

# Addressing the Subjugation of Knowledge in Educational Settings through Structuration of Teacher Research

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Volume 24, Number 1, 2023

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1110316ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33524/cjar.v24i1.664>

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Publisher(s)

Canadian Association of Action Research in Education

ISSN

1925-7147 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Edwards, W. & Kalan, A. (2023). Addressing the Subjugation of Knowledge in Educational Settings through Structuration of Teacher Research. *The Canadian Journal of Action Research*, 24(1), 56–80. <https://doi.org/10.33524/cjar.v24i1.664>

Article abstract

Building on critical sociological models and action research traditions, our work theorizes a structured model of action research to address the subjugation of knowledge within educational settings. We focus on the interplay between structure and agency and how these dimensions can co-evolve in teacher research. In this article, we examine how teachers and researchers engaged in collaborative inquiry communities inhabit a complicated role within educational structures. The authors outline and detail rich cases that illustrate the dense particulars of knowledge subjugation within educational structures—these range from the denigration of immigrant students' credentials to the suppression of indigenous languages. The testimonies of practitioners and students are presented to underscore the inchoate and contradictory conditions that inform educational systems and the meaningful alternative practices that might contravene inequitable structures. The possibilities for recognizing the corrosive mechanisms of knowledge subjugation potentiate resistant parallel structures that invite meaningful inquiry-based methods.

## ADDRESSING THE SUBJUGATION OF KNOWLEDGE IN EDUCATIONAL SETTINGS THROUGH STRUCTURATION OF TEACHER RESEARCH

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### ABSTRACT

*Building on critical sociological models and action research traditions, our work theorizes a structured model of action research to address the subjugation of knowledge within educational settings. We focus on the interplay between structure and agency and how these dimensions can co-evolve in teacher research. In this article, we examine how teachers and researchers engaged in collaborative inquiry communities inhabit a complicated role within educational structures. The authors outline and detail rich cases that illustrate the dense particulars of knowledge subjugation within educational structures—these range from the denigration of immigrant students' credentials to the suppression of indigenous languages. The testimonies of practitioners and students are presented to underscore the inchoate and contradictory conditions that inform educational systems and the meaningful alternative practices that might contravene inequitable structures. The possibilities for recognizing the corrosive mechanisms of knowledge subjugation potentiate resistant parallel structures that invite meaningful inquiry-based methods.*

**KEY WORDS:** Action research; Practitioner inquiry; Teacher inquiry community; Teacher research; Structuration

### INTRODUCTION

In February 2020, during the initial peak of the global COVID-19 pandemic, the Ontario Council of Agencies Serving Immigrants (OCASI) and the Toronto Region Immigrant Employment Council (TRIEC), released a public statement urging the province to hire its

more than 20,000 internationally educated health professionals to help alleviate the massive health force shortage. More than 2,660 internationally educated professionals signed up, yet only 33 provincial health centres requested positions, and only 20 were filled (Desai, 2021). Despite the dire need of the health care system, when staffing shortages created dramatic gaps in emergency room care, the prevailing spectre of educational exclusion effectively blocked internationally educated professionals who were living in Canada from alleviating the burden on the health force. No matter how great the need for educated and trained professionals, discourses that shape the symbolic capital (Bourdieu, 1983) of educational credentials persist to limit the agency of internationally educated professionals.

These structural mechanisms function in a manner akin to Canadian immigration point systems—the fixed address of one’s educational credential connotes symbolic currency and potential entrance into the professional domain; or in the counterinstance, foreign credentials can be downgraded extensively depending on their country of origin. The symbolic norms that circulate around educational credentials encourage specific modes of socialization that legitimate predetermined positions in the labour force and social stratification (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977). This spectre of de/legitimization which constitutes the process of enacting which immigrants are “value added” (Foster, 1998) reifies colonial educational ideology—for even the most intimate work, such as caregiving and nursing—rendering this labor an implicit neoliberal market exchange (Hochschild, 2003).

In Canada, there is an ongoing institutional devaluation of foreign-acquired qualifications, credentials, and experiences (Bauder, 2003). This phenomenon mostly occurs beyond the classroom in the job market for which teachers are required to prepare their international students. Educational structures also often act as businesses that manage the flow of students into and out of the institution with no responsibility for their students’ lives after graduation. If social and educational structures within which teachers are working are not ready to embrace immigrants and other minoritized populations, a focus on teacher agency as a factor that can significantly impact educational outcomes might not amount to much.

When we study teaching and learning with a focus on the role of teachers, and their performance and impact, we often lose sight of the structures that limit teachers’ activities and undermine their visions and initiatives. This oversight will not encourage us to remember that most current educational structures have in fact been designed by colonial and neoliberal institutions that hardly have any desire to empower racialized and minoritized students, but to manage them for the benefit of the political and economic system (Giroux, 2002; Gray et al., 2018; Plehwe et al., 2007). Ontario’s failure to respond to the Ontario Council of Agencies Serving Immigrants and the Toronto Region Immigrant Employment Council, at the peak of the initial wave of the COVID-19 pandemic, reveals some of the serious contradictions in the design of education.

Drawing on theories of institutional structuration and racialized social systems (Giddens, 1984; Meghji, 2021, 2022; Robinson, 2020), in this article, we offer a new methodological model for teacher and action research that recognizes the mutual relationship between

teacher agency and structural bonds. This work crystalizes critical pedagogy (Freire, 1990) and critical race theory (wa Thiong'o, 2005, Meghji, 2021) with meaningful and actionable alternatives for teacher and action research. We begin by outlining our vested scholarship in practitioner and action research and explain how this form of research is best conceived through a Structurated Model of Practitioner Inquiry. This work is then made poignant and actionable through two examples: Illustration #1: Will's experiences with an after school reading and writing group in Toronto and Illustration #2: Amir's interactions with the members of the Network of Critical Action Researchers in Education (NCARE), an international network of teachers interested in critical action research. Discussing these examples, we conclude that we need a model of teacher and action research that recognizes the impact of global neoliberal structures and linguistic imperialism and their role in advancing cultural and economic exclusion.

Over the past ten years, we have been working within numerous action and practitioner research sites while collaboratively thinking through the contradictions and nuances of the work we engage in (Kalan et al., 2019; Kalan & Troberg, 2016; Simon et al., 2016, 2019). We first met at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education of the University of Toronto in a research project titled *Addressing Injustices*. The members of this teacher inquiry community mobilized practitioner inquiry as a form of transformative research (Simon et al., 2014, 2016; Simon & Kalan, 2016). Our conversations about different dimensions of practitioner inquiry continued even after we departed *Addressing Injustices* to engage in separate action research and practitioner inquiry projects. A key feature in our extensive collaboration over these years has been developing inquiry models that can help teacher researchers make sense of practitioner and action research as a systematic approach with defined steps and methods.

Practitioner inquiry, and action research as one of its popular forms, is a methodologically fluid research approach that intentionally defies formulization to better reflect the messiness of everyday teaching and learning. Nevertheless, different theorists have constructed inquiry models to help teachers to initiate their research more comfortably and confidently. Building on the same tradition, in this article, we propose a model for practitioner and action research that best conveys our critical and transformative work; one that captures the problems and inequities that we continually encounter.

Some scholars in critical action research (Cahill, 2007; Park, 1992), practice-research engagement (Brown et al., 2003), and anticolonial traditions (Bernal, 1998; Lather, 1986; Smith, 1999) have pushed for more responsive methodological approaches that rethink intellectual authority by contesting delimiting policy structures with the power of local knowledge. This approach fosters an ethical aim to humanize research (Blackburn, 2014; Campano et al., 2016). By detailing and expanding research models—namely, the “Circle of Inquiry” (Pincus, 2005) and the “Action Research Methodological Model” (Johnson, 2020)—we introduce an action research model that contests inequitable knowledge structures. We have named this model: “The Structurated Model of Practitioner Inquiry.”

### **THEORETICAL ORIENTATION**

Our model starts with the primary recognition of inequitable knowledge structures that pervade educational contexts while stressing how structural and social dimensions can contour and reshape social actions through both the conscious and unconscious processes that position the agent within and against institutional and social structures. In teacher and action research, recognition of relationship between human agency and institutional structures is significant because it allows reflection on the dialogue between teachers and educational settings in a process of interpretation and negotiation that may or may not lead to action, or meaningful action. Through this lens, one can better see that teachers' knowledge enters educational structures, but at the same time teachers' pedagogical actions and interventions are shaped and challenged by established institutional norms.

The relationship between human agency and institutional structures has long been recognized in sociology. For instance, in Giddens' (1976, 1979, 1984) structuration theory, there is the possibility of making sense of limitations of agency in the space between models of volunteerism and determinist structuralism. We have borrowed the term structuration from this theoretical tradition, yet we recognize that traditional structuration theory, such as Giddens' work, fails to address additional layers of social division, discrimination, and domination, such as racism and Eurocentrism (Connell, 2007; Meghji, 2021). Hence, we believe our model, and the illustrations of it, which include students and teachers of colour, can be better explained by drawing on sociologists such as Meghji (2022), Robinson (2020), and Amelina (2021), who, conscious of the shortcomings of the Northern theory, emphasise the importance of invisible racialized social systems that reinforce institutional oppression and, at the same time, local resistance movements that are mobilized against cultural and institutional domination.

Accordingly, although our focus in this article is primarily the role of teachers' action within educational establishments as institutions, we are aware that institutional subjugation of knowledge in the contexts that we discuss is reinforced by societal structuration and differentiation based on racialized capitalism that feeds on Eurocentric notions of globalism. We hope that this theoretical lens will help our readers more easily understand our model's proposition that institutional subjugation of knowledge is often racially motivated, and teachers might need to create parallel educational structures out of the reach and interest of institutions to fundamentally recast teaching and learning.

In this article, we detail a cycle for actualizing educational alternatives by outlining projects that draw specifically from a critical interrogation of the inherited norms and practices within local contexts to reveal how parallel structures can foster new possibilities for teaching and researching. This "working of the dialectic" (Campano et al., 2016, p. 35; Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2011, p. 31) entails questioning and dismantling the dichotomy between research and practice while actively blurring the designations between action and research to contest structures that limit agency and subjugate local knowledge.

### **PRACTITIONER & ACTION RESEARCH MODELS AND STRUCTURAL RESTRICTIONS**

Our work is situated in the nexus between broad scale educational structures and the confluence of local realities that shape and limit teachers' and students' agency. Some of the theoretical traditions that inform our work take a historical perspective to fully grasp the ideological apparatus of educational policy. It is here that the groundwork for social action takes many of its cues. The efficiency movement spawned by the Progressive Era led to the modern iteration of standards and accountability that culminated in No Child Left Behind (Mehta, 2013b). The rationalization for institutional processing (Weber et al., 2000) exhibited a similar pattern throughout the stages of the standards and accountability movement; this process began with the enactment of a linear logic with the following contingent precepts: (1) the creation of a crisis of quality which destabilizes educational practices; (2) the assertion of a technocratic "solution," supported by the knowledge assumptions of an elevated epistemic community; (3) the spreading of this "solution" to powerful stakeholders outside of schools through a logic that promises innovation and power over an increasingly diverse school system; and (4) the inability of the teachers to resist (and often to be co-opted by) this technocratic logic, due to historic factors that position practitioners as a weak, bureaucratically administered field without established countervailing standards (Mehta, 2013b, p. 2). The process of rationalization has come to augment the "standards" ethos undergirding many educational structures. These paradigms, while externally imposed and often rigidly conceptualized, suggest that unless teachers are able to counter these pressures through the articulation of cohesive alternatives, practitioners will remain at the mercy of external actors shaping new technocratic "inventions."

A discourse of "standards" has also empowered neoliberal structures which treat education as commodity. Standardization, centralization, and homogenization help neoliberal institutions mass-produce courses, programs, and curricula for higher enrollment (Davies & Bansel, 2007; Giroux, 2005). "Under neoliberal modes of governance, regardless of the institution, every social relation is reduced to an act of commerce" (Giroux & Sardoč, 2018, para. 4). This view of education significantly impacts pedagogy. The same system that regards students as customers will treat teachers as customer service representatives who become bureaucratic agents of the state, positioned to create more revenue. This designated role is far from the image of teachers as knowledgeable educators capable of mobilizing their agency when needed for the betterment of their students. Teachers in this role are asked to teach centralized curricula and conduct standardized assessment. Meanwhile, their performance is constantly checked through different means, mainly to develop strategies for more student "retention" and thus profit (Zepke, 2015). Institutional and structural forces impact teachers and their pedagogical practices (Moriarty, 2020), and thus any formulation of practitioner and action research would have to address questions about structural mirroring, especially when institutions regard education as a means of standardization and commerce.

The deeply rooted contradiction resides in the fact that the educational sector is organized around an inchoate system that operates as a bureaucracy (Mehta, 2013a, p. 463); one that is primarily funneled through a neoliberal ethos. Practitioner inquiry is seminal to our

understanding of educational research because it unfolds in what Lytle (2000) has described as a *contact zone*; one that is fraught with tensions, resistance, and critique. It is here that the inherited dimensions of practice and positionality are questioned; this type of research encourages sustained interrogation of universal or generalizable models that can, due to their inherent simplicity and fluid marketability of “best practices,” obscure deeper issues within practice.

As practitioners adopt an inquiry stance in their work, they engage in research that has as its goal some element of change, often involving shifting discourse about learners, problematizing the structures of schooling, and creating new conditions for teaching. What often begins as an ethnographic question (What is going on here? What are the underlying patterns and ideologies that govern teaching and learning within a particular context?) becomes the starting point for ongoing inquiry in which taking action and knowledge generation are intertwined processes. (Campano et al., 2013, p. 104)

In the face of reductive and politically inert definitions for teaching and learning, practitioner research opens some opportunities for documenting alternative practices and the emergent tensions that are embedded in the field. Rather than being faithful implementers of other people’s ideas, a methodology that emphasizes how research produces “knowledge, knowers, and knowing” (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009, p. 118) reveals the importance of more democratic and innately reflexive engagements with communities, academic institutions, and other stakeholders.

### **The Circle of Inquiry**

The Circle of Inquiry, as Pincus (2005) originally conceived of it, emphasizes how practitioner researchers are in a different relationship with their research participants than most researchers: as such, practitioner research methods for data collection can differ significantly from traditional researchers who make clear distinctions between the role of the teacher and the researcher. While practitioners’ contexts are diverse and multivalent, there remain interesting commonalities, between and across sites of practice, when one considers the possibilities for generating questions about teaching and participants’ lives. What is useful about Pincus’ (2005) paradigm is the emphasis upon how moments of professional dissonance can lead to powerful questions that result in some kind of recalibration or action. “Taking action” as a practitioner researcher can have a direct impact on students’ lives (Pincus, 2005). The model she proposes identifies the importance of sustaining inquiry across a professional lifespan (see Figure 1).

Pincus (2005) identifies how a circle of inquiry can be driven by moments of dissonance that can elicit real questions that initiate the cyclical process of inquiry through raising questions, looking closely, searching broadly, making sense, then taking action. It is important to note that unlike linear models of inquiry, the process is ongoing and recursive. Nevertheless, the main focus of this model is teachers’ *volunteered* action and reflection. There is no overt reference to educational structures as the main cause of challenges that teachers and students have to face within the classroom.



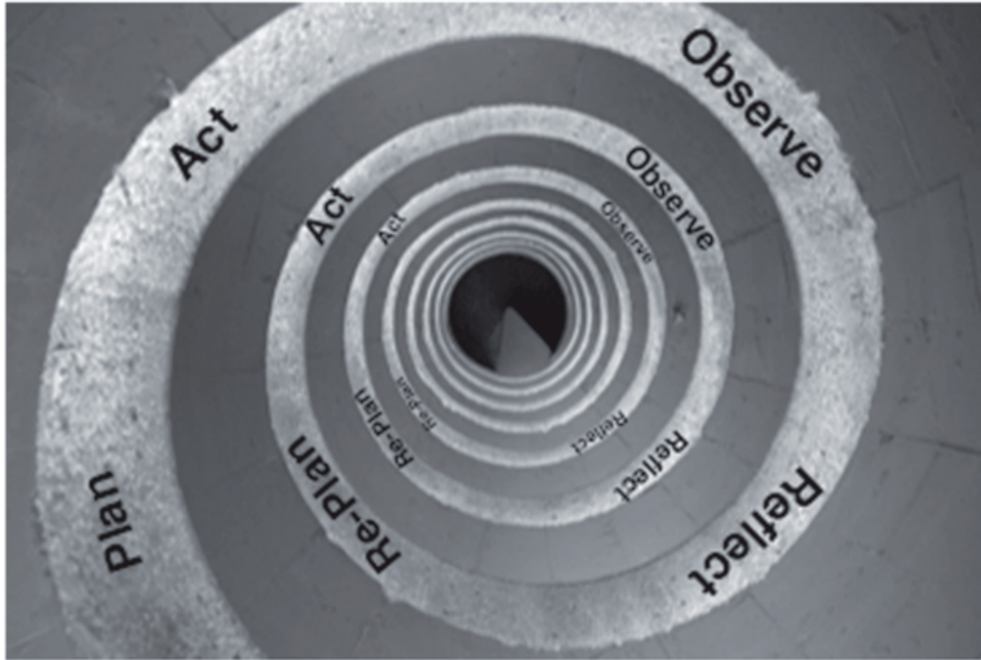
**Figure 1.** *Circle of Inquiry (Pincus, 2005)*

### **The Classic Action Research Model**

The same mentality is evident in most action research models. Figure 2 is a popular action research model from Kemmis et al.'s well cited *The Action Research Planner* (2014). The model can very well represent most two and multi-cycled spiral models of action research typically based on systematization of teachers' initiatives through thoughtful reflection, planning, acting, and observing for renewed plans of action. As Kemmis and his colleagues also state, this traditional model of action research places too much emphasis on the individual teacher's action as if it were the only lacking element in the system:

This Lewinian view of action research and what, in earlier editions of the Planner, we called "a spiral of cycles of self-reflection" or "the self-reflective spiral" oversimplified the process, and, we now think, gave too much significance to the individual steps of planning, acting, observing, reflecting, re-planning (and so on) and their reiteration. (Kemmis et al., 2014, p. 9)





**Figure 2.** *Action Research Spiral Model (Kemmis et al., 2014, p. 19)*

### **The Structurated Model of Practitioner Inquiry**

Considering the Circle of Inquiry and traditional Action Research Model, we noted the paucity of theorization of the structural dimensions or influences. It would seem these models could not account for the dynamic of the structural tensions that inherently limit the agency of practitioner researchers. This is where sociological theories of structuration, discussed in the theoretical orientation section, become informative. Instead of envisioning structure as fixed over time, in structuration theory, there is a duality that could be both enabling and constraining. Structure and agency are innately related. These social worlds are enacted through “rules” that can be mitigated through resistance and creative compliance.

The insufficiency of attention to institutional and societal structures can also be explained by myriad streams in scholarship, for instance, theorizing agency within structure, for Freire (1976), is coterminous with a form of critical “conscientization”—this looks beyond fatalistic or naïve accounts of so-called neutral or natural systems of power. The Structurated Model of Practitioner Inquiry owes some theoretical lineage to Freirean (1976) conscientization, specifically, in how this model emphasizes a continual interrogation of inherited patterns and practices.

Figure 3 is our model created based on the impact of structures. The Circle of Inquiry paradigm and the Action Research Spiral Model afforded us the opportunity to visually represent—however imperfect—the recursive/inquiry-based methods that we were developing, and at the same time, highlight the role of structures more tangibly.



Figure 3: The Structured Model of Practitioner Inquiry

“Teacher research is a form of inquiry approached from the teacher perspective” (Craig, 2009, p. 61). Theories that conceptualize practitioner and action research often value teachers’ epistemic privilege and thus resist hierarchies of knowledge that reduce the role of practitioners to technicians that need to follow roadmaps created by academic and policy makers. “School-based teacher researchers are themselves knowers and a primary source of generating knowledge about teaching and learning for themselves and others” (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009, p. 447). Action research, as a form of practitioner inquiry, additionally, emphasizes the significance of taking “action” based on teachers’ epistemological stance. Teachers can “make up their own minds about how to change their practices in light of their informed practical deliberations” (Carr & Kemmis, 1986, p. 219).

Despite a clear agenda to disrupt the dominant hierarchical knowledge structure that informs everyday pedagogy, most practitioner inquiry theory focuses on teachers’ practice as the ultimate goal of engagement with teacher research. In other words, most practitioner inquiry theory is interested in improving teachers’ practice through their own reflections and understandings without paying sufficient attention to how structures impact teachers’ practice. In this tradition, teacher researchers, as cited above are invited to “generate knowledge for themselves” mainly to “change their practices,” as if the teachers’ practice is the main problem to be fixed.

An emphasis on pedagogical improvement is crucial in any theory of education, and understandably a vital component of practitioner inquiry theory. The emphasis on the improvement of practice has made teacher research a popular form of professional development (Atay, 2008; Borg, 2014; Kirkwood & Christie, 2006; Zeichner, 2003) in which teachers are not treated as trainees but the leaders of their own learning:

It has been argued for many years that P-12 educators should conduct research about their own practice as a form of professional development. One of the most common claims is that teachers will become better at what they do by conducting research and that the quality of learning for their pupils will be higher. (Zeichner, 2003, p. 302)

In our model for practitioner inquiry, we recognize the significance of a focus on teachers' pedagogical practices. At the same time, however, we highlight the significance of mobilizing teacher and action research in order to disrupt educational structures which impact teachers' practices within the classroom.

A sole focus on practitioner inquiry as professional development has two major disadvantages. First, theorizing to address teachers' imagined "lack" of skills, with no attention to structural contexts, resembles an attempt based on a deficit mentality. Second, conceptualizations with disinterest in institutional practices that, at least to some extent, determine educators' teaching rely entirely on theories of volunteerism that could exaggerate the impact of teacher agency in the formation of pedagogical practices.

An interest in structural transformation is not necessarily a new direction in teacher research. It has, in fact, been part and parcel of teacher research from inception. Decades ago, Bullock (1987) conceptualized teacher research as a revolutionary act that, although involving the teacher's practice, ultimately targets the entire educational structure:

Like many simple acts ... teacher research is finally revolutionary. ... These small acts, these little rebellions add up to a quiet assault on the entire educational hierarchy through the actions of individuals and the assertions by teachers in individual schools. (Bullock, 1987, p. 27)

The same attitude has echoed in other publications in the field. Here is another example:

Practitioner researchers draw upon their identities and experiences to question established systems and create more equitable arrangements for student learning. Often, this involves theorising and teaching within and against inherited assumptions and structures. (Simon et al., 2012, p. 9)

While contributing to the same line of thought, what is new in our work is formulating a methodological model that overtly incorporates considerations for structural reform into its processes. Our model positions addressing structural knowledge subjugation as a crucial part of practitioner inquiry rather than an outcome of teacher research. Our model clarifies

that what teachers need to disrupt is not necessarily their practice but the structure. This recognition allows them to imagine alternative pedagogical spaces, autonomous micro-institutions within or without the current institutional dominations. This move involves the creation of a new space rather than reforming unreformable structures that were not constructed to promote a diversity of knowledge traditions in the first place but built to oppress it. Creating an autonomous educational space will allow teachers to fundamentally recast teaching and learning since it liberates teachers from adherence to colonial and neoliberal institutional requirements. The next step is documenting alternative practices and outcomes involved in this process to communicate its potentials to fellow educators. In what follows, we focus on a number of examples to illustrate, unpack, and explain the Structured Model of Practitioner Inquiry.

**Illustration #1: “I seek the challenge I was trained for.”**

Will teaches in a large Academic Upgrading program in a densely populated urban center that services students who, for one reason or another, could not finish high school and hope to bridge into college. These students have access to some of the resources the college has to offer, and yet they remain academically marginalized until they can successfully complete Academic Upgrading and receive an invitation into the program of their choice. Will's positionality, as a white first-generation post-secondary student who grew up in a working-class community in an economically depressed industrial city in Ontario, provided some insight into the difficulties of navigating post-secondary school. Like some of his students, Will did not have the generational guidance of an elder who had succeeded in post-secondary contexts.

In April 2011, the main funder of this program, Employment Ontario, unveiled an extensive curriculum reform into the publicly funded adult basic education program called Literacy and Basic Skills (LBS). These changes were predicated upon the Ontario Adult Literacy Curriculum Framework (2011). The outline for this curriculum is described in hundreds of pages of documents that lay out the new accountability system to propose a task-based learning system. A thorough analysis of the entire program is beyond the scope of this paper. At the core of the reform is a learning standards document called The Ontario Adult Literacy Curriculum Framework (OALCF), which has established Milestones as the example referenced below: “Read instructions on a cleaning product” (Ontario Adult Literacy Curriculum Framework, 2011, p. 8). See Figure 4.

These “milestones” have a contradictory value. They are a low-stakes test for adult learners since their results are not used to indicate program achievements. However, they are used as an indicator of program performance in determining funding allocations. This makes them a high-stakes test for literacy programs. Assessors must “sell” the value of the Milestones to learners. It is important to note that Ministry of Training College and Universities (MTCU) has not developed adequate testing accommodations for learners with learning disabilities, mild developmental disabilities, vision challenges, or other needs. Ontario is the first and only known jurisdiction in the world to have reformulated some of the international survey testing methods for educational and pedagogical purposes, and then mandated its use within an accountability framework (Pinsent-Johnson & Sturm, 2015).

Examples of tasks learners can do at the end of Level 1:

**Read brief texts to locate specific details**

Tasks	E	A	SS	PS	I
Read instructions on a cleaning product label	•	•			•
Read a brief email confirming the date and time of a meeting	•	•	•	•	•
Read a brief note from a co-worker	•	•			
Follow directions to a local retail outlet	•	•			•
Read a brief blog entry on a familiar topic			•	•	•
Read a note in a log book					

Each example task indicates the goal paths in which learners are likely to be expected to perform similar tasks once they have transitioned

Example tasks illustrate what learners can do at the end of a level.

**Figure 4.** Ontario Adult Literacy Curriculum

The Ontario Adult Literacy Curriculum Framework, which sets the parameters for adult literacy in Canada’s most populous province, reveals the deep social and intellectual disjunction (Rose, 1989) that permeates well intentioned educational interventions. Will’s students are often numbed by the notion that they have come back to school to gauge whether they can complete performance tasks like: “Read the label off of cleaning products” or “Read a brief note from a co-worker” (Ontario Adult Literacy Curriculum, 2011, p. 8). In this single curriculum extract cited in Figure 4, the term “brief” is used four times. This predilection for compact writing and reading instruction for “Level 1” learners reflects the assumption that the substance and quality of writing can only be effectively established in quick/short intervals of text and time (Hillocks, 2002; Simon, 2013). This technocratic solution reveals the diminished expectations of students’ abilities and ambitions. The implementation of this broad scale curriculum is predicated upon a social determination model that effectively streams marginalized (often new immigrant) students into menial employment like “reading instructions on a cleaning product.” There is a lot at stake for practitioner researchers hoping to counter these mandates and the societal expectations that they are rooted in.

Identifying and challenging the reductive policy embedded in the Ontario Adult Literacy Curriculum entailed a critical connection to the theory of structuration. This meant wrestling with the ideologies present in the economic and social determinism that seeks to wed immigrant students to menial jobs/services. From a pressing and practical standpoint, this work involved challenging mechanisms that created time barriers and extra hurdles for students. For Will, as a practitioner researcher with some limited agency in terms of practice, this meant actively fast-tracking students who were barred from college entrance due to their foreign credentials while creating opportunities for them to engage and disseminate

their own voices and critiques of the educational barriers they experienced. This culminated in the formation of an educational alternative created explicitly for the purpose of inviting inquiry around the implications of educational structures and how they delimit the life chances of students. Will created a class called *The After School Reading and Writing Group* and invited students from across the different so-called “ability clusters” who were interested in exploring creative and critical work that exceeded the highly reductive and newly minted provincial curriculum mandate. The dynamics involved in creating and running the group remind us that practitioner researchers are uniquely situated to identify sites of resistance to invite educational alternatives that address the subjugation of knowledge.

It is through Will’s work with literacy programs that he first met Khin (pseudonym). Khin was a new immigrant in her mid-thirties of South Asian descent who enrolled into the Academic Upgrading program shortly after arriving in Toronto. As a practitioner in the Academic Upgrading program, Will had to negotiate the implementation of top-down curriculum (Ontario Adult Literacy Curriculum Framework, 2011) alongside established practices of streaming students into literacy courses. Welcoming students like Khin, who came with a vast array of skills and experiences that could not be fully quantified within rigid Canadian credentialing bodies, fundamentally altered the way Will would approach teaching and research. Khin joined the literacy class Will was teaching, he became compelled by her struggle to translate her professional experiences back home into a Canadian context. Khin had worked as a pediatrician in Myanmar, assisting children who experienced chronic illnesses. She had come to Canada with clearly defined aspirations to support her husband and young daughter, but she had hit extraordinary barriers. The denigration of her professional experience was such that she had to effectively acquire high school equivalency to be considered as a candidate for a nursing program at a college in Toronto.

Khin went from being a pediatrician in her homeland to an academic upgrading student seeking high school equivalency in Toronto. Her medical degree with a specialization in Children’s medicine, along with a decade of clinical experience, all backed up with references, were fundamentally undercut. Learning Khin’s and other students’ stories led Will to question whose interests were upheld in the processing of new immigrants’ educational credentials and work experiences? It was during this time that he began exploring practitioner research as a viable methodology for considering how knowledge becomes effectively subjugated (Foucault, 1980). There is strong theoretical resonance between Foucault’s (1980) articulation of subjugated knowledge and Freire’s (1990) seminal critique of the banking concept of education and how transmissive knowledge structures breed complacency and passivity: “The more completely they accept the passive role imposed on them, the more they tend simply to adapt to the world as it is and to the fragmented view of reality deposited in them” (p. 73). Such critiques also reveal the insidious nature of colonial knowledge structures that make use of official educational establishments.

The idea of ‘subjugated knowledge’ captures some of the epistemological approaches that are designated inadequate, insufficiently elaborated, and become “located low down on the hierarchy, beneath the required level of cognition of scientificity” (Cochran-Smith & Lytle,

2009, p. 130). Becoming aware of the subjugated knowledge that students like Khin possessed—such as a medical degree from an unrecognized institution—encouraged Will to revisit the role that practitioners could play in repositioning power arrangements, one that could, in some meaningful way, alter the dominant equation that seemed stacked against certain students. Foucault's (1980) work on the nexus of power and knowledge reveals the coercive ideological structures that operate to dismiss knowledge that exists outside established purviews. In the context of a constantly shifting post-industrial workplace, a continued scrutiny on immigrants' foreign credentials seems hopelessly anachronistic (Foster, 2006).

Will sensed that Khin, and other students, came into class with significant experiences of being processed by bureaucratic mechanisms that shaped their educational trajectories. Khin, in particular, felt thwarted from pursuing medicine in Canada. Will encouraged her to compose a piece of writing that might encapsulate her experiences of settling in Canada. This was a call to action for Khin, Will invited her to continually document, through her writing, the inequitable knowledge structures that animate institutional life in Canada. This call to action is reminiscent of Ngũgĩ and his work predicated on decolonising the mind. Thiong'o (2005) reminds us that we need to examine where we stand in relation to our perspective on imperialism, "in its colonial and neocolonial stages: that if we are to do anything about our individual and collective being today, then we have to coldly and consciously look at what imperialism has been doing to us and our collective view of ourselves" (p. 88). Khin's documentation of her refusal to merely accept her professional denigration and seek menial employment speaks to the importance of recognizing and theorizing student/immigrant agency within academic models that reify the status quo.

Khin chose to write a narrative essay entitled, "The Challenges Internationally Educated Immigrants Face in Canada." She began her work outlining the many agencies that offered free services with the intent of uplifting the career and life goals of new immigrants, but with the practice of funneling newcomers through rigid assessment terminals that could leave indelible marks on their future and ultimately obstruct them from attaining any meaningful employment:

All newcomers know and agree that every immigrant has to face many new challenges in Canada. The hardest challenge for me as one of the internationally educated professionals (IEPs) was to find a job in my area of expertise. English language proficiency, lack of Canadian work experience, Canadian certification, and under recognition of the value of international credentials are serious roadblocks faced by internationally educated professionals. These roadblocks cause a negative impact on immigrants and the Canadian government. So, I was determined to learn English to overcome my perceived language deficiency and to find a job in my profession. My husband brought me to the Bickford Centre to assess my English skills. We found out that my Canadian Language Benchmark (CLB) levels were 7, 7, 7, 8. When I checked the job postings in newspapers and the Internet, I noticed that most employers required a history of Canadian work experience. I attended the Career Transition for International Medical Graduates'

Workshop at Skills for Change Employment Ontario, and learned about the Canadian Labour Market, Canadian workplace culture, different resume formats and experienced a mock job interview. To obtain Canadian work experience in my professional field, I applied for a volunteer position at the ... Hospital. My application was turned down by the volunteer coordinator. There were too many applicants. He told me that, "This volunteer opportunity is mainly for applicants whose CLB level is 4, 5. Your CLB level is 7, 8. You can speak English very well. You are ready to apply for a job, and you should focus on searching for jobs instead of volunteering.

Khin's writing captures some of the illogical contours of the process of downgrading immigrants' foreign credentials. Her story provides an example of a resistant counter-narrative that complicates the deficits projected upon migrant workers. Her frustration with being told she is too educated to attain a volunteer position at a hospital, and too inexperienced (from a Canadian workplace experience benchmark) to get a job, was one of many delimiting contours that would shape her immigrant experience. As an instructor working with students like Khin, Will began noting that this was a very common problem newcomers face in Canada. Will felt uneasy responding to her documentation of being a 7 or 8 on the Canadian Literacy Benchmark, when a 4 or 5 was the designation that might have helped to establish a professional network within a hospital. Why would hospitals, institutions which consistently bemoan the lack of human resources, prefer less linguistically fluent volunteers? Khin continued in her essay to document the tough choices new immigrants face:

I was in a quandary. What should come first; a job or improved English skills? One day, my friend told me that there was an immediate need for Burmese speaking medical interpreters in the non-government organization (NGO) where she worked. I applied for the post and eventually, I got the job. It was my first Canadian job. I am still working there. Although I could not work as a healthcare service provider, I was happy to be a part of the Canadian health industry. I learned many new things while providing interpretation services. I broke the language barrier and helped non-English speakers from my country, Myanmar. I met some IEPs (medical doctors, engineers and people who held Masters or PhD degrees) who worked as taxi drivers, security guards, factory workers and cleaners. I am a foreign trained medical doctor who could not find a job in my area of expertise. My plight: I have to work as a medical interpreter to survive. I do not want to work as a medical interpreter for the rest of my life. I seek the challenge that I was trained for. Chin up, I kept on looking for a better job opportunity in my field by attending seminars conducted by Health Force Ontario and Internationally Educated Professionals.

Encouraging Khin to develop her literacies in Will's class felt contradictory; it seemed that she became keenly aware that the game was fixed against new immigrants with foreign credentials. Khin's writing surfaced an organic intellectual critique (Campano et al., 2013) of immigrant services, the Canadian Education system, and the Health Care networks. Master's



degrees, PhDs all mean very little when they exist outside the established credentialed canon determined by parochial institutions. Later in her essay, Khin underscored her realization that Canadian institutes of higher learning are imbricated with credentialing services that hold the key for professional designation. As recent events have illustrated, not even a pandemic can break these institutional molds. After learning she scored too high to volunteer in the medical field and too low to apply for the nursing program, she wrote:

I was determined to earn a Canadian diploma. I booked an appointment with an entry advisor at ... College to find out the pre-requisites for applying for a postsecondary program as an IEP. She advised me to have an evaluation of my foreign credentials by the World Education Service (WES) or International Credential Assessment Service (ICAS). In the evaluation report, my medical degree was equivalent to first year of Medicine in Canada, and all my scores were degraded from A to B and B to C. The advisor also told me that the Practical Nursing (PN) program that I was planning to apply for was an oversubscribed program, and any candidate who got "A" in all pre-requisite subjects was sure to get an admission offer. I felt that the Canadian Education system was very unfair to internationally educated professionals.

There were no choices provided by our college intake team for Khin to investigate alternative assessments of her medical degree. Only the World Education Service or the International Credential Assessment Services held the power to process her medical degree. It is one thing to have her medical degree reduced to one year's equivalent of medical school in Canada; this would mean she could apply to nursing schools with her degree grades intact. It seemed unfair and arbitrary to deflate every course grade on her transcripts (from an A to a B) simply due to her country of origin. This systematically delegitimized her credentials within Canada. Khin's medical degree was not worth the paper it was printed upon in Canada. The academic evaluation agencies offered no viable options to appeal or contest their designations. Creating an alternative space, the After School Reading and Writing Group allowed literacy practices that facilitated meaningful conversations about institutional discrimination in the Canadian job market. Becoming deeply acquainted with Khin's experience of being professionally stripped of her credentials also spurred Will to push for programmatic changes within the college. One of these actions entailed authoring frameworks for fast-tracking talented and qualified internationally educated students through college programs so they can attain credentials 6-12 months earlier than the original timeline. Khin's experiences were also a catalyst for instituting more broad interpretations of what are known in the college as PLAR (Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition).

Khin's story speaks to how the funds of knowledge (Moll et al., 1992) students bring with them can be thoroughly diminished. By recounting Khin's encounters with bureaucratic models of processing, evaluating, designating, and ultimately professionally denigrating her credentials, sustaining a professional conscience as an insider to these practices, required that Will develop alternative practices to capture the capaciousness of academically internationally educated professionals who found themselves academically marginalized. The impulse to develop alternatives also encouraged Will to meet with other educators and

administrators to collectively question practices like streaming and the relationship with outside 'expertise' embodied in the World Education Service and the International Credential Assessment Services.

As a newcomer to Toronto, Khin experienced several layers of bureaucratic processing that proclaimed she was a 7, or at best an 8, but that she had 'no relevant Canadian experience'. Her numbers were too high to let her into a hospital to volunteer and too low to grant her admission into the nursing program. These agencies included immigrant services, Canadian Language Benchmark assessments, International Credential Assessment Services, Employment Ontario, Health Force Ontario and Will's college, which placed her in a middling literacy stream. Nevertheless, what Will found most edifying about Khin's writing and her way of being in the world was the way that she composed resistant tones: "I didn't want to work as a medical interpreter for the rest of my life, I seek the challenge I was trained for." Khin's jarring concluding lines stuck with Will, "No matter how big the challenges are, internationally educated people will find a way to overcome them." Despite this hopeful instantiation of agency, Khin's sense of dehumanization remained with her even after she scored one of the highest grades in our Academic Upgrading program and attained entrance in the Practical Nursing program at the urban college where Will teaches.

### **Illustration #2: Network of Critical Action Researchers in Education (NCARE)**

Amir's observations of multiple practitioner inquiry and critical action research projects also show that transformative and critical teacher research projects often share features that resemble our structured inquiry model, which regards structures as actively forming dominant pedagogical practices and policies. These institutional and structural dynamics at times even undermine teachers' activities and initiatives which are intended for more effective and equitable education.

Amir joined a teacher inquiry community called the Network of Critical Action Researchers in Education (NCARE) in 2016, and since then he has been an active member of the group. The NCARE is a network of teachers and teacher educators who are interested in critical and transformative action research. The association with this network has provided Amir with an opportunity to learn about many critical action research projects. One major NCARE activity that Amir was heavily involved in over the past 6 years was creating a book that reports the experiences of the NCARE teachers (Gagne et al., 2022). The projects reported in the NCARE publication have different objectives and methodological approaches. However, the common theme that connects the projects is fighting back neoliberal policies that have negatively impacted educational processes internationally (Giroux, 2002; Gray et al., 2018; Plehwe et al., 2007). In this section we briefly discuss a few projects supported by NCARE as examples that can substantiate the significance of our revision of dominant action and practitioner research models. In harmony with our perception, the value of these projects lies in teachers' attempts to disrupt structures rather than their own practice.

Amir's close interactions as an editor and critical friend with the teachers who contributed to this book, gave him a unique opportunity to observe the impact of structural pressure on teachers and their work and to study how teachers come together to resist that pressure.

Amir's positionality, as an Iranian-Canadian scholar with teaching experience in multiple international contexts, provided him with a common background with the teachers who shared stories from the Global South. He, for instance, taught English within institutions in the Middle East that aspired to catch up with the norms set by global neoliberal standards, such as the use of English as the language of science, curriculum standardization, and conforming to ranking systems regulated by educational policy makers in the North. As explained in the book (Gagne et al., 2022), the neoliberal damage to education has been so overt that only a focus on teachers' agency seems to be an unrealistic vision for meaningful transformation. Some of these aggressive neoliberal policies are: cutting funding for public schools, commercializing knowledge and education, corporatization of higher education, eradication of indigenous forms of education, and linguistic and academic imperialism.

Traditional practitioner and action research models invite teachers to "reflect" on their practice. The overemphasis on teacher reflection in these models can be interpreted to mean that teachers do not often systematically analyze their everyday pedagogies. In contrast with this view, the NCARE teachers did not, in any way, "lack" an understanding of the significance of "reflection," nor were they oblivious to the importance of systematically improving their practice. The deficit mentality that views teachers' practice as lacking problem-solving skills is highly misleading. This view puts the responsibility of structural and policy problems on teachers' shoulders by overemphasizing teacher agency, or lack thereof. In fact, classroom pedagogy was not the main problem or question in any of the NCARE projects. Instead, what the researchers and teachers in these projects had to address was global neoliberal structures and the linguistic imperialism that empowers them. In the following examples we explain the actions taken by three teacher-researchers who challenged the restrictions and dictates of these structures through project-based pedagogies.

Bapujee Biswabandan (2022) conducted his project in a village school in Odisha in India. Bapujee joined the teachers and parents of the school to create a multilingual textbook that used the students' Indigenous languages. The textbook was a collection of ethnic songs and traditional stories in all the languages that the students spoke. Despite the legal space for conducting mother tongue-based language education in Indian states, the languages of many Indigenous populations have not found their way into the educational system and are not used as the language of instruction. One reason for this is that most states in India, which have the authority to determine the language of instruction, use the dominant language of the state as the language of instruction. This design has created a multilingual system at the national level; it, however, has excluded many minoritized languages in each state. The second reason is the neoliberal policies that local Indian governments, including the Government of Odisha, have been adopting and reinforcing. Like many other policy makers in developing countries, these governments have bought into the idea that there is a correlation between English-medium education in primary schools and "quality education" that can nurture "economic opportunities." As a result of these policies, the children from Indigenous families find themselves stranded in an education atmosphere dominated by English and the state language with no presence of their mother tongues. In response to this situation, the textbook industry in India shows no interest in creating textbooks that contain

minoritized languages. Biswabandan's collaboration with the schoolteachers' and students' parents was meant to address this structural malfunction.

In harmony with our proposed model, Biswabandan's, the schoolteachers', and the parents' project starts with a recognition of linguistic subjugation imposed by neoliberal linguistic imperialism. Please note that, unlike the previous models that encourage the identification of moments of dissonance in the classroom and in the teaching and learning process, our model is more interested in macro patterns of discrimination and structural oppression. The next step is creating a parallel structure instead of reformist tweaks. The teachers and parents come together to create a textbook that, in practice, the economic and political structures have purposefully prevented from being published. In this sense, it is not the teachers' practice that needs to be reformed through cycles of action; it is the system that lacks genuine interest in meaningful educational outcomes. Practitioner inquiry in this context needs to create alternative possibilities that not only improve pedagogy but also disrupt the usual function of the structure. Biswabandan, the teachers, students, and their parents created the textbook in the school yard after the official school time.

Biswabandan's multilingual textbook is an example of what it means to create alternative educational possibilities. In the model that we are proposing, the book format of the project is also important because books can be disseminated. They can be sent to other schools and used by hundreds of other students. Alternative dissemination possibilities, besides traditional academic representation, are a vital component of our model because "alternative" possibilities need to turn into "actualities" through communication between practitioners. Based on our model, teacher research outcomes need to be visible, be replicated, be adopted as feasible alternatives. Sharing recourses and ideas will make it clear that alternative possibilities exist and can happen, although the system often actively hinders creative visions.

Interestingly, creating essential shareable resources that current structures have failed to produce characterized a few other projects in the NCARE. For instance, Mama Adobea Adjetey-Nii Owoo (2022) collaborated with a number of teachers in Ghana to create Gã-English bilingual resources, including a learner's dictionary. Similar to India, Owoo identified the resource deficit in Ghana's academic context as a direct result of the centrality of English as the language of the neoliberal market and how this has swallowed all available funds and resources.

In a different NCARE research project, Andrés Valencia (2022), a Colombian teacher researcher, attempted to challenge English academic and essay writing in his EFL (English as a Foreign Language) Teacher Education courses with his pre-service English teachers. He calls his project a "political-pedagogical project" (p. 81) in which he resisted the linguistic bias of verbocentrism in communication. Hand in hand with the dominance of verbocentrism is the projected role of the teacher as the conveyer of the techne of verbal communication in the language classroom. Valencia regarded reducing the role of ESL (English as a Second Language) and EFL teachers to teaching communicative skills as problematic because in the current neoliberal world, a "focus on communication skills may well entail the dissemination

of American ways of speaking and the forms of communication, genre, and style of the dominant consumerist culture, which globalization is extending worldwide” (Phillipson, 2010, p. 488).

Valencia mobilized his action research as some form of anti-colonial participatory politics. Valencia and the pre-service teachers who worked with him explored alternative ways of communication beyond written academic language. Again, they did not look at their project as an attempt to fix a pedagogical issue or as professional development only; they consciously wanted to disrupt the curriculum. They imagined their project as creating alternative forms of text that they could share with the public. In one arts-based project, Valencia’s students created a mural on university walls as a symbolic multimodal public text. The subject matter was significant. They decided to represent the region’s Indigenous mythologies on the walls. They wanted to occupy the university space, as a place of colonial knowledge generation, with an exhibition of Indigenous mythological figures. Again, as our model highlights, teacher and action research can have the outward vision of challenging societal discourses and structural practices rather than being adopted as a form of self-interrogation.

#### **CONCLUSION**

Rather than mirroring models of teacher and action research that are heavily predicated upon teacher reflection, in the projects discussed we outlined the centrality of global neoliberal structures and the linguistic imperialism advancing cultural and economic exclusion. We opened the article with the emblematic paradox of our pandemic condition to illustrate the failure of these structures in terms of welcoming newcomers as knowledge holders and professionals: The perversive logic of attempting to ameliorate health care shortages by opening recruitment, then bureaucratically downgrading or excising internationally credentialed professionals to the determinant of the public health care system, exhibits the seemingly inextricable logic of an academic hierarchy buttressed by a neoliberal educational system.

The structured model of practitioner inquiry is a useful theoretical heuristic because it starts with the recognition of inequitable knowledge structures; by identifying how institutions can fundamentally disavow knowledge that exists outside of the status quo, the inquiry process seeks to fundamentally challenge the reproduction of inequity through the theorization of parallel structures. The examples we shared represent instantiations of alternative arrangements that were actualized through a deep and sustained recalibration of social practices. We continue to find promising possibilities that demonstrate the active interplay between agency and structure while making legible how ingrained policies and practices can subjugate the knowledge and life chances of students. ■

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