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## ARTFUL INQUIRY AND THE UNEXPECTED ETHICAL TURN: EXPLORING IDENTITY THROUGH CREATIVE ENGAGEMENT WITH GRADES 9-12 STUDENTS IN GUATEMALA AND CANADA

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**ABSTRACT:** This paper presents a research project conducted with Grades 9-12 students in Canada and Guatemala where the visual arts were used to explore identity. Participants engaged in a short-term artful inquiry in which they were asked to create a piece of visual art that represented their cultural roots, self in present society, and hopes for the future. Various modes of representation including drawing and collage were used. When considering the data, emergent themes, and the overall project, unexpected reverberations about the ethical impact of doing arts based work emerged. These questions led to further questions about how individual and collective transformation within the classroom environment does/does not occur as a result of creative engagement.

**KEYWORDS:** art education, Indigenous education, curriculum development, artful inquiry

Research has shown that an understanding of identity, culture, and history is unachievable for many Indigenous students while immersed in a world that marginalizes them through hegemonic structures that exist in many current educational practices and places (Banks, 1998; Kanu, 2011; Witt, 2006). Particularly, Aboriginal<sup>1</sup> youth struggle to find themselves in Western narratives that lack an Indigenous perspective (Battiste, 2011). As one step towards fostering awareness about this concern, an artful inquiry project about exploring identity creatively was developed and implemented with primarily Indigenous youth. This project was conceptualized as a way to give individuals the opportunity to look into their own cultural roots and to then represent this exploration using various forms of art. These artistic representations included, but were not limited to collage inquiry (Butler-Kisber, 2010) and drawing. The research conducted for this project includes data from a total of four classes of students in two schools, as they engaged in an arts-based inquiry project that asked: *Does artful inquiry help Indigenous students understand, represent, think about, and positively shape their identities? Are the experiences of students in Guatemala and Canada similar or divergent? What are the implications of this?* Although the focus of this paper began by exploring these questions, the unexpected concern that emerged while analyzing the data was one about ethics around arts based work. For this reason, data in the form of artwork is not included in this paper, but can be found in a previous publication on this research (Carter, 2016).

## **The Arts, Identity Formation, and Indigenous Youth**

As an arts educator and researcher in teacher identity (Carter, 2014) I have long seen the importance of connecting art making to identity formation. Recent studies have also further emphasized the significant impact and capacity of the arts to foster socio-emotional, creative, and imaginative development (Wright, 2003). In particular, several studies have recently highlighted the ways that arts-based teaching has a particularly beneficial impact on Aboriginal learners (Carter, 2016; Irwin et al., 1997; Patterson, Restoule, Margolin, & Leon, 2009; Smith-Gilman, 2015). In *Arts-based teaching and learning as an alternative approach for Aboriginal learners* (Patterson et al., 2009), 392 teachers and students across Canada explore ways that the arts can be infused into teaching and learning. The co-researchers in this investigation discuss the need for educational approaches that allow for the centrality of Aboriginal values (i.e. Aboriginal Learning Knowledge Centre, November 2009; Antone, Gamlin, & Provost-Turchetti, 2003) resulting in an increase in students' personal and cultural pride, and their abilities to concentrate and feel confident in pursuing their learning and overall educational achievements.

Documented less explicitly through traditional forms of Western research, but available vis-a-vis narrative publications such as Rigoberta Menchu's *I, Rigoberta Menchu* (1983), are the recorded struggle(s) of the Guatemalan Indigenous peoples' experiences as silent majorities in their country, when issues of equity and accessibility to education/rights are evidenced. Although traditionally for Indigenous peoples art is not separated from daily life as it is in a Western context, I still sought to explore through this research if student engagement and success through arts based teaching could draw similar results with Aboriginal students in Northwestern Ontario, Canada and Indigenous youth in Quetzaltenango, Guatemala.

## Arts Based Educational Research

Arts based educational research (ABER) (Carter, 2016; Finley & Knowles, 1995; Irwin, 2003; Kalin, 2014; Leavy, 2009) allows for the use of multiple qualitative methods to be used when approaching one's research. What makes ABER unique is the disposition of the researcher when engaging in arts based work. To commit to approaching one's research through the eyes of an artist/researcher means that one is open and attuned to observations, information, responses, and dialogues that are not just analytical, intellectual, or report driven. The artist/researcher is emotional, imaginative, agile, and responsive. This way of researching allows one to sometimes hear, see, feel, and respond to participants, places, and spaces that affect and contribute to an overall aesthetic experience of unfolding (Irwin, 2003) that has the power to transform both the researcher and participants. In this particular comparative study, data sources include participant art, reflective writings, observations, thick descriptions, and interviews. These approaches were selected to consider the posed research questions and grasp the interrelations between the respondents experiences with making art, and the researcher's unfolding understandings of how the artful inquiry research project may need to be adapted for greatest usability in future educational contexts.

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Although new to the researcher, and not the main focus of the methodological framework for this paper, an understanding of Indigenous methodologies (Kovach, 2009; Smith-Tuhiwai, 1999) that tend to cultural protocols, values, and behaviours was reflected upon prior to the start of this project. Contemplating deeply what research

reflexivity means when working with Indigenous students meant that conversations with elders, colleagues, and participants took place. Both arts based (qualitative) research and Indigenous methodologies involve dwelling and becoming within an interstitial space where meanings, identities, and understandings are vulnerable and constantly in a state of becoming (Carter, 2014 & 2013). In practical terms, using these methodological practices for this project means that the entire research process and the researcher are committed to viewing this work as a living, ongoing, and unfolding process to be filled with surprises and silences, questions and quandaries.

## **Researcher Positionality**

There are many reasons that this research project began. For the focus of this paper, the rationale for improving Aboriginal students' experiences in Canadian schools was the central one and was tied to my experiences growing up in Northwestern Ontario, Canada where many of my classmates were Aboriginal. The urgency of working with Aboriginal students became even stronger during the year I spent as a volunteer teacher in Guatemala, Central America. During my time in Quetzaltenango, I continually questioned my own position as an outsider who used Western approaches and paradigms to inform my pedagogical approaches. As a result, I began to think about how I could help to improve the lives and educational experiences of people where I was from in Canada, rather than unassumingly transmitting my unquestioned educational experiences to my students in Central America. This strong personal desire years later, led me to this particular project. However, accompanying my passion for this work is fear.

I am afraid of not being respectful of the peoples I am working with and learning from. I am afraid that even though I grew up being a part of various Aboriginal cultural customs and traditions that I may offend someone or do something wrong. I have read about Indigenous research methods and observed various Aboriginal peoples begin conferences, presentations, and ceremonies with prayers and rituals to honor the land and the ancestors. But, doing these things myself feels foreign, uncomfortable, and inauthentic.... I have let what I perceive others may think about me engaging in this work hold me back from writing or speaking about Indigenous issues because I am not Aboriginal. My fear has up until now silenced me.

However, I feel a deep connection for the land in Canada; for the cold, the trees, the oceans and lakes, the blueberries and fish and flowers and birds and Northern lights that I can name and recognize and spend time with...I can speak about my awe and reverence for the respectful way(s) that both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples that I grew up with in a small Northwestern Ontario community have for the

natural world, and this grounds me. The land and shared resources (like water) also connect me to Guatemala...a country far away where I feel at home and free. And so, it is with this love for the shared space(s) and place(s) that open up worlds of wonder and imagination for me that I have found my way into Indigenous and arts based research approaches and projects.

## Research Site and Participant Descriptions

Although I worked with Indigenous students at each of the research sites for this project, the circumstances and realities at each of the sites were quite different. For example, six Oji-Cree and Ojibwe teens from remote Northern Ontario communities died mysteriously while pursuing high school diplomas at the school in Northwestern Ontario where I conducted research just before I worked there. In addition to low enrolment and graduation rates, this boarding school for Aboriginal-only students had extremely high absenteeism and lateness records.

Conversely, at the K-12 school in Guatemala, there were three classes of high school students from middle to high socio-economic status backgrounds. Here, Indigenous, Spanish, and a minority of students from other cultural backgrounds had been at this school since Kindergarten.

**Research Site 1:** *High School in Northwestern Ontario, Canada for Aboriginal-only students<sup>2</sup> (Teacher: Samantha Nolan,<sup>3</sup> Students: 12 grade 10-11 students enrolled in Visual Arts (following the Ontario Provincial Curriculum))*

The high school at the first research site was a long-time vocational high school that could accommodate a maximum of 750 students. However, since it was changed into an Aboriginal-only high school, the enrolment of the school decreased. The effect of this when I was in the school building, was that it seemed almost deserted in between classes. The visible images, slogans, mission statement of the school, and other markers inside were reflective of the Ojibwe, Cree, and Oji-Cree cultures that made up the student population. This school also offered a lunch to all students and had elders in the school on a full-time basis, so that students who boarded away from their remote communities could speak with these people for support. To be accredited to issue high school diplomas acknowledged by the province of Ontario, the school had to teach the provincial curriculum. This also meant Ontario certified teachers had to be hired.

The classroom teacher, Samantha, and I discussed where she was at in relation to her provincial curricular objectives for the year prior to the start of the

project. With only a month left of school, Ms. Nolan created an extensive 25-page culminating activity worth 20% of the visual arts final mark based on the curricular project design I had created previously for this research. She spent a significant amount of time developing this document so that it would be in line with the Ontario Visual Arts grade 11 guidelines, and because she felt that this project was important for fostering positive youth identity.

Of the 12 students in this class, only five of them agreed to give their permission for me to take pictures of them and their artwork. Generally, the students were very quiet, but most worked extremely hard on their project during the time I was there.

***Research Site 2: K-12 School in Quetzaltenango, Guatemala<sup>4</sup> for Indigenous, Spanish and International students (Teachers: Grade 9 Science Teacher John David and Visual Arts 2D & 3D teacher Marie Osheaga)***

The school in Guatemala where the artful inquiry project was conducted is located slightly out-of-town in the second largest city in this country. Originally created for the children of American missionaries, this school now caters to Indigenous students (who are often on scholarships), students of Spanish descent and a small number of students with alternate cultural backgrounds. Accreditation of their programs and teachers has recently become a focus for the administration, and with this concern has come the revamping and construction of improved facilities. On top of a hill and protected by a fence around the area that overlooks the neighbouring city, this school is picturesque and reasonably well maintained.

John, a long-time teacher at the school, allowed me to work with his grade 9 science students for two class periods. He did not seem concerned that the visual art and identity focus of the project distracted from his science objectives for the year. Originally from the United States, John had been living abroad for over 20 years and seemed to feel that the new standards being implemented for school accreditation were not necessarily positive.

Marie, the Visual Arts teacher, was a first-time teacher in her early 20's. She had chosen to come to work in Guatemala after graduation from an American University as a kind of "gap" year. Her classroom was chaotic, with materials stacked on top of one another, student work falling from the boards, and garbage pushed aside into corners. Without any prompting upon my arrival in her classroom, she surveyed the classroom along with me and said: "I started strong." The elective 2D and 3D arts classes open to all high school students, in which I conducted my research were embraced by Marie who even took part in making art.

Because of the distance to Guatemala from Canada and the cost and space that a variety of materials would take up, in addition to the short amount of time that I had with each class (1 hour 30 minutes with each of the three classes), I decided to focus on collage inquiry (Butler-Kisber, 2010) as the method for working with the students. The premise for the project remained the same as it was for students in Samantha's class, but they were able to use magazine images and small postcard sized card stock to create their artwork. This collage inquiry approach allowed students enough time to plan, work on, complete and then share their final products during the time I spent with them in their class.

## Explorations

At both sites I began by introducing myself, the project, the purpose of the research, and sharing exemplars of past work. The teacher in each class would then speak to the curricular connections of the project and students had a chance to plan/brainstorm. In the Canadian school, the brainstorms took the form of sketches (published in Carter, 2016). The sketches were drawn freehand by students after they had time in class to brainstorm/research symbols and images that were important to them, and included images that were reminiscent of the Northwestern Ontario landscape (i.e. blueberries, bears, eagles, water, trees) and popular culture symbols (i.e. Coca-Cola symbols, Nike symbols, the McDonald arches).

At the second site, students in all three classes looked through magazines to select the images that they felt represented their past, present, and future. Some elected to brainstorm key images and ideas before creating their collages, but most just worked directly from the images they selected in the magazines. Despite the fact that the magazines I brought with me were primarily American publications, the students selected several images that were related to new technologies (i.e. the Internet), American foods (i.e. Pringles, McDonalds, Coca-Cola) and professional careers that seem to offer financial stability (i.e. Medicine, Law).

I had a limited amount of time with students at the second site, so once they completed their collages, they were asked to write reflections on the images they selected and how these impacted their vision of themselves in the past, present, and future. 68% of the students finished and handed in their collages and 35% wrote reflective comments on the experience. As I began to categorize, thematize, and order the collages, for the purpose of understanding and making sense of some of the visual and written data across both research sites, I started to realize that as a result of doing so I felt deep despair. In Carter, 2016, I was able to publish on the themes

that arose from the student art-work created for this project. In that article there was a focus on the reporting of the “data,” its analysis, and the conclusions that could be drawn for future research implications. In order to fit within a traditional research reporting paradigm my artist/research-self was bracketed. This led to further feelings of alienation from my research. I have opted to focus on these forgotten responses in this work.

## Despair

Jean Paul Sartre, wrote at one time about factory workers in France in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century who worked 16 hours a day and never had worries, until one day a trade union person came to the door and offered the workers a vision of a better world. He went on to say that it was only then that they began to see their lives as unendurable, that they thought about doing something about it. Only then.

I have been reflecting on the notion that Sartre discussed, about how the process of awakening that Maxine Greene (1995) talks about, which in education at least, is the fun part, but is not of course without its own hurdles and moments of discomfort. When you disrupt something that has been unquestioned for a long time, especially in teaching, there is a process of offering an alternative to others that can lead to the deep desire and need to do something differently. In my opinion, this process is like falling in love ... where the overwhelming feelings of loving and being loved take one over completely. As Pablo Neruda writes, there is no differentiation between the hand of the beloved and the chest of their love on which the hand rests when their bodies intertwine together.

When looking at the data for this project, I think I was looking for this to happen; for there to be some evidence in the data that suggested to me that by doing this project the participants could come to see a new “vision of a better world or themselves.” I looked for evidence that they were overwhelmed with the process of awakening for which this artful inquiry was a catalyst, but as I searched and searched in the images and the comments from the participants, I just did not find this kind of response. Sure, this artful inquiry was fun and engaging, but, it did not seem transformative. In fact, the comment that stays with me, from arguably the most

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engaged student in the project was: “I’m glad you came to see what we are capable of.”

They (the participants) did not need to know themselves. They did not need to prove to themselves that they could create amazing art as expressions of their identities. This was extremely difficult for me as a researcher to admit, because on some level it made me feel like they also did not need me.

## The Ethics of Working With Arts Based Research

As an arts educator myself, I have gotten used to bearing the weight of my students fear and trust as I usher them through experiences that I have confidence will help foster classroom community, and aesthetic and pedagogical mastery. I have learned to carry the ambiguous process of creation for pre-service and in-service teachers who have no arts backgrounds and are for the first time exploring drama and theatre, dance, music, or the visual arts. I ask for their trust and offer my reassurance and encouragement because I believe so strongly that the arts change lives and create a better world. But ethically, should I ask them to trust me, someone who struggles with ambiguity after the unendurable ruptures that occur in the very fabric of my own life as a result of being human? Ruptures that cause me to question if I can or should continually choose to throw myself at the mercies of the universe to help me dwell with the sometimes unbearable weight of existence? To cast aside, as I do in my own art-making, myself?

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On the issue of ethics, how does self-care factor into dwelling within liminal moments? There must be a reason people seek out comfort, predictability, and routine. By continually encouraging oneself to “arise and begin again” (Greene, 1995) in order to live some level of

authenticity in arts education, what toll does this take over a lifetime? I am not suggesting that this work end, I am only wondering to what end it should lead. I ask these questions now because I have struggled over the data that has emerged from this research and felt myself fall to pieces. In the interview transcripts and student responses there do not seem to be any descriptors that record the kind of

transformational experiences I was hoping this work would illicit. I struggle with feeling like a failure who has not changed anyone's life but my own by doing this work, but has used monies to do this research along the way. I have travelled and by doing so taken a toll on the environment, left my two young boys at home so I could pursue research I thought was "so important," yet it seems like the work does not reverberate the way(s) I had hoped it would. So, I have no choice but to ask: Does this research matter? Ethically, should I be doing this work if it feels like my participants do not really need me? How does need determine justification for something in arts based research? By continually implicating my own emotions within my research, am I fostering a sustainable research practice for long-term holistic health?

And so, once more with reluctance and partial understanding, I can only offer my latest questions at the end of this research project. I have once again learned that, in attempting to state with certainty that artful inquiry fosters community and positive identity formation for youth, while possibly true, it is not the conclusion I can draw from this data.

In addition to the emergence of more questions developing from this research, I also learned that the materials and subject matter I selected (i.e. the self) as parameters for this project, were too limiting for participants. Perhaps because of the magazines I chose for the collages, there was not much diversity in the responses from students in Guatemala. This makes me think that in the future I need to allow students to pre-select their own images, from other sources, prior to the start of the collage work. Additionally, I felt that the students in the first research site did not need to focus on their Aboriginal identity and that by the time this project took place, they were ready to explore and experiment with various visual arts mediums to create their work. This is a tribute to the work of their teacher, who brought Indigenous content into the existing curriculum prior to my arrival and helped use the arts to foster positive identity formation and a safe space for student explorations.

As a result, in the future, I think that selecting a critical issue (i.e. such as sustainability and the environment) that students could discuss and then explore/re-represent through artful expression may be a better way to foster the kind of deep engagement that I was seeking through this project. The reason I would shift the focus of the inquiry is that it seemed that by focusing on identity, identity itself became a limit. This may be because students focused more on who they were (now) instead of who they might become. Perhaps by connecting to an issue bigger than themselves, they could collectively explore the tensions together and then represent their own personal understandings through their art.

## Moving ... But Not Forward

To conclude, I was surprised that as a researcher I felt that this research did not have the impact I anticipated. This makes me think that spending more time, perhaps through an ethnographic approach with the participants with whom I am working, may allow for a deepening of the connection I seem to seek with my participants as a researcher. I also learned that it may be important, when doing artful inquiry with students, to explore a critical issue through art instead of focusing on identity. The arts are an expression of identity through creative means de facto, so providing a larger enabling constraint for the imagination to explore seems necessary.

I was also increasingly concerned that the experiences of participants were objective driven for this project. This brings up a larger concern about assessment in the arts and creating a culture where production is geared towards grading (or for consumers to purchase art work on a societal scale). In high school especially, it seems allocating grades or parameters, where students feel like they have to create something for a particular audience (i.e. me in this case), limited the direction of the student work, so that I ended up seeing little variety between end-products.

Finally, as already mentioned, I was really struck by my own overwhelming feelings of what it meant to be ethical when working within arts education in general and with Aboriginal and Indigenous students in particular. At this time, as a result of this project, I feel that this is a future direction that needs further reflection and research.

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## NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> The terms Aboriginal and Indigenous are not used interchangeably throughout this paper. Rather Aboriginal is used to refer specifically to the Indigenous peoples in Canada. When the term Aboriginal is used by Aboriginal scholars to discuss concerns related to the Canadian Aboriginal peoples, this term is used for consistency with the original texts. The term Indigenous refers to all of the people who are indigenous to a particular place/land. This means that in this paper, Indigenous will be used to refer to all of the participants in Guatemala and Canada (who are Indigenous).

<sup>2</sup> In order to do research at this site, I sent a letter to the Principal of this school to request to work with the Visual Arts teacher on this project. This school was selected because it was in the Northwestern, Ontario community where I grew up and did my own B.Ed. practicum (so I was aware of their mandate etc.).

<sup>3</sup> The names of the schools, students and teachers are all pseudonyms.

<sup>4</sup> I approached the school Director about doing this research project at the school and was given permission almost immediately. This is the school that I was a volunteer teacher at almost 14 years prior. The science teacher I worked with was a teacher when I was at the school.