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Article abstract

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“Surviving and Thriving”: An Autoethnography of a Black Afro-Caribbean Early Career Teacher in a Northern Ontario First Nation Community

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Abstract

The beginning years of a teacher’s career can be an overwhelming experience, and combined with being in an isolated, fly-in community, particularly during a pandemic, can be debilitating. This qualitative research is aimed to support and account for the story of a Black Afro-Caribbean, early career teacher (ECT) in a Northern Ontario First Nation (FN) community over a three-year teaching placement. The goals were to use her stories for reflection, inspiration, and guidance to support other ECTs, and to provide recommendations to teacher-education programs to lessen attrition and increase retention among ECTs in FN school placements. An autoethnographic method was used to identify key themes in her narratives to better understand her experiences of surviving and thriving. Although this ECT was significantly tested about her decision to become a teacher, support, empathy, resiliency, and governing one’s practice with clearly defined moral and ethical principles rooted in the belief that every child can learn helped her survive and thrive. The conclusion was that ECTs in FN school placements need, among other things, a willingness to be vulnerable and resilient.

Introduction

Being an educator at any point in one’s career is never without its struggles. However, many consider an early career teacher (ECT) to be the most challenging (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2005). ECTs’ lives have been studied for many years to identify the challenges and substantiate the need for support (Burke et al., 2015; Ewing & Smith, 2003; Fantilli & McDougall, 2009; Gallant & Riley, 2014; Kutsyruba et al., 2018; McCormack et al., 2006). Research (Jakhelln, 2011; Kutsyruba et al., 2018;) has confirmed that ECTs

generally feel overwhelmed with opposing feelings of excitement and fear, and a lack of experience puts them in a vulnerable position. Boreen (2009) described this experience as “running the gauntlet through a dangerous obstacle course with both visible and invisible pitfalls” (p. x). According to Delamarter (2015), despite ECTs initial enthusiasm, many abandon the profession feeling depressed and discouraged. He attributed the high attrition rates among ECTs to a phenomenon named “practice shock; unrealistic expectations around teaching that, if left unchecked, can lead to an identity crisis during the first year of teaching” (p. 1).

Based on the phenomenon of “practice shock” (Delamarter, 2015, p.1), previous studies (OECD, 2011; Burke et al., 2013) emphasized the importance of adequate and appropriate support for ECTs to lessen attrition and improve retention. Nevertheless, according to Burleigh (2016; 2020), there is little research exploring the retention of ECTs [and even less research on non-white ECTs] in First Nation (FN) school communities, where attrition rates are estimated as high as 40% annually (Anderson et al., 2004; Kitchenham & Chasteauneuf, 2010; Mueller et al., 2013). This lack of research-based evidence has created a significant gap in understanding the challenges faced in FN communities among ECTs to reduce “practice shock” and increase retention rates. The primary objective of this autoethnography is to fill this gap by presenting the story of a Black Afro-Caribbean ECT’s experiences in an FN community to understand better how she survived and thrived. Her experiences can serve as a potential recommendations’ roadmap for other ECTs and teacher-education programs to prepare them for known challenges in FN school communities.

Framing Ourselves and Our Research Approach

Jody-Ann, a Black Afro-Caribbean, early career, female teacher, went to a new school amongst a mostly all-white staff in a remote Northern Ontario FN school community. We (the authors) entered this project as an attempt for an implicit inquiry through critical self-reflection to identify solution-orientated actions to support Jody-Ann’s *surviving and thriving* as a Black Afro-Caribbean ECT in a First Nation school community. Although this research project began somewhat haphazardly, through an independent-paced graduate research course in 2018 with the instructor and student (the authors), we continued documenting Jody-Ann’s experiences (i.e., analysis, reflection, actions taken, and lessons learned) over her three-year teaching assignment. We share these experiences in a format that we hope will create “research is ceremony” (Wilson, 2008, p.137), which is a concept that Wilson (2008) explains for building stronger relationships, and allows a raised level of consciousness and insight into the Indigenous world. We chose autoethnography with the intent to avoid justifying a theory explicitly. We hoped to push the limits of traditional research and lean into Indigenous methodologies that can be free from the need to constantly justify research and knowledge systems from the dominant system’s expectations and perspectives.

Researcher positionality

Central to qualitative research, and particularly to autoethnography, is researcher positionality. Our research involves data based on personal narratives and self-reflection as non-Indigenous researchers. It would be remiss not to offer our backgrounds and positionalities in order to be authentic and transparent in our positions and words. In this way, the reader can better understand better our subjectivity, frames of reference, and interpretations.

Jody-Ann: teacher, researcher, author, and EdD candidate. I am a Black, Afro-Caribbean female and a native of Jamaica. As such, I believe inherently in the motto out of many, comes one people. I am not a stranger to adversity, or the systemic marginalization of visible ethnicities. As I grew up, my father instilled in me a mantra that members of our family will be resilient. Throughout my life, despite my many negative experiences, I knew failure was never an option. Nevertheless, relocating to a new place in Ontario and seeing how students were living in third-world conditions was ghastly. My purpose was to somehow foster an appreciation for learning by establishing an environment of mutual respect and trust to help each student survive and thrive. Building respect and trust became my agenda.

Patricia: graduate educator, mentor, and supporter. I am a white, cisgender woman, a settler-colonizer, and part of the historically dominant group. I acknowledge that I actively benefit from white privilege. As Brown (2017) discusses in her work on vulnerability, deep, transformative work requires a person to be in the arena, not in the stands. The willingness to show up, make mistakes, and receive critical feedback from those in the situation is essential. I am dedicating my career to identifying what (and who) I take for granted, problematizing these assumptions, and participating in efforts to dismantle white supremacy—including White fragility, which DiAngelo (2018) has defined as the feelings of discomfort a white person experiences in discussions on race. I disseminate my beliefs through my research and writing, and I intentionally encourage and challenge my students to strive for deep, transformative learning that raises their consciousness about white privilege, the dominant and colonizing (self) narratives it produces, oppressive beliefs and actions, as well as the structures and systems it perpetuates. Am I perfect? No. Do I make mistakes? Yes. However, I am willing to engage in mentor and critical friend relationships for self-learning, and to support a deeper understanding of dismantling and deconstructing dominant ideologies. I refuse to be a silent bystander.

Context of the Study

We acknowledge and honour the FN community and their land, where Jody-Ann spent three years learning from and with the FN peoples.

Before Jody-Ann graduated from her teacher-education program in 2018, she applied to an organization that recruits teachers to teach in remote areas of Canada. She was offered and accepted a teaching position with the organization and placed in a fly-in FN school community in Northern Ontario. In mid-July 2018, 500 kilometres from her family's urban home, she started a mandatory three-week intensive training for new incoming teachers to learn more about FN communities and cultures. From this training, she learned the power of storytelling, was immersed in nature, and left with a renewed gratitude for the comforts she often took for granted. Jody-Ann felt the training inspired and motivated her to begin her new teaching position.

At the end of August 2018, Jody-Ann began her new role as a grade-two teacher at an FN School in Northern Ontario. Like many ECTs, she was eager, inspired, and optimistic to start her teaching career. However, the drastic lifestyle adjustments transitioning to living in the remote north challenged her. Jody-Ann had mixed feelings of excitement and fear, cultivated by a desperate desire to reform, to be her best, and to offer a stellar education from a mosaic of perspectives for all students.

Over her three-year teaching term, many experiences challenged her personal and professional strengths and identity. Undoubtedly, the first was dealing with drastic comfort-level

changes. Moving three plane rides away from her childhood home to live in an FN community triggered many conniptions. The luxuries she took for granted had no place in this paradigm. Her luxuries were limited to 50 pounds of luggage, and her boxes—shipped weeks before her arrival—were delayed. The community is not on the hydro grid; therefore, fuel-run generators that tend to break down supply the power. She explained, “I never gave much thought to electricity sources until I had no electricity for three days.” Her only connection to family and friends was through Wi-Fi, and the comfort and convenience of retail access was reduced to a single store. Limited access to taken-for-granted food luxuries (i.e., ordering take-out, unlimited grocery selection) and power outages genuinely tested her sanity while living in a northern community. She was required to accept and relinquish many delights (i.e., restaurants, visiting the theatre, attending dances, frequenting the gym, and indulging in libations). The isolation she experienced in her living situation is apparently among the top reasons why many educators who have come to the North quit. However, she confirmed that the transition grew far less painful once she accepted her living reality, and embraced the beauty and adventure around her.

Furthermore, she explained that her “celebrity status” was a new experience. Jody-Ann came from an urban area where everyone is just another person on the sidewalk, to a place where students follow a new person wherever she goes, and her actions seemed to be the main topic of discussion. While shopping at the grocery store, all eyes were on her. Her home became a fishbowl, and groups of students stood on her apartment deck and peered into the windows (this included the wildlife), which threatened her natural sunlight. The constant scrutiny could be tricky, and she quickly learned to communicate her boundaries to maintain mutual respect.

Within the first weeks, she learned, “Sometimes I needed to accept things to find value in what exists around my new community and me, and other times, I needed to challenge myself to see beyond my previous reality.” This revelation of seeking a continuous balance became her guiding mantra for the challenges and solutions of living in the North. Fast forward to June 2022, when Jody-Ann finished her third and final year teaching at the northern school. We present the findings as a story of overcoming “practice shock” to survive and thrive as a Black Afro-Caribbean ECT in an FN School community (and during a pandemic).

Literature Review

Teachers choose the teaching profession for honourable reasons, based on a desire to make a difference by inspiring students to become educated (Ewing & Smith, 2003). However, for many ECTs, this desire has never been brought to fruition. Given that the teacher is the most significant school-based variable contributing to student outcomes (Hattie, 2003), it is crucial to investigate and better understand the experiences and challenges of ECTs. Such information could lead to solutions for alleviating these challenges, reducing attrition, and increasing retention. This section briefly reviews the literature based on the challenges most identified in ECT attrition.

Research suggests that ECTs experience multi-layered and complicated challenges related to teaching, professional learning, school administration, colleagues, parents, and students (Guardino & Fullerton, 2010; Kyriacou & Kunc, 2007; Whisnant et al., 2005). Despite research on ECTs (Fenwick, 2011; Heikonen et al., 2016; Jakhelin, 2011; Lovett & Cameron, 2011; Mansfield et al., 2014), persistent problems remain. The more that is known about the experiences of ECTs challenging situations, such as Jody-Ann, the better teacher-education programs can prepare ECTs for successful transition and retention into the profession, lessen “practice shock” (Delamarter, 2015, p.1), and achieve successful recruitment and retention in areas that are more challenging, such as FN school communities.

Attrition, retention, and recruitment

As noted consistently in the literature (Buchanan, 2012; Buchanan et al., 2013; Ingersoll & Strong, 2011), the teaching profession attrition and retention of ECTs must be improved. Although teachers have undertaken a teacher-preparation program and obtained certification before entering the workplace, their initial enthusiasm appears to be diminished and abandoned in the early years, and many leave the profession depressed and discouraged. Much research claims that attrition and retention problems exist because ECTs are vulnerable (Borren et al., 2009). They are consistently in vulnerable positions because of their lack of teaching experience, uncertain job stability, limited pedagogical knowledge, lack of emotional support, and the practice shock that many experience. Research (Monk, 2007; Mueller et al., 2011; Wotherspoon, 2006, 2008) specific to FN school communities suggests that teacher recruitment and retention have similar issues with the addition of teacher isolation and transition difficulties (Collins, 1999), as well as cultural, linguistic, and social factors (Monk, 2007). According to Monk (2007), in many FN school communities, which are in remote areas, “working conditions are problematic, student needs are great, support services are limited, and professional support networks are inadequate” (p.167).

Support and mentorship

Many studies emphasize the importance of support early in a teacher’s career to encourage them to remain in the profession and help mitigate vulnerability and challenging contexts (Burke et al., 2013; Le Maistre et al., 2006; OECD, 2011). Because relationships are viewed as the backbone of the teaching profession, and are often associated with the foundations of schools’ success (Bryk & Schneider, 2002), new teachers need relational support to develop, navigate, and maintain the multidimensional relationships in a school community. More specifically, interactions with peers helps beginning teachers with socialization into the teaching profession and professional growth (Achinstein, 2006; Alhija & Fresko, 2010; Friedrichsen et al., 2007; Tillman, 2005).

Some frame peer relationships in line with mentorship. Mentorships are an integral and crucial component of induction programs to support individual beginning teachers’ needs (Hobson et al., 2009). High-quality mentoring programs have positive impacts on increased teacher effectiveness, stronger self-confidence, higher levels of satisfaction, motivation, commitment, reduced stress, improved classroom instruction and student achievement, and early career retention (Glazerman et al., 2010; Guarino et al., 2006; Henry et al., 2011; Ingersoll & Strong, 2011; Wynn et al., 2007). Nonetheless, the idea of high-quality mentorship is ambiguous. Introducing virtual mentorship has become a viable option, and has proven a solution for teachers in remote areas (Briscoe, 2019).

Navigating school micro-politics and FN community expectations

A critical area that researchers have emphasized (Buchanan et al., 2013; Burke et al., 2013; Kelchtermans, 2011; Vanderlinde & Kelchtermans, 2013) is for ECTs to learn and navigate school micro-politics. Knowing and learning this can substantially help a beginning teacher’s experience. The potential discrepancies between the beliefs of ECTs and the unknown formal structures of the institution (and, in this study, the FN school community) may compromise an ECT’s resiliency and is of particular interest for ECTs in FN school communities.

These micro-politics involve learning to negotiate and navigate the school culture (i.e., the staffroom) and establishing one’s identity, role, and place in the school and community. Vanderlinde and Christensen (2013) argue that ECTs need “strategies to develop positive micropolitical identities, which will enable and empower them to participate in, and move from, context to context, with the confidence, belief, and strategies to proactively, assertively, and effectively engage in and influence their professional contexts” (2013, p. 81). Lemaire (2009) added that without these strategies, ECTs may feel disempowered, leaving them vulnerable and questioning their career choice. It can also trigger negative turning points early in many ECTs’ careers (Kelchtermans, 2013).

Methodology

Autoethnography is a form of “action research for the individual” (Ellis & Bocher, 2000, p. 754), confirming that this study’s purpose and method were conscientious. As a qualitative study, an autoethnographic method of personal narratives was used. This term was coined by Norman Denzin (1989), to tell autobiographical stories about some aspects of experiences in daily life (Ellis & Bochner, 2000). Ellis (2004) added that the purpose of personal narratives in autoethnography is

to understand a self or some aspect of life as it intersects with a cultural context, connect to other participants as co-researchers, and invite readers to enter the author's world and to use what they learn there to reflect on, understand, and cope with their own lives (p. 46).

The personal narratives of this paper, from the three-year teaching placement, allowed the ability to lean into the autoethnography method for (re)examining, reflecting on, unpacking the experiences, and subsequently writing about them, while interrogating their subjectivity and emotionality based on the authors’ influences from the observations (Ellis et al., 2011). Also, in line with autoethnography, this research was more about solving a problem, than a means for making meaningful contributions to the larger body of knowledge on ECTs in FN school communities. Autoethnography provided a way to present the stories in the findings in first person. Thus, the scene was set, and the story told in a way that weaved the intricate connections among one’s life as a new teacher. The personal experiences, theory, evocation, and explanation, and will help the readers to bring connections to their own lives (Jones, 2008). To that end, this research does not aim to generalize all ECTs’ experiences but to provide a deep exploration and critical reflection on the learning process that this ECT experienced.

Participants

The two participants were the authors. Both identify as cis-gender females. In her late twenties, Jody-Ann had just finished her teacher-education program at Niagara University, becoming a certified Ontario College Teacher (OCT), and was continuing her studies in the master’s program of educational leadership. Patricia is an associate professor in her ninth year of higher-education teaching at Niagara University. She became Jody-Ann’s graduate advisor and instructor for a research course. In contrast, Jody-Ann began her first-year teaching placement in the FN school community. Both participants agreed to participate in this research project to

document Jody-Ann's experience as a Black Afro-Caribbean female ECT in an FN school community.

The setting

The school is in a fly-in FN community where roads are only accessible when frozen in winter (January to March). The community population is approximately 500, with limited amenities (i.e., one community store providing groceries, clothing, and toiletries with minimal selection). The school is relatively new. It opened in the fall of 2016 and has a current population of 168 students from kindergarten to grade 8. During this research, the teaching staff consisted of a school principal, ten classroom teachers, a special-education teacher, and a reading-intervention teacher. One-bedroom, furnished apartments in a bungalow triplex are where all staff lived in the community, which included internet access, a washer and dryer, and a stocked kitchen.

Data collection and analysis

Data collection

Andrews et al. (2008) stated that an inquiry, using personal stories as data, is based on the premise that understanding and meaning are garnered through storytelling, and that the gathering of narratives—written, oral, and visual—is focused on the meanings that people ascribe to their experiences. This was done through data collected by two methods: journaling and researcher-participant discussions. Jody-Ann kept a reflective journal over her three-year teaching placement. She wrote in it weekly, and focused on documenting experiences, within her week, that presented as positive or challenging in order to extend her understanding of teaching and learning in an FN school community. Her journaling grounded an approach that enabled her to look inward and create a reflexive dialogue with herself (Humphreys, 2005).

As data, Jody-Ann's stories provided meaning. They brought forth epiphanies, challenges, and thought-provoking questions that guided and founded her teacher identity in her new environment. Over the three years, the authors had virtual discussions to unpack some of the experiences, and discussed potential action plans and approaches. These conversations occurred every month in the first year (8 sessions) and every two months in years two and three of her placement (8 sessions). The discussions were recorded, transcribed, and reviewed for analysis, by focusing on unpacking the why behind the experiences and how to respond to them.

Data analysis

An autobiographical genre of data collection displayed "multiple layers of consciousness, connecting the personal to the cultural" (Ellis & Boucher, 2000, p. 739). In the process of analyzing the data—from the personal stories from Jody-Ann's reflective journaling and the researchers' conversations. A careful read of the data (personal journal entries and the one-to-one virtual conversations were examined to re-remember the experiences that pertained to pivotal moments as a Black Afro-Caribbean ECT in an FN school community. From there, the stories were identified and grouped into three main themes. These included a) context challenges and outcomes, b) pedagogical challenges, and c) relational support (or lack thereof). In the second round of the reading, Jody-Ann selected specific stories related to the identified themes. She attributed these to her critical learning based on the "outward social and cultural aspects of the experience; then the inward to expose a vulnerable self" (Ellis & Boucher, 2000, p.739). She also wrote collective stories of surviving and thriving. These first-person narratives are presented as findings, and serve

as a collective story of Jody-Ann’s pivotal moments for surviving and thriving as an Afro-Caribbean ECT in an FN school community.

Findings: The Stories of Surviving and Thriving

As stated above, the findings are first-person narratives and are grouped as a collection of stories over the three years that demonstrated the main themes related to a) context challenges and outcomes, b) pedagogical challenges, and c) relational support (or lack thereof). Also included are Jody-Ann’s final thoughts about her ongoing (re)evaluation of her teacher role and identity.

Context challenges and outcomes

Apart from adjusting to being isolated living in the North and away from family and friends, Jody-Ann noted some extraneous challenges in her context. Her stories revealed despair, along with the empathy and resilience needed to seek solutions to the challenges.

The story of community tragedy

My emotions were tested during the second week of my placement. There were two community deaths, and one was a tragedy. Unfortunately, over my three-year placement, community deaths were (and continue to be) prevalent and bitterly disheartening. The school was closed, as the community was mourning this heartbreak. Sadly, my first community interaction was from tragedy, leaving me vulnerable. This level of trauma was new to me. Aside from a four-hour training (a volunteer certificate program), I could not offer much insight into tragic deaths besides being empathic.

Nonetheless, I attended the funerals, and assisted during communal feasts. These moments allowed me to connect with students outside of the classroom, and this helped me enrich my connection with my students and their families. After the first community death, as a follow-up, I thought it was important that students had a safe space where the topic of death could be acknowledged instead of ignored. During my class and with my limited experience, I attempted to support students and offered a developmental writing activity to express their thoughts and feelings surrounding tragic deaths. I also hosted a community circle for students who wished to share.

The community tragedies continued, and although they were devastating, I remained steadfast in aligning my words and actions to communicate my principle of support and service. In doing so, I had to set aside my (self-interested) teaching ideals (i.e., my perception of the day-to-day teaching in my classroom with my students) and shift (and adapt) to focusing on the needs of the community. This response allowed me to embody humility, through a desire to be of service to the advancement of Indigenous education. I aspired to the words of bell hooks (1994): “To teach in a manner that respects and cares for the souls of our students is essential” (p. 13), albeit this was difficult. Each disheartening tragedy triggered a ripple effect within the community, and I feared I could not inspire optimism amid their angst.

I reflected on the initial advice from peers that I would face behavioural and academic challenges from students. This was proven wrong. I was experiencing positive outcomes. The students were (are) awe-inspiring. Despite generations of oppression, contentious interpreted education, and much downtime, they are respectful, precocious, and honest. I am happy that I discovered this independently, rather than listening to others. These community tragedies provoked me to question my teacher identity. I looked to Freire’s words (1998), and I asked myself: “How can I be an educator if I do not develop in myself a caring and loving attitude toward the

student, which is indispensable on the part of one who is committed to teaching and to the education process itself" (Freire, 1998, p. 65). I concluded from my three years in the North that ignorance is no excuse: the perils of your students must be learned if you are to be impactful within the classroom. Second, I realized that fear is a filthy notion that can deter one from greatness—if one allows it.

Near the end of my placement, I made several conclusions about our school community and community tragedy. There is much sensitivity by the staff about being in a community that can mask and justify their lack of competency. I learned that a lack of infrastructure, oversight, and accountability created a climate in which excellent educators are isolated, poor educators are isolated, and educators in their formative years are left with little developmental support. The lack of ethical approaches and professionalism amongst some staff was notable and disappointing. It made me question my role: "Was I too rigid in my classroom approach? Did I consistently maintain a pleasant disposition with staff and students? Was my mindset helping or harming the student collective?" In hindsight, I became jaded in my efforts to maintain a pleasant disposition with staff, and by the second year, I reserved my pleasant disposition for my students. Communication with other teaching staff became direct, and I remained aloof during social engagements.

Attendance and responses

Absenteeism is challenging for many educators, regardless of location. However, chronic absenteeism is common in many FN communities for various reasons. Jody-Ann noted that attendance proved a challenge, and that it is important to adjust not only the teaching, but also one's beliefs and judgments.

The story of school attendance and necessary adjustments

I realized that I had to understand first, and then deal with the reasons behind the children's absences from school. School interruptions and my adjustments to my mindset, teaching approach, and need to embrace community needs were imperative to starve off deficit thinking. I and the school staff struggled to be collectively empathetic, while promoting consistent attendance beyond a positive reward system. I noticed that attendance issues led to assumptions and judgments (as it happens probably in every school). I avoided these discussions by prioritizing self-care and channelling my energy toward my teaching practices and graduate studies. To mitigate the attendance issue, I remained cautiously optimistic that community-building events would be implemented, but this was not accomplished during my three-year tenure. Thankfully, I found kindred spirits among a few locals and a couple of teachers. Within this small tribe, I experienced canoeing activities, fishing, hikes to see the northern lights, movie nights, and evenings spent baking bannock. These outings fostered opportunities to share our thoughts, fears, and experiences in a congenial atmosphere, free of judgment. As a result, I learned to be vulnerable, and new bonds blossomed with refreshing perspectives offered, leading to team-teaching opportunities and deepened professional dialogue.

These fresh experiences brought an awareness of new life in this FN community, and the personal connections inspired me to create opportunities to explore with my students. I attempted to remedy the absenteeism in my classroom by using a homework booklet program created with online resources and a workbook. Building inclusion for the absent students was vital within the classroom and among the staff. Weekly phone conferences with my family, friends, and mentor helped preserve my sanity. I also developed some after-school programming, such as debate club, baking club, poetry club, story-time club, and photography club. These activities enhanced my

connection with the students, and deepened my pedagogical prowess. Students and their families responded positively to these initiatives, reinforced through repeated attendance. I credited my student attendance improvement to my ability to maintain transparent communication. Every action I took was communicated (good or bad) to each student and parent to foster a deeper understanding of the why behind my words. My intent was that open communication created a safe space, where I could ask students for help in moments of uncertainty, and they would freely share their ideas. Doing so established mutual trust, both inside and outside of the classroom.

I was inspired in my second year by a graduate-studies project to initiate and lead a school-wide diversity project that highlighted diversity and equity for students and staff through literacy. My belief is that we should spend less time ranking children, and more time helping them identify and cultivate their natural competencies and gifts. This project allowed teachers to approach Canadian history through a diverse lens and engage students in those conversations to deepen their understanding of the world and their place within it. At the end of the school year, to commemorate our commitment to equity, diversity, and inclusion, the entire student body created a handprint artwork, which was added to the diversity-tree display in the school's main lobby.

Pedagogical challenges

Many ECTs are confronted with the challenge of aligning their lessons with the curriculum, and offering quality teaching that is culturally relevant and diversified, in order to meet the needs of their learners. Jody-Ann recounted the necessity of aligning the curriculum and approaching her teaching through a decolonizing lens.

The story of decolonizing the curriculum

My journey north was the first time I saw my capacity to do something meaningful while witnessing how powerful the relationships between teacher and student can be (and should be). I explored aspects of my humanity while unlearning my limiting beliefs about the Ontario curriculum. I leaned into Freire's (1998) suggestion that “the more efficaciously we manage to provoke our students into an exploration and refinement of his or her curiosity, the better you are as a teacher” (p. 106). The Ontario curriculum is meaningful. However, it is most powerful when it proves relevant. Therefore, constructivism, humanism, and a didactic approach are all relevant to classroom instruction. The concepts highlighted in the Ontario curriculum proved futile, because students could not connect to the content. Therefore, I aimed to decolonize my approach to learning, and intertwine the land, the language, and the experiences of Indigenous people to create a more enriching learning environment for all students.

Over my three-year assignment, I learned that teaching through a cultural lens helped me to understand why decolonizing the Ontario curriculum was vital. I also found that various voices and perspectives matter in decolonizing the Ontario curriculum, because it allowed me to reflect on a broader historical perspective beyond the Eurocentric framework. Conversations with my mentor helped me understand that a focus on project-based and inquiry-based learning approaches—if done effectively—could yield opportunities to tailor more positive student outcomes. In other words, I decolonized my teaching approach, and by creating spaces and resources that were culturally relevant for my students were able to achieve the curriculum expectations. One example was a science lesson where the students dissected a rabbit. Intrigue and fascination with this project helped my students understand the similarities between the life systems of humans and animals. I observed how their young minds grappled with the notion that humans and rabbits share a heart, a kidney, and a stomach. This activity became the foundation

of discussions on science and social studies. My initiative was to connect all my teaching choices to a culturally relevant teaching approach, and I concluded that implementing culturally relevant pedagogy always needed attention. It was vital that I consistently remained cognitive of differences (and sometimes, this was very subtle) when providing instruction and selecting resources.

As I entered my third year of teaching with a new cohort of students, I felt transformative learning happening within my approach to teaching and my perspective on being a teacher. I remembered the words of Neil DeGrasse Tyson (2017), “One of the great challenges of this world is knowing enough about a subject to think you are right but not enough about the subject to know you are wrong” (p. x). This mantra adequately describes my current state of mind. Overall, I enhanced my pedagogy with student inquiry surrounding my Caribbean heritage, which inspired me to scaffold learning with lessons showcasing the history of various cultures. From this, it became apparent that teaching and learning are, first and foremost, acts rooted in storytelling. My role as a teacher was humanized by redefining success with the students. Instead of defining success through academic achievement, I personalized the learning experience to identify each learner’s success through evolution. In doing so, I followed a simple quote that was followed: “I can see you, and I can learn with and from you” (de Souza Vasconcelos, 2011, p. 431). Based on this, a teacher’s length of stay in a community should not be an excuse for their inability to create competitive learning opportunities. Every teacher should be a vessel of positivity, motivation, and support for the community, because relationships are at the heart of teaching. We must have solidarity in implementing empathy, admiration, respect, and high expectations for all students. A shared mindset, in conjunction with mutually beneficial goals, inspires a culture of inclusion. After three years at this school of a primarily white teaching staff, I concluded that sometimes I felt this, but most often I did not, which was disappointing.

Relational support

Support (or lack thereof) and microaggressions

Historically, a lack of diversity in the teaching staff has existed in FN school communities. The principals are mainly white. The staff is mainly white, and the school-board support is also mainly white. Change is happening, albeit slowly. In many conversations, Jody-Ann commented on lacking support from her school colleagues and feeling isolated. She concluded that this lack of diversity was her greatest challenge and outstanding learning. She described her situation by saying, “Despite the challenges of living in the North, being one of two Black women amongst a predominantly Caucasian teaching staff, who were seemingly unaware of racial issues, proved to be the greatest challenge in my three-year teaching placement.” However, there were BIPOC person created teachable moments within the classroom and community, as the students strove to understand her skin colour through questions about her birthplace, hair, dialect, and culture. This departure point gave her the notion about how she could, and should, be working towards not only decolonizing the curriculum. She explains.

The story of belonging and not fitting in

For the first time in my Canadian experience, my skin colour granted me favour within the community, whereas some Caucasian counterparts experienced what they classified as reverse racism. I respectfully disagreed with this stance, and soon realized the lack of understanding regarding the racist structures within the Ontario educational system. I listened attentively to their demonstrations of outrage at not being welcomed by locals, disrespectful students, and

disrespect for their professional credentials, leading to threats of leaving. I was tempted during these claims to ask the following questions in order to create critical reflection, but for my survival, I refrained from doing so:

- When was the last time Indigenous people forced White people to relocate from their native lands, only to force economic dependency from the government upon them?
- When was the last time Indigenous people used residential schools to force the assimilation of White children?
- When did Indigenous people last exclude White people from accessing middle-class opportunities?
- How many Indigenous prime ministers have we had in Canada?

The challenge in these instances was to check my privilege and to remind myself that taking joy in their misfortune was beneath my dignity. However, my ego had an innate desire to return their angst with disdain and verbally crucify them for their lack of empathy and ignorance of marginalized people's history. Silent wisdom within me reminded me that this moment called for empathy, enlightenment, and inclusion.

In my second year, I dealt with another situation, when a student called me the "N-word." My first thought was that I held a safe space for those who trusted me with their angst, and allowed them to unleash their fears without condemnation. However, the most disheartening was when I felt wounded by this experience and shared the encounter with another colleague. She laughed at me. The only explanation for her reaction was that the student had used the word so frequently that the staff had grown immune to it. From this conversation, I learned that, if it is previously accepted, ignorance is embedded within an organization from the top down, and people cannot [will not] change what they do not know. I also learned it was futile to waste my time affirming myself to those who fail to see my humanity. It was easier for me to choose empathy, instead of perpetuating evil. In this case, racism has divided humanity for centuries. As time passed, further evidence of a toxic school culture proved undeniable. I felt a lack of collective purpose, coupled with inactions from my peers. These responses prompted me to act for my survival, and I became more reclusive, and engaged selectively in collaboration for student success. This incident catalyzed my re-evaluation of my role as a teacher, and my ability to act, and inaction to fulfill this role.

I reframed my thoughts about my role as a teacher. Learning was more accessible for my students, when they could feel that a teacher cared for them. However, I felt discouraged and challenged by the need for more care displayed in the staff room conversations about student behavioural issues. I felt appalled by the earnestness with which Caucasian colleagues called local law enforcement each time a junior student misbehaved, and was saddened by a teaching staff that prioritized fun over academic progress. To mitigate this, I challenged myself to demonstrate care for the entire student body. I learned the names of every student I crossed paths with during recess, lunch duty, and community feasts. I engaged in congenial dialogue to communicate to each child that they mattered to me and were an integral part of humanity. I was determined to demonstrate care to all students. Overall, the microaggressions I encountered from various Caucasian colleagues were far less painful than the non-alignment in ideals for the standards of practice. The belief that all children can learn was not a shared ideal, which was the most challenging aspect of working in this environment.

(Re)evaluation of the role of the teacher

The more Jody-Ann experienced school micro-politics and microaggressions, the more she questioned her desire to continue as a teacher. Her final comments demonstrated how she navigated through these complexities, and strengthened her passion for teaching.

The story of reflecting on my career choice

My admiration for the teaching profession was tested early in my first year. However, my three-year placement in this FN school community forced me to (re)evaluate who I am as a teacher, and what makes me the teacher I am. The answer is simply self-awareness. Self-awareness is a vital aspect. It requires us to know our purpose and be empowered to share our gifts. Equally, we need to be able to seek help when we are unsure. Mentorship was an integral part of my success as an ECT. Through mentorship, I received guidance from consummate professionals, from various sociocultural backgrounds, who shared various teaching methods and techniques. Based on their guidance and advice, I worked on honing my ability to connect, empathize, and thoughtfully relate to a diverse group of students and peers. I was assisted by many in transforming my fears into fortitude. I learned from my mentors that pedagogy reinforces the value of self-love, finding purpose in my perceived pain, harnessing my emotions for the greater good of my students, and humanizing the teaching experience in making learning a harmonious experience that reflects everyone involved.

One area where I found comfort and steadfastness (while other peers did not) was among the school community. For many, it represents the first social structure that is experienced outside the family nucleus, so I focused solely on connecting with students, and building relationships early in this assignment. As a Black Afro-Caribbean woman (an outsider), I was invited and welcomed to potluck meals embraced in cultural activities such as canoeing, fishing, and riding ATVs. Local staff, parents, and students respected me, contrary to what other staff experienced and vocalized. The community's essence, the landscape's beauty, and the fortitude each student demonstrated helped me realize that vulnerability is powerful. I learned to thrive in my role as a teacher and in this teaching assignment. I learned to adapt, and make interconnectedness a daily spiritual practice. I also rooted my practice in the sacred Seven Grandfather Teachings referenced in the Ontario Ministry of Education Indigenous Educational Strategy (2017), which encouraged me to embody honesty, respect, courage, humility, wisdom, love, and truth. I learned to challenge my insecurities, while synonymously expanding my consciousness. I learned that only insecure teachers think that all reality should be amenable to their principles. Such individuals need to realize that the greatest gift of this profession is having multiple points of view to share. This teaching placement in a FN school community was my chance to repay the gifts that the educational system gave to me. My overall reflection is that each moment helped me define the kind of teacher I am: one who believes that education is a tool to help all students thrive in life, and the teacher I am not: one who mechanically upholds sanctimonious values to the detriment of ethnically-visible students.

Final thoughts

My choice to commit and stay for three years in this teaching placement was grounded in my desire to challenge myself. This decision led to exposure and empathy that unearthed countless emotions and epiphanies, leading to re-evaluating my role as a teacher. I learned many things about being a teacher and myself that tested my beliefs and values. First, I learned that diversity is always

political, and schools are one of the most political venues anywhere in the world. It became clear to me that the culture among our staff disabused the romantic notions I held about unity in education, because a shared mindset did not exist. I noticed a need for more diversity in my school. I can only offer this because ideological hegemony occurs when individuals willingly reinforce power structures and societal ideas, even when these structures and ideas are harmful, or silencing, for those without access to power (Spinetta, 2014). Second, my dialogues with my mentors helped to motivate me and sparked new ways to better understand and act accordingly to the subtle discrimination that keeps the lack of diversity out of FN school communities. Third, I learned that teachers who seek mutually beneficial outcomes for all stakeholders in education view life as a cooperative, not a competitive, arena. One cannot deny that for teachers to promote inclusive ideals consistently, they must be seen practicing equitable and collective processes that are organized to promote inclusion and foster relationships. To create these meaningful connections, one must willingly embrace opportunities that require vulnerability. Being vulnerable is a personal choice. However, I attribute my choice to being vulnerable with students as the catalyst to student success in the classroom. Fourth, I learned that I (and others) must challenge myself to see beyond who they are and find value in what exists around them. Canadian educators must assist in cleaning up the debris of colonial practices within Ontario's educational system, and seek to diversify all aspects of the educational hierarchy in order to ensure that the realm is genuinely equitable, diverse, inclusive, and reflective for all students. With a shared belief, these actions can actualize the learning of every child by committing to teaching a culturally relevant and decolonizing curriculum, with collaborations that reflect a mosaic of perspectives.

The transformational memories from this experience will remain a sacred and defining moment in my teaching career. I share my story to honour the students in the community who should be exalted, because they are innocent, wonderful human beings. My final thoughts and advice are provided to lead your teaching beliefs and practices with an open heart and mind, allowing each student to teach you even more than you could ever teach them.

What Do the Stories Say about a Black Afro-Caribbean ECT Surviving and Thriving in a FN School Community?

Jody-Ann's experiences are not free from subjectivity. However, this research process allowed her to reflect, act, and become transformed from her previous limiting beliefs about her role as a teacher, and identify any personal and professional inadequacies. The mentorship and guidance helped Jody-Ann find solutions, rather than thoughts, about attrition. Her stories emphasized that intentional reflection and discussion aided in the success of her early years of teaching in a new and challenging context. Two key themes were confirmed. First, Jody-Ann's experiences are consistent with previous literature about ECTs who experience practice shock, a misalignment between what is expected, and what is experienced as an ECT (Delamarter, 2015; Stokking et al., 2003). Jody-Ann began to (re)evaluate her purpose for becoming and remaining a teacher, she found a support system and learned to navigate her way in the school's micro-politics, which included microaggressions.

Second, Jody-Ann's stories are consistent with the identified phases of ECTs' experiences transitioning into the workforce. She faced acculturation into school and community contexts. In Jody-Ann's situation, this was referenced mainly by the drastic changes in her lifestyle: moving from an urban to a rural environment and finding ways to understand the community culture and their tragedies. These findings are consistent with other research that state teacher isolation and transition difficulties (Collins, 1999), and the cultural, linguistic, and social factors (Monk, 2007)

associated with isolation in FN school communities. Jody-Ann's experience with community tragedy and attendance issues highlighted an area where most ECTs (and experienced teachers) feel ill-prepared. These situations created intense feelings of vulnerability. Jody-Ann felt untrained to deal with the complex experiences of tragedy that required appropriate trauma counselling for the students and their parents. There was also evidence of the constant struggles that ECTs face when making connections in unknown communities.

Jody-Ann encountered the complexities of professional expectations and the non-expectations (i.e., deficit thinking) while navigating the micropolitics of schooling, her colleagues, and the community's ways of thinking and doing. Jody-Ann struggled to find support from her colleagues when her beliefs and values contradicted theirs, which affected her socialization and made her question her decision and passion for becoming a teacher. We believe that her success came from several areas:

1. Her ability to remain resilient.
2. Mainly working alone and steadfastly.
3. Seeking external support (mentors).
4. Focusing on the students and their families.
5. Bringing culturally relevant pedagogy to her teaching.
6. Be courageous and vulnerable, by taking risks with new school innovations despite lacking collegial support.

These approaches, combined, contributed to Jody-Ann surviving and thriving in her three-year placement. They could serve as our intended purpose of this research, a roadmap for other ECTs to consider when looking for teaching placements in FN school communities.

Consistent with autoethnography, another layer of her stories revealed the personal struggle that Jody-Ann experienced with microaggressions from the school staff. Jody-Ann explained that her lack of support from them forced her to seek other solitudes from personal reflection, self-directed professional growth, a mentor, and among her students and the community. These actions, relationships, and support also substantially impacted her *surviving and thriving* in teaching and living placement. As evidenced from Jody-Ann's narratives, intriguing questions are raised regarding the nature and extent of the perspectives and capacities necessary to "survive and thrive" as a Black Afro-Caribbean Female ECT in an FN School community.

One crucial point that was a common thread in all her reflections was her (re)evaluation of her purpose for becoming a teacher. She continuously questioned her decision to become a teacher. For us, it was not the fact that she was re-evaluating her decisions but why it was a constant practice. Why were the environment and situations creating these thoughts? Burleigh (2020) answers this question best: "The connection between student success and teacher quality meets at the nexus of how teachers in FN communities conceive their work, the roles they assume in doing so, and, most importantly, how they can unpack and resist the colonial nature of their own educational experiences and teacher education" (p. 709). Based on Jody-Ann's reflections, we believe she had to resist these forces throughout her three-year placement. Our conclusion for other ECTs going to FN school communities is that apart from pedagogical knowledge, one must be aware and prepared to engage in critical reflections, embrace vulnerability, and be humble to learn as one resists and unlearns one's colonizing ways.

Our recommendations

We realize that Jody-Ann’s experience as a Black Afro-Caribbean ECT in an FN school community may be a singular case, but overall, her experiences provided insights into some recommendations for ECTs and teacher-preparation programs. Previous literature and Jody-Ann’s stories revealed the nuances that affect teacher retention, teacher quality, and ultimately, student success and school experience (Chell et al., 2009; Darling-Hammond, 2003; Rowe, 2007). Jody-Ann’s stories clarified how she strengthened her perspective on defining her role as a teacher, and adjusting her perspective to her context. She realized the most important and necessary was forging bonds with her students and the community. Teachers play a vital role in the community and the quest for education. Therefore, teacher candidates must learn sophisticated and respectful ways to forge relationships in FN communities, especially in contexts contradictory to their socially constructed beliefs and values.

Some behaviours take much more time to be learned (i.e., learning to be resilient and vulnerable) than a two-year teacher-preparation program allows. However, increasing research (Caires et al., 2009; Delemarter, 2015; Moosa, 2019; Stokking et al., 2003) on specific efforts to reduce practice shock has demonstrated increased ECT retention. Our recommendation for teacher preparation programs is to provide teacher candidates with awareness: implicit discussions on the realities of teaching that will alleviate practice shock, and to intentionally include discussions on extraneous contexts, such as an FN school community and potential situations for BIPOC teachers. Finally, Jody-Ann’s stories have made it clear that in an FN school community, more diversity, equitably, culturally responsive education, and increased awareness of colonization and decolonization are needed with greater significance in educational discourse, policy, and, more notably, practice.

Concluding Thoughts

The turtle represents the Seventh Grandfather’s teaching of truth: Living in truth is living in harmony with oneself. The symbol of the turtle is significant in teaching, because it teaches patience. It is one of the slowest-moving creatures on earth, and yet, it arrives at its destination no matter how long it takes. These teachings remind us to be faithful to our vocation, and honour our gifts and others. Truth is to be understood, spoken, and lived.

This autoethnography aimed to share stories and document the experiences of a Black Afro-Caribbean ECT in an FN school community. We have presented the stories of Jody-Ann demonstrating her resiliency for learning, transformative actions, and the support she received from mentors to encourage her to continue surviving and thriving in her teaching placement. We hope this account of her experiences has inspired other ECTs, by giving them a sense of knowledge about challenging contexts, and encouraging them to seek teaching positions in FN school communities. Based on our research, we argue that retention of ECTs—particularly in more isolated communities and known, challenging contexts—could be increased with awareness about what to expect when they are armed with learned skills to navigate negative and colonized spaces. As well, matched with a specific focus on reducing practice shock in teacher-education programs and a support system (i.e., virtual mentors for ECTs), teacher candidates planning to locate in known challenging and unfamiliar contexts, may help irradicate high ECT attrition rates, while increasing recruitment, and retention in FN school communities. As evidenced in this study, retention and attrition became more about an ECT’s ability to be resilient and learn to effectively navigate one’s purpose as a teacher in an FN school community, despite feeling vulnerable. The difficult question to ask is: Can we prepare our ECTs?

In addition to external support, ECTs need to recognize the personal and professional growth required to face one's fears and vulnerabilities. Jody-Ann's stories highlighted that all educators must reject deficit thinking and adopt and enact a belief that all children are bright, intrinsic by nature, capable of learning, and deserve their best. Therefore, whether it is in southern or northern Ontario, an FN school community, or a classroom on the other side of the world, ECTs must learn to align their situations with appropriate actions and mindsets.

We ask readers to consider these questions about who you are as a teacher and how you see your role in the teaching profession.

- What am I creating with the words that I constantly repeat?
- Am I aware of the privilege I possess?
- Can I embrace vulnerability?
- Do I believe in humility?
- Do I believe all children can learn despite their environment?
- How am I building resilience today?

We conclude by leaving readers with thoughts that truth in the Ontario educational system requires a commitment to inclusive education exemplified by decolonizing spaces with culturally responsive pedagogy instructed by a diverse group of teachers. Our teaching philosophies should be rooted in a pure mantra: I am in service to each student, and in doing so, I must provide unconditional acceptance. Jody-Ann's experiences were confirmation that educators who possess empathy, lead with a resilient nature, have a support network, and govern their practice with clearly defined principles rooted in the belief that every child can learn, will thrive in any school community. A reminder that it is not our paper qualifications as teachers that define us, but our commitment to humanity's progress that brings effectiveness in the classroom.

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Author Bios

Jody-Ann Robinson is an EdD candidate at OISE, University of Toronto. She spent three years (2019 to 2022) teaching in a First Nations community in northern Ontario and currently works as an occasional teacher with the Peel District School Board. Before her classroom teaching experience, she worked as an English tutor serving at-risk youth for eleven years. Jody-Ann's teaching philosophy integrates inquiry-based learning through a constructivist approach to promoting an inclusive learning environment that reflects diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) and fosters culturally responsive pedagogy. She believes and acts toward preparing educators to create inclusive, empathic, and diverse learning opportunities to humanize all students' learning experiences. In addition to being a lifelong learner and educator, she is also an author who self-published her first children's book titled *Hippo Happiness*.

Patricia Briscoe is an associate professor at Niagara University Ontario. She has over ten years of teaching experience in higher education and is currently teaching at the graduate level in Education Leadership and the Teacher Education program. Patricia has extensive leadership experience supporting action research projects with teachers worldwide. She also organizes

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