., 2021). Paradoxically, knowledge sharing fosters "a culture of openness, transparency, and innovation" (Bilginoğlu, 2019, p. 65). Peers hold power, and learning with them boosts conceptual understanding, increases engagement and motivation, and encourages persistence in the face of challenges (Cooper, 2002). An interdependent CoP naturally emphasizes communal responsibility; with no "authority" to validate answers, the group is left to think together (Wessel, 2015).

Developing "egalitarian cognitive partnerships" requires a space that invites the mutual sharing of ideas through deliberative discourse (Vauras et al., 2003, p. 22). Also called "exploratory talk," it invites community members to think together, critically and constructively (Littleton et al., 2000). Marked by shared knowledge, accountability, and reasoning, exploratory talk publicly binds a group's thinking (Littleton et al., 2000). This "interthinking" stimulates "reorganization" and reflexivity (Mercer, 2004, p. 139), which has been shown to lead to "cognitive growth" (Psaltis & Duveen, 2007, p. 80). In fact, exploratory talk is arguably the most viable way to support a student's understanding (Barnes, 2008).

Yet, such interthinking requires a "grasp of interpersonal reasoning" (Noddings, 2008, p. 169). The establishment of care is a "prerequisite for the development of cognitive and social understanding," and communicates that thinking with others is safe (Kutnick & Colwell, 2010, p. 195; Noddings, 2008). Moreover, reframing the intention of group work ("to help one another—not simply to produce a better product or surpass another group"), strengthens the "web of care" (Noddings, 2008, p. 171).

This study attempted to disrupt the static and traditional thinking that dictates middle school students' beliefs about school, learning, teachers, each other, and themselves; to emancipate students from an authoritarian system that strips them of

autonomy and quells their curiosity; and, most importantly, to reintroduce students to one another.

Method and Design

Auto-educational criticism, a methodology that engages the research in professional exploration and "reflexive subjectivity," framed my exploration of middle school students' experiences in interdependent CoPs (Eisner, 2002; Uhrmacher et al., 2016; Glesne, 2016, p. 108). Generally, "schools make little place for reflectivity" (Eisner, 1998, p. 115), but this inquiry facilitated deliberate reflection. Consequently, any overarching goals were formative, as I remained open to emerging, unanticipated findings. This receptivity enhanced my "cognitive flexibility" and "intellectual exploration," thus facilitating greater diversity in my interpretations (Eisner, 2002, p. 118).

At the time of the study, I taught sixth-grade English Language Arts. The school, with a modest enrollment of 195, accommodated grades 5 to 8. Data was collected in my classroom. Of my 45 rostered students, 20 consented to participate—13 girls and seven boys. Those participants were distributed across three class periods.

As a participant-observer, I maintained a dual role, serving as both a teacher and a researcher throughout the study (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). Collecting data in a socially interdependent environment necessitated a restructuring of my positional power, as traditional authority in a socially interdependent environment is limited. Therefore, data collection methods—field notes and journaling, transcribed audio recordings, elicited documents, and student interviews—reflected this adjusted role.

The data analysis process was cyclical. Rather than the next linear step after data collection, I interpreted my findings as they were collected, thus informing the data collection process. As it was an open-ended pursuit, I remained actively receptive to emerging implications (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2018). For this process, I incorporated both deductive and inductive reasoning throughout my analysis. Deductive analysis was driven by theory, while inductive analysis involved me generating conclusions from specific data (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2018). Specifically, analytic tools such as memoing (writing about writing) and annotation (phrase isolation), supported my interpretation and thematic classification of the data.

Finally, I carefully attended to what the students communicated through their body language, tone of voice, dialogue, and how they used the space around them. My

field notes, narratives, and vignettes originated as superficial descriptions, but deepened through annotation for complexity.

To ensure the trustworthiness of this study, I utilized the following methods: triangulation via multiple data points to elicit “more complex perspectives”; comprehensive description via vignettes to “enable the reader to experience qualities within the situation that critics claim to be there”; “consensual validation via scholarly conversation to seek feedback on my observational data” (Flinders & Eisner, 1994, p. 354); and member-checking to compare my interpretations with the participants (Eisner, 1998). As such, I consistently engaged my participants in dialogue about their experiences, while simultaneously inviting them to check the accuracy of my descriptions and interpretations.

Summary of Findings

This study attempted to understand the interdependence of sixth graders as they worked together in communities of practice. Analysis of their experiences and reflections revealed thematic patterns relating to interpersonal relationships and discourse.

Relationships as Foundations of Interdependence

Communities, by nature, are characterized by a “collective accountability” created via relationships with others (McKnight & Block, 2011, p. 65); the chief tenet of the interdependent community is “we are responsible for each other” (McKnight & Block, 2011). A community’s strength rests on its members’ willingness to value the well-being of fellow members.

I directly observed the development of positive, promotive interactions in some groups. Those groups were composed of at least two group members who mutually respected, encouraged, and supported one another; who interacted with each other; who demonstrated care; and who avoided judging their group mates (Patrick et al., 2007). Still, different groups were characterized by inconsistent interactions and partnerships. The absence of authentic care for another’s success, especially if care required mutuality, appeared to inhibit responsiveness and communication. If a group member’s attempts to engage their peers with care and concern were unsuccessful, they themselves disengaged from the group and worked alone.

Data revealed patterns related to the students' ability to regulate their learning and behavior; the interpretation of these patterns indicated that dysregulation interfered with the development of academic kinship. For example, in the following conversation, Ophelia demonstrated frustration with her peers' rudimentary common sense: "They have no idea what to do sometimes. I know that they will be able to learn, but a lot of people don't know what to do. Like, we just need to use a little more common sense," she said.

Isabella interjected, "Yeah, but with that, um, so like, if they say they didn't know what to do, we can help them because most of us do know what to do."

Ginny argued, "If my classmates have a question, they will either skip it or not do it at all rather than ask a peer."

"But I think it's because they aren't used to it," I pointed out. "It's not like that in other classes. And we only meet 45 minutes a day."

Ginny retorted, "Okay, but they are twelve-year-olds. They're capable."

Another participant, Jessica, complained about her experience with two boys: "I'm the only one who actually worked in that group. They were always playing Fortnite on their computers. I had to keep reminding them to do the work." Another group member, too, was often off-task: "She'd play Monkey Mart or make fun of the boys or do something to make them laugh, and then they'd all get distracted. And then I tried to, like, put them all back together so they could work." This frustrated her because she "got off task because [she] had to remind them that they had to do the work.".

Georgia shared Jessica's discouragement as she, too, struggled to relate to her group members: "When he gets his work done early, he's like a big distraction to other people, like me." Evelyn noticed in her group that "some people like doing it by themselves, like, they don't want anybody to help them, and they don't need anybody to help them."

While Lilah acknowledged inevitable relational challenges, she also described the importance of stretching your social boundaries:

> You don't want people to work with someone they can't work with. Meet in the middle, like, yeah, work with someone you've never worked with before. As you know, I work with two others. I'm not friends with them, but I'm not enemies with

> them. I just don't talk to them. Like, I've never seen them like this before. Hannah is a little shy, from what I've seen. She doesn't talk to anyone. But she's really smart, and, like, the things she says impress me. And Corbin. I used to think he was a bad person. But he's hilarious. They just make me feel better about it. Like, they're both very different from me, and I just think that's quite awesome.

While Charlotte valued the relationships she built with her group mates, she also voiced concerns. She argued:

> When I'm in a group, a lot of people just assume I know the answer. I mean, see, with book groups, Tanner asked me a bunch of questions, and sometimes I would get caught up with the questions. I love to help people, so I really get caught up in questions sometimes, but when I work alone, I am able to get a lot more work done.

These students, accustomed to years of instructional practices that value reliance on a teacher, are still learning to trust their peers as academic partners. During an interview, one student, Amber, said, "You say, 'we are responsible for our learning' and 'it's our learning' and stuff. I feel like other classes haven't, like, other teachers haven't really said that." She continued, "I feel like a lot of people just want to be able to just come up and ask the teacher and just get a direct answer. A lot of people don't think that their peers will, like, understand their question, or have a decent answer." Another participant, Charlotte, said: "Group work was different because we had to be interdependent. We had to ask each other instead of you." Isabella reasoned that groups were different in our classroom versus other classrooms because "you tried to make us work with people we don't normally, and it opened something in my mind that makes it easier to work with people." Charlotte noted that teachers "would not ever" give them the "freedom" I did because they did not "trust in" them.

As an element of social capital, trust positively influences one's help-seeking and help-giving behaviors (Tuominen & Haanpää, 2022); students' relational foundations are built on trust. Moreover, trusting relationships with teachers embolden the courage to engage with the novelty of interdependence. Teachers and schools who "trust-in-advance that students fundamentally want to participate, to think and to act morally, will treat them in a way that actually helps to advance these attitudes" (Oser et al., 2008, p. 409). The community is the "primary context" for the development of morality, and schools that "collective[ly] socializ[e]" nurture a 'moral atmosphere'" (Snarey & Samuelson, 2014, p. 64).

However, "trusting-in-advance" requires a belief in the capacity of pre-teens and young adults to be altruistic, to care, and to "increase the well-being of others" voluntarily without "asking for anything in return" (Lu et al., 2021, p. 2), and adults' perceptions about what adolescents' social and emotional capabilities often differ greatly from adolescents' potential (United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund [UNICEF] Romania, 2022). Particularly, one must understand the influence of teachers' beliefs about adolescent morality, as these attitudes shape the "overall development of the school system and long-term development of the country" (Zhang et al., 2022, p. 1).

As I contemplated the implications of students' experiences, I reflected on the social, moral, and educational culture of our school. Did the perspectives of adults in the school mirror those of the nation? Did teachers and administration trust middle school students' capacities to build cognitive and moral partnerships? Seemingly, practices and policies that determined school-wide culture compromised potential opportunities to develop these types of peer-to-peer interactions.

Two participants—Amber and Charlotte—described a novelty associated with interdependence. The mutuality I expected from them conflicted with the traditional pedagogy of other teachers. While this could simply indicate a teacher's unfamiliarity with cooperative learning, it may also suggest risk-aversion. If a teacher's objective is to maintain power, they may be less likely to design activities that promote students' autonomy. Control is familiar, and "losing control of their students may be their biggest fear" (Finkel, 2000, p. 41). A teacher's unfamiliarity or unwillingness could have compromised my students' capacity to build academic relationships with peers.

On a broader scale, questionable executive decisions dehumanized community members on the periphery. That year, by a vote of 7-1, the school board sanctioned an amendment to limit the display of flags in the school building to the United States flag and the state flag. With this majority, they effectively devalued the LGBTQIA community and its allies, as six power-wielding adults rejected and vilified difference. Rather than invite diverse voices to the table, this policy served to silence them. Thus, my efforts to facilitate reciprocity competed with a divisive district-wide ideology.

Discursive practices as instruments of interdependence

As discussed earlier, peers are "valuable sources of ideas and solutions" (Johnston & Nicholls, 1995, p. 97), and recognizing them as such engenders "greater

amounts of high-level cognitive interaction" (Kutnick & Colwell, 2010, p. 210). Interdependence requires interaction, and CoPs are sustained through organic conversation around a specific topic. From the outset, however, I recognized a disconnect between expected and actualized group interaction.

I observed that the presence or absence of interpersonal and academic relationships with their peers directly affected their level of cognitive engagement. Indeed, if a student did not consider a groupmate as a potential source of information or support, this discouraged cognitive interaction. While the participants in this study agreed that, in general, the diversity of a group engenders new ideas and perspectives, this understanding did not necessarily transfer to their communities of practice.

Oser et al. (2008) claim that true democratic intention is a "vision unfulfilled" in schools, as young students' thinking tends to be "egocentric" (p. 401). As such, they are "pseudo-participants" (Oser et al., 2008). Rather than assuming the "shared responsibility" of "total participation," the pseudo-participants of my study superficially engaged with their small groups, if at all (p. 408). While my actions were intended to create an atmosphere of mutuality, connectedness, and interdependence, it did not appear that all students reciprocated this intention.

As Lilah's group sat together to research their global issues one morning, one boy whispered to her, "This is for education and gender inequality, look. I'm doing gender equality or whatever it is, but I'm only searching income, and boys get paid more for the same jobs."

Lilah said, "Cool."

"But um, I don't know if it should be income equality or gender equality," he wondered.

Lilah responded with, "Um, income equality."

This exchange represented the highest quality conversation from the entirety of the recording; it was related to the task, someone asked a question, and another person answered it. However, from the standpoint of conversation, there was room for improvement.

Elaboration is one of the most effective ways to learn and remember; "the more you can elaborate on how new learning relates to what you already know, the stronger

your grasp of the new learning will be, and the more connections you create to remember it later" (Brown et al., 2014, p. 208). Communities of practice are designed to encourage elaboration. Some took advantage of these opportunities, and it supported their learning. Isabella said, "I did think it helped me. Even if I'm talking to nobody, just sharing my thoughts out loud, it kind of does. I don't know how."

Patrick et al. (2007) argue that task-related interactions are a "significant catalyst for learning" (p. 93). Therefore, educational environments should support task-related interactions and academic conversation. Had I effectively created a supportive environment that encouraged discussion? Were my students aware of the value of talk and the quality of their conversations? Clearly, a scholarly connection required explicit invitation and scaffolding.

First, we collectively evaluated a transcribed interaction, and I invited them to consider the quality of the dialogue. They concluded that a conversation's quality was determined by its outcome: academic conversation produced new thinking. Second, I asked students to track their task-related and non-task-related conversations in groups. They did this with tally marks on a sticky note, then made observations about this data. Soon after, students began reminding one another to engage in academic conversation; the opportunity to access and create data empowered them.

Yet, despite intervention, consistent academic conversation remained elusive. In interviews some students told me that their group members' behavioral disengagement interfered with connection (Jessica: "It's hard to work with them academically because they are always goofing off with each other.") Others noticed that, when students were friends with their group members, social relationships were prioritized over academic ones. Even those motivated by democratic intentions were unsuccessful in their attempts to build academic relationships with those they may not "like" (Isabella: "What do you do when the person you dislike is in your group and you talk to them academically, but they don't talk back?").

Finally, towards the end of my data collection, I overheard this exchange between Isabella and Charlotte:

Charlotte: "I don't have anything else to say about this metaphor, but I need to spend 15 minutes on it. I just don't have anything else to say."

Isabella piped up, “Yeah, I don’t know how to do a metaphor, well, I do, but it’s really hard.”

“Exactly! This is supposed to challenge you!” Charlotte said. “An example would be like a seed to a tree. Or not that one because that one’s self-explanatory.”

“Oh! I could use a pen!”

“It’s supposed to open your perspective.”

“But how do I start it?”

Towards the end of the class, groups huddled for a recap of what—if anything—was accomplished that day.

“So, what did you do, Isabella?” Charlotte asked.

“I started a metaphor about space.”

Charlotte said, “Nice!”

In this exchange, Charlotte and Isabella interacted positively and academically about their task, which was to explain the research process using a metaphor. They asked questions, offered suggestions, and Charlotte was a supportive group member as she checked in with Isabella at the end of class and congratulated her on her success. Although these girls were not friends outside of school, they did occasionally play together at recess. Isabella sometimes struggled to regulate herself due to an attention disorder and low self-efficacy, but her creativity increased when she felt competent. She matched well with Charlotte here, whose strengths were in areas where she needed the most support. The exchange with Charlotte helped her feel confident enough to attempt a metaphor, which was so daunting to her at first. It was a beautiful example of what interaction could be.

Implications

In addition to illuminating students’ interdependent experiences, this study intended to produce general implications for middle school teachers interested in implementing communities of practice. While data provided evidence of promotive interaction characterized by (trust, mutual respect, and productive interaction) in some groups, it also revealed the presence of interpersonal space within other groups. Limited

access to prerequisite relational foundations, impeded academic connection, and interdependence faltered.

Lightfoot (1986) acknowledges, “it is not the absence of weakness” that marks a good teacher, but how a teacher “attends to the weakness” (p. 15). By recognizing and articulating the weakness, it can be “confronted directly and worked with over time” (p. 15). Goodness, therefore, is represented by the ability and willingness to change. As an auto-critic, it was my responsibility to transfer my learning.

That fall, I found myself in a new, community-minded school, and I eagerly anticipated the dialogic environment I would co-create with eighth graders. While the original CoPs with sixth graders may have provided an opportunity for the motivated student to initiate conversation, others disengaged without explicit guidance. Rather than deliberative, students’ interactions appeared unstructured and meaningless, and a specific design would have supported meaningful engagement.

In *Teaching with Your Mouth Shut*, Finkel (2000) describes an explicit structure to foster interdependent struggle: the open-ended seminar. An open-ended seminar “preserves” for students the “chance for genuine inquiry” via the “unpredictability of human conversation” (pp. 39, 41). But the skill of addressing inquiry through conversation evolves with experience, and students must engage with each layer of the process.

Students should first build conversational and thinking skills. With a pre-seminar discussion group, they informally dissect a medium and confront raw reactions. The opportunity to first think with fewer people “promotes the presentation of more thoughtful questions … than would arise otherwise” (p. 47). Simply the act of convening with a specific purpose—to prepare for the seminar—“increases the chance of learning in the following formal seminar” (p. 47).

Once preparation via pre-seminar groups is complete, the class convenes to collectively examine the text. This activity is student-directed, and an outcome is not predetermined by the teacher (Finkel, 2000). Rather, the teacher assumes the supporting role of facilitator, as they “learn to tolerate the unpredictability of spontaneous human conversation” (p. 41).

An open-ended seminar limits the role of the teacher. A deliberate balance of power fosters intellectual conversation between peers without “reverting to

teaching-through-telling," which might shatter any spirit of empowerment (p. 46). Teachers can support accountable talk by highlighting important comments, contributing useful questions, "nudg[ing]" the class to stay "focused and productive," supporting the maintenance of civility and order "in the interest of productive discussion," and "summariz[ing] the key results" of the conversation (p. 43). Discussing previously examined media without the teacher's legitimization provides the most benefit; "it is the process of attaining knowledge that legitimizes it" (p. 35).

The belief that the act of teaching transmits knowledge from an expert to a novice assumes that one is "unable to learn without explanation, without the intervention of the master-explicator" (Biesta, 2010, p. 54). Dependence via explication maintains inequality; a "circle of powerlessness" ties the learner to the explicator (Bietsa, 2010). In celebration of collective potential, however, exploratory talk recognizes that learners have the capacity to "proceed in good faith in their search for knowledge without relying on one who already knows" (Finkel, 2000, p. 37). Thus, emancipation from the explicator disrupts the circle of powerlessness (Biesta, 2010).

Conclusion

Mindful of Lightfoot's (1986) wisdom, I attended to the weakness, confronted it directly, and worked with it over time. After all, an educational critic's goal is refinement of the learning process, not the pursuit of perfection (Eisner, 2002). In fact, in any search for improvement, imperfection is inevitable (Lightfoot, 1986). Adopting this evolutionary view made objective measurement of improvement for this critique unsuitable. Rather, my conclusions acknowledged the subjectivity of the context; the emergence of new thinking reflected progress.

Communities of practice served as a "disorienting dilemma" that stimulated transformative thinking (Alhadeff-Jones, 2017, p. 179). Subjectification highlighted possibility by "ruptur[ing] the order of things" and "reconfigur[ing]" the learning experience for me and my students (p. 175). While our communities of practice may not have been the idealized future I had imagined, they did counter "socialized emotions" and create new types of relationships (Zembylas, 2014, p. 218; Alhadeff-Jones, 2017). Ultimately, transformation is a dynamic movement, and the "rhythmicity of emancipation" is revealed through careful and critical reflection (Alhadeff-Jones, 2017, p. 188).

Holistic critique is characterized by the intersection of power, emotion, and reflexivity (Zembylas, 2014); we must be willing to be uncomfortable. Proximity to discomfort allowed me to recognize contradictory emotions that were initially imperceptible. This "critical emotional reflexivity" engendered new perspectives and relationships that did not "blindly follow existing social norms" (Zembylas, 2014, p. 218). So, in the face of "the natural order of things," I stepped into "exile" (Ayers, 2004, p. 156). Trading safety for possibility challenged me to "consciously reach beyond" (p. 157). But upheaval is restorative, and with empowered energy, I continue to challenge dominant ideologies.

Follow me. Let us turn toward our disquietudes, lean into what makes us uncomfortable, and listen carefully to what it tells us (Passow, 2022). Then, let us "shake ourselves awake" and "act" (Ayers, 2004, p. 155).

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