

## **Becoming Authentic Teachers Through Transformative Inquiry: Final Practicum Challenges**

### **Devenir d'authentiques enseignants par le biais de la recherche transformative : les défis du dernier stage**

Vanessa V. Tse, Meaghan Abra et Michele T. D. Tanaka

Volume 52, numéro 3, fall 2017

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1050908ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1050908ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

#### Éditeur(s)

Faculty of Education, McGill University

#### ISSN

1916-0666 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

#### Citer cet article

Tse, V. V., Abra, M. & Tanaka, M. T. D. (2017). Becoming Authentic Teachers Through Transformative Inquiry: Final Practicum Challenges. *McGill Journal of Education / Revue des sciences de l'éducation de McGill*, 52(3), 657–676. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1050908ar>

#### Résumé de l'article

Au cours du dernier stage en enseignement, les futurs enseignants font face à un défi important: redéfinir leur identité comme enseignant. En effet, oeuvrant dans un nouveau milieu — en contexte professionnel — ils doivent abandonner leur identité étudiante et se questionner sur le type d'enseignant qu'ils désirent être. En collaboration avec leur professeur, deux futurs enseignants ont analysé les expériences vécues durant leur dernier stage, mettant en lumière la manière dont l'approche de Recherche Transformative (RT ou Transformative Inquiry), une méthode de recherche holistique, les a aidés à devenir de véritables enseignants. Dans cet article, nous apprenons comment la RT leur a permis de développer, d'accepter et de renforcer leur identité pédagogique personnelle et unique. Les auteurs abordent des histoires marquantes, le pouvoir du cercle, le concept d'incarner le questionnement et l'importance de la réflexion constante. Les futurs maîtres se sont opposés à la conception traditionnelle de l'enseignant et ont accepté d'être imparfaits, ainsi que vulnérables.

# BECOMING AUTHENTIC TEACHERS THROUGH TRANSFORMATIVE INQUIRY: FINAL PRACTICUM CHALLENGES

VANESSA V. TSE, MEAGHAN ABRA & MICHELE T. D. TANAKA  
*University of Victoria*

**ABSTRACT.** Within the final teaching practica, pre-service teachers encounter the crucial challenge of redefining their teacher identities. Leaving behind personas formed as students, professional settings necessitate asking themselves what kind of teacher they want to be in a new context. In collaboration with their professor, two pre-service teachers examined their final practicum experiences, highlighting how Transformative Inquiry (TI), a holistic investigative approach, supported them in becoming authentic teachers. We hear how the TI process helped them identify, honour, and strengthen their personal and unique teaching identities. Highlighted themes include: touchstone stories, the power of the circle, living the questions, and the importance of on-going reflection. These new teachers resisted traditional images of teachers by embracing imperfection and vulnerability.

## DEVENIR D'AUTENTIQUES ENSEIGNANTS PAR LE BIAIS DE LA RECHERCHE TRANSFORMATIVE : LES DÉFIS DU DERNIER STAGE

**RÉSUMÉ.** Au cours du dernier stage en enseignement, les futurs enseignants font face à un défi important: redéfinir leur identité comme enseignant. En effet, œuvrant dans un nouveau milieu – en contexte professionnel – ils doivent abandonner leur identité étudiante et se questionner sur le type d'enseignant qu'ils désirent être. En collaboration avec leur professeur, deux futurs enseignants ont analysé les expériences vécues durant leur dernier stage, mettant en lumière la manière dont l'approche de Recherche Transformatrice (RT ou Transformative Inquiry), une méthode de recherche holistique, les a aidés à devenir de véritables enseignants. Dans cet article, nous apprenons comment la RT leur a permis de développer, d'accepter et de renforcer leur identité pédagogique personnelle et unique. Les auteurs abordent des histoires marquantes, le pouvoir du cercle, le concept d'incarner le questionnement et l'importance de la réflexion constante. Les futurs maîtres se sont opposés à la conception traditionnelle de l'enseignant et ont accepté d'être imparfaits, ainsi que vulnérables.

*"The transformation of education begins with the transformed heart of the teacher."  
(Palmer, 1983/1993, p. 107)*

In their practicum context, emerging teachers often wonder: Who am I as a teacher? Are my personal identity and teacher identity the same? Do I want to be like the teachers I had in my own schooling or somehow different? How do I bring my authentic self, my own personal beliefs and values into the classroom? How does my personality mesh with the existing, sometimes hidden, culture of the school? As pre-service teachers move from teacher education programs into school-based practicum settings, they leave behind whatever scaffolding was offered during the classroom settings of their teacher education program and begin the task of defining themselves in the context of their new school environments.

The practicum is a situation in which confidence can be forged or fractured, self-efficacy developed or pulverized, and identity realized or splintered. How can pre-service teachers best adjust to the rigors of classroom life? In this writing, we attend carefully to identity transitions. The term *identity transitions* refers to the process pre-service teachers engage in where they seek to embody who they are and yearn to be as educators. For each pre-service teachers' unique identity to be authentically embodied, they must engage with and resist traditional images of what it means to be a teacher.

Findings from a five-year study that examined the experiences of over 200 pre-service teachers suggest Transformative Inquiry (TI) as one approach that can help new educators navigate this potentially tenuous professional journey (Stanger, Tanaka, Tse, & Starr, 2013; Tanaka, Farish et al., 2014; Tanaka & Tse, 2015). Our purpose here is to elucidate how TI assists pre-service teachers in identifying, honouring, and strengthening their personal and unique teaching identities. TI is a dynamic process that helps educators negotiate the complex and vibrant terrain of learning ~ teaching<sup>1</sup> as they ask questions relevant to their practice as teachers. TI is a way of taking time and space to draw on personal passions and put that energy to use within a relational framework.

To demonstrate this process, we begin by briefly describing the context for our experience of TI and we then go into more depth into TI itself, grounding it in identity development theory. This is followed by a description and discussion of the classroom experiences of two of the authors (Vanessa and Meaghan) as they move through their final practicum placements, thus highlighting specific and useful practices of TI. The authors of this article are an instructor of the TI course (Michele Tanaka) and two students who have taken the course and since graduated from the program (Meaghan Abra from the Bachelor of Education Elementary Program and Vanessa Tse from the Post-Degree Elementary Program). Meaghan's and Vanessa's vignettes of experience are particularly poignant as they are told from each of their own perspectives as pre-service teachers. This paper has been a unique collaboration between a professor (Michele) and these two undergraduate students. Use of the term "we" refers to all three authors, but to avoid confusion, we shift into third person when Meaghan and Vanessa are narrating vignettes based on their experiences.

## CONTEXT

TI is a research approach that supports pre-service teachers as they work through various aspects of being and becoming teachers (Tanaka, 2014). Developed at the University of Victoria on the Canadian west coast, the approach has been the focus of a long-term study funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada. TI is a direct response to the overly-positivist paradigm entrenched in many teacher education programs. TI resists the transmissive model of teaching perpetuated in the academy and schools. The TI approach is very much grounded in an indigenous and holistic way of knowing. While TI is designed to be useful in the Canadian teacher education context, it can be adapted and practiced in a variety of contexts. For example, a graduate program at the Huxley College of the Environment at Western Washington University is grounded in the TI process.<sup>2</sup>

The TI process helps new educators attend to the dilemmas of teaching while charting their professional bearings towards the possibilities of who they want to be as teachers. Through developing a holistic inquiry stance, pre-service teachers move closer to ecological sustainability, social justice, and an awareness and implementation of their ideals, while also finding more about who they really are as teachers. In this required course, pre-service teachers choose a topic of inquiry they can get excited about: something they believe to be relevant and interesting within their teaching practice. Topics are wide-ranging and heartfelt, reflecting the complexity of classroom practice. Examples include: teacher confidence, anxiety, introversion, empathy, assessment and motivation, perfectionism, joy in the classroom, faith and spirituality, building an inclusive classroom community, mindful teaching and learning, and teacher health and wellness. After choosing a topic, they spend time exploring how to “dwell aright” (Aoki, 2005, p. 163) in the complexity of their topic (for more information, see Tanaka, Stanger, & Tse, 2014).

After participating in the TI course, Meaghan and Vanessa became undergraduate members of the research team and engaged in the data analysis process to contribute their student perspectives. Alongside this work, they were encouraged to write about their own practicum experiences. In response to the research question, “What influence does the TI process have on emerging educators?”, Meaghan and Vanessa wrote about touchstone stories from their final practica and then alongside senior members of the TI research team, began to analyze their experiences. In this way, their lived experiences were situated in the context of TI and were a rich site for understanding how two individuals drew upon the process of TI within their practice as educators.

The research team then compared these stories to themes identified through prior pre-service teacher focus groups on the TI process. Meaghan and Vanessa further analyzed their practicum experiences; many of the themes in their own stories were congruent with findings from the wider research study. In this article, we share in-depth narratives of what happened to Meaghan and Vanessa within

their practicum settings emphasizing the following four themes: touchstone stories, power of the circle, living the questions, and ongoing reflection. We turn first to explain TI's main tenets, ones that became salient in our experience of the teacher education program and the process of becoming teachers.

## TRANSFORMATIVE INQUIRY

TI offers a rich terrain for identity development (Tanaka, Tse et al., 2014). TI is in part a response to concerns that teacher education programs often “concentrate almost entirely on teaching pre-service teachers to teach; little attention is placed on helping them to become teachers” (Cole & Knowles, 1993, p. 469). Two specific aspects of TI support the important process of identity formation. First, the process of becoming a teacher can be deeply charged with emotions and pre-service teachers need support to learn how to negotiate these (Timoštšuk & Ugaste, 2010). In TI, emotions are attended to with openness, honesty, and non-attachment; we acknowledge emotions, while at the same time try to remain objective in terms of understanding what they indicate. We often refer to this meta-cognitive space as the *edge of counseling*, a place to delve into the affective aspects of an inquiry topic. The course offers time and space for exploration of personal worldviews, reflection on past experiences, and uses accompanying emotions as doorways into deeper understanding. The depths of these explorations are left up to each individual, and sometimes, their choices can lead to complex and challenging emotional landscapes. In many educational contexts, such engagement in emotional knowing is relegated to the counselor's office down the hall. We attempt a holistic inquiry stance, and thus seek to attend, support, and welcome emotions in a way that will deepen the learning processes for each individual.

Second, TI supports a different kind of learning community, one that diverges from the competitive soil that germinates much of life in academic contexts. Unfortunately, too few school communities construct spaces where colleagues might learn from one another; teachers are often insufficiently equipped to engage in genuinely collaborative work (Westheimer, 2008). We have found that *how* we listen is key to developing this ability. In TI, we consciously create situations that re-pattern our listening behaviours towards more inclusive habits where we listen to the layers of the classroom. Schultz (2003) described the pedagogical usefulness of teachers incorporating a listening stance: “Rather than teaching prospective and experienced teachers how to follow prescriptions or blueprints,” she suggested “that teachers learn how to attend and to respond with deep understanding to the students they teach” (p. 2). Schultz laid out a framework that locates listening at the centre of teaching and suggests that teachers must listen to the layers of experience in their classroom to know how to proceed. This includes being able to listen to the rhythm and balance of specific classrooms; listen to the social, cultural and community contexts of students' lives, and listen to silence and acts of silencing.

Additionally, in TI, we not only learn from each other, we also learn *with* each other (for specific activities see Tanaka, Stanger, & Tse, 2014, Chapter 8; Tanaka & Tse, 2015). This type of deep listening affects the whole learning community including learner and instructor relationships (Tanaka, Farish et al., 2014). The impact of this form of listening is felt through its ability to help us to shift away from the positivist tendency towards criticism and into a space where we allow others' questions to help guide our own journeys. What is s/he wondering? How can I assist their learning process? Listening is an integral aspect of teaching because quality teaching is built upon meaningful relationships.

Another focus within TI is to recognize and explore the potential of educational paradigms diverging from the dominant positivist paradigm, such as critical social justice, ecological complexity, and Indigenous ways of knowing (Stanger, Tanaka, Tse & Starr, 2013; Tanaka, 2014). This opens pedagogical possibilities beyond what is typical to the positivist paradigm many pre-service teachers have learned in their own schooling. Upon re-entering public schools for their practicum, some find themselves caught between what they hope schools and classrooms can become (many pre-service teachers are often newly exposed to paradigms that have the potential to transform dominant practices of learning and teaching) and those found in a school system firmly rooted in positivist ground. Many aspects of the practicum cannot be controlled and yet, as the earlier Palmer (1983/1993) quote indicates, changing education requires changing educators on a deeply personal level.

The practicum vignettes elucidate the journey required as Meaghan and Vanessa leaned into the difficulties of becoming the kind of teachers they believed themselves to be. For Meaghan, the key issues in her Grade 7 practicum revolved around the questions: If I'm not the perfect master teacher my supervisor expects, who am I as a teacher? How do I find my authenticity? Within her Grade 6 placement, Vanessa pondered: How do I walk my talk and bring my heartfelt issues into the classroom? How do I enact my authenticity?

#### **IDENTITY FORMATION WITHIN THE COMPLEXITY OF ENDURING TEACHER IMAGES**

In the backdrop of Meaghan and Vanessa's stories are cultural and historical images of a teacher that have long permeated both public and private spheres (Weber & Mitchell, 1995). For example, teachers are often believed to be information disseminators, nurturers, and social controllers (Weber & Mitchell, 1996). Britzman (1990/2003) expressed the stereotype of the "good" teacher as being "self-sacrificing, kind, overworked, underpaid, and holding an unlimited reservoir of patience" (p. 28). There can also be a binary infused into these images in which the teacher can be angel or antagonist, champion or failure (Alsup, 2006).

As pre-service teachers shift from overly idealized images of teaching to those that are more realistic, Cole and Knowles (1993) discussed how disillusionment often sets in when confronted with the classroom realities of education. They described three potential responses new teachers have to this predicament: 1) they leave the profession; 2) they simply survive and find ways to function within the system; 3) they are resolute in their belief to make a difference and endeavor to embody their principles. A specific intention of TI is to prepare pre-service teachers to gravitate towards the third option; to find clarity of values, beliefs, and identity, as well as the habits of an inquiring professional who can move towards enacting these dispositions.

In order for pre-service teachers to embody their beliefs, they must know what their beliefs are. To successfully transition into teaching, they need “a strong sense of their personal identity and its connection or disconnection with their professional identity” (Alsup, 2006, p. 25). Personal identity and professional identity are complex, related constructs. Unfortunately, pre-service teachers frequently forge a binary between the two. Metaphorically speaking, the relationship between professional and personal identity is akin to the relationship between one’s left and right hand in that they are two manifestations of one person.

Identity is often understood as a relational, dynamic phenomenon (Beijaard, Meijer & Verloop, 2004). Post-structuralists and feminists challenge the notion that there is a unified self and instead propose identity as contradictory, numerous, and changing (Norquay, 1990). In this way, “identity should not be seen as unitary and fixed but as shifting and constantly re-performed in the different contexts that make up our lives” (Gill & Pryor, 2006, p. 286). Yet, most pre-service teachers struggle to do away with the stability of a central point of reference embedded in the modernist conception of the self. In the context of TI, we understand identity as a dialogic that combines both modern and postmodern conceptualizations (Akkerman & Meijer, 2011); thus, identity is “simultaneously unitary and multiple, continuous and discontinuous, and individual and social. With such a view, we move from a theoretical discussion in terms of either/or towards thinking in terms of both/and” (Akkerman & Meijer, 2011, p. 315). Vital to the professional identity of teachers is including an understanding that the identity construct is a continual process that entails both the context and the individual, engages one’s sub-identities, and involves agency (Beijaard et al., 2004).

### ***Authenticity***

Imbued within this discussion is the important notion of authenticity. Cranton and Carusetta (2004) described authenticity as encompassing the following traits: congruity between beliefs and actions, living critically, genuineness, and encouraging the authenticity of others. They further depict five aspects

of authenticity: self-awareness, awareness of others, relationships with learners, awareness of context, and a critically reflective approach. The latter is not a judgmental stance, but rather a mode of thinking about oneself: a practice of teaching that is mindful, inquiring, and open. We suggest that to cultivate authenticity, teachers must critically reflect on the standards of learning and teaching in their context and consider the ways in which their personal beliefs might deviate from accepted patterns that govern interactions in the classroom. In this way, teachers can distinguish themselves from the larger community of educators and thus develop an understanding of how they are similar to and different from the collective (Cranton & Carusetta, 2004).

In order for identity to be authentically expressed and strengthened, educators must sometimes resist and transform traditional historical and cultural images of a teacher that have been grafted onto them. As Clandinin (1985) stated, images “are not merely mental constructs to be expressed; they are embodied in action” (p. 382). These traditional images may have a hold on pre-service teachers at a visceral level (Weber & Mitchell, 1996), and it is very challenging “for self-aware professionals to forge new identities by modifying images that they have held all their lives – images that are rooted in both mythology and the reality of teaching” (Weber & Mitchell, 1995, p. 31). In reaction to the stresses associated with learning to teach, many new teachers adopt the cultural norms of the school because of its pragmatic importance (Hawkey, 1996). But conforming can be hazardous to the process of teachers’ finding themselves (Beijaard et al., 2004). Regrettably, some new teachers must make “a conscious decision to adapt to the existing culture since this will bring greatest success, until such time that they can resist or change that culture” (Hawkey, 1996, p. 101).

Cole and Knowles (1993) have encouraged teacher education programs to proceed holistically:

An inquiry approach to teacher preparation based on internal and external information gathering methods...provides pre-service teachers opportunities to engage in ongoing examination of self as teacher within the contexts of classrooms, schools, and the broader professional community. Habits and patterns of reflective inquiry are likely to afford greater congruity between idealized images and realities of schools such that beginning teachers may challenge and move beyond the status quo. (p. 470)

The TI process resonates with this view. Told in their own words, both Meaghan’s and Vanessa’s stories are testimonials to journeys of resistance, which struggle with inherited images of what it means to be a teacher. Within each of the four themes appear a pair of vignettes: one from Meaghan, another from Vanessa. All three authors introduce the theme, as well as discuss it afterwards in light of the vignettes.



## STORIES FROM PRACTICUM

*Touchstones*

There is increasing evidence in the usefulness of developing awareness around touchstone experiences for pre-service teachers, particularly with an eye towards social justice (Strong-Wilson, 2008). Strong-Wilson argued that literary touchstones, such as books remembered from childhood, can be significant experiences that shape teaching practice. In this light, pre-service teachers are seen as “storied intellectuals” who undergo “storied formation” – the shaping of who they are as teachers through the stories they remember, read, tell, and hear (Strong-Wilson, 2008, p. 5). These salient points of reference become places to return to from which they can “judge the worth of other stories and experiences” (Strong-Wilson, 2008, p. 95) and become situated in their “landscape of learning” as teachers (Greene, 1978, p. 2).

The vignettes begin by describing salient experiences from Meaghan and Vanessa’s practica. These profound teaching moments became touchstone stories that they will hold onto throughout their careers as a type of compass indicating veracity of what could be true for them as teachers.

VIGNETTE 1. *Meaghan: The French lesson*

It was the initial week of my final practicum and I was being supervised for the first time. My mentor teacher had handed me a unit introduction lesson for French that he usually used and I had tried to teach it without adapting it to my own style. I will readily admit it was not my best lesson, but I was not prepared for the conversation to come.

My supervisor told me the truth: the lesson wasn’t engaging, I could do better, and I needed to be more dynamic as a teacher. I interpreted it as “you are not cut out for this, you failed your students, and you are not ready to be a teacher.” Looking back, the pressure I was putting on myself to be *perfect* in the first French lesson I had ever taught was unreasonable. Striving for perfection had been what I was known for, *doing it all* was my identity within the teacher education program. This was my final practicum, and I believed I already had all of the practice I should need.

The idea of failing my practicum became almost debilitating, and I couldn’t fully participate in the conversation. There was a lot of talk by my supervisor about what a “master teacher” looks like and what I needed to change in my practice. Now I know this advice was meant to be helpful, but at the time it made me feel inadequate: as if I had failed not only as a teacher but also as a person. I believed that I had failed in my integrity and respect to my students, the two things I am most passionate about. The feeling of inadequacy stuck with me for the rest of the day. Many thoughts were tumbling around in my head: *What is wrong with me? Can I do this again tomorrow? Can I do this again forever? Is teaching really for me?*

On the drive home after that meeting, I felt ready to give in and give up on teaching. As the questions raced around my mind, I felt a seizing of my insides. It is a queasiness I associate with discomfort with the unknown. This time, the unknown was of being alone in the journey. How would I learn to speak my truth, be myself, in my teaching?

**VIGNETTE 2. *Vanessa: The photograph***

Something strange happened on my practicum. I came into education through a passion for working with disadvantaged children, and sharing stories about privilege and oppression is integral to my stance as an educator. However, while planning a Social Studies lesson for my Grade 6 class, I was jolted by my own resistance to put my convictions into practice. My idea was simple: to present a photograph of a girl I had met on the streets of India and begin a discussion around privilege. This particular image evokes a visceral response in me even years after it was taken. A little girl, about four years old, with a gaze that pierced me then and that pierces me now. There were no edges in her expression, just all that is innocent, open, and honest. Describing her always slips away from me, the words cannot stretch wide enough to reveal our encounter. So I turn to poetry, as the best way to render the story of our meeting and the sparks it stirred within.

*Birth Right*

Brown eyes,  
cinnamon skin,  
the burning kiss of August  
sweat hugging your  
blonde hair that should have  
been black velvet.

The streets of Delhi  
teeming with rickshaws,  
camels and jalebis.  
A wisp of a sari,  
a young hand tugging  
at my shirt. The sun  
pouring through the smoke  
and garbage to find  
you. On a square of  
fabric with your mother  
and bananas. Faded  
shirt, all pins and frays.  
The paths of our hands,  
entwine. The imprint  
whittled between the  
throttle of hunger  
and the rot of wealth.

The burning never  
stops. The reflection  
swims between  
my heartbeats.

I wanted to share with my students the phenomenon of where we are born – how that unique moment can chart our trajectories in this life. My hope was to cultivate a culture of empathy by disrupting their perceptions of the other (Lingis, 1994), and for my students to begin to recognize privilege as something that is often not earned but bestowed at birth. Yet, I hesitated. I was not sure if I could share the photo, when just looking at the image caused my eyes to well up with tears. My anxiety and fear stifled me. I suppose this fear had everything to do with truly being seen by my students. Somehow, bringing my passions into the classroom made me feel naked and unguarded as a teacher.

It was easy to share interests that related to sports, music, or hobbies, but the beliefs and passions that composed the fabric of my heart – I was unsure how to hold them or speak them when draped in my new persona as a teacher. Experience had taught me that my views were not always popular. Others are not necessarily inclined to discuss the unequal diffusion of wealth and resources and systemic oppression. Over time, I had been socialized not to wade into too many uncomfortable conversations or be perceived as playing the “race card.” However, TI taught me that my deeply held beliefs are paramount to being a good teacher.

I hesitated, because to impart those concepts involved baring my own emotions and spirit, and exploring ideas and deep questions where my knowing does not yet entirely stretch. How could I reach into those sacred spaces of my heart with my students? Was that something teachers even did? Yet to not share the image and what it represents, would be to deny the passions that brought me into education.

*Discussion of touchstone vignettes.* Both Meaghan and Vanessa describe practicum experiences rooted in emotional terrain, a topography that was difficult to enter because they felt they had never been taught how. Traditional ideas of what it means to be a teacher are steeped in notions of *teacher as expert* or *teacher as the one who knows*. But both Meaghan and Vanessa felt they needed more space given to their process of becoming, to embody being a *teacher as inquiring professional*, asking difficult questions without having to respond with immediate answers. Both felt that if they did not get this right, they would not get a good evaluation and later, a teaching job, becoming another statistic of a university graduate who could not attain work in their field. Their experience demonstrated a narrowing path to being a teacher; if that role was not performed to reflect traditional standards, they could not pass through the gates of the profession.

Meaghan and Vanessa’s touchstones were events that cracked the veneer of patterned and expected ways of being a teacher, leaving them susceptible to compromised identity formation. Paradoxically, the gifts of such cracks and imperfections can be the development of courage, compassion, and connection (Brown, 2010), important traits for teachers to possess. For Meaghan and Vanessa, the cracks became entry points into professional authenticity. Careful attention to these fissures can lead to growth and a more enlivened teacher presence.

Women have a particular pressure to look, act, and be flawless; not surprisingly, perfectionism is deeply tied to shame (Brown, 2012). Perfectionism can feed the delusion that when unfortunate circumstances arise, we could have prevented them (Brown, 2012). Elementary teachers, who are predominantly women, are frequently obsessed with getting all their “ducks in a row.”

In her practicum, Meaghan felt her cracks starting to form like ice under pressure, gradually splintering across a frozen expanse. She was fighting an ingrained notion of having to somehow be all things to all people, to do it all and do it well. Fortunately, due to the influence of TI, her experience became an opportunity to become more who she wanted to be as a teacher and as a person.

Vanessa felt it might have been easier to go with the flow, to show her supervisor that she had grasped the mechanics of constructing lessons and planning. But social justice was something she cared deeply about and constructing a lesson with the picture of the young girl was a conscious act of following her convictions. To move forward with greater authenticity, she wanted to be emotionally vulnerable and let go of her inherited beliefs around teachers as objective information disseminators. Vanessa had to recognize that these cracks were not a sign of weakness but an opportunity for growth. Why was that one little girl born a beggar? Vanessa may never have the answer, but compassion moved her to share a young child’s predicament with her students. At the heart of this lesson was the intention to disrupt the myth of the meritocracy, to show that privilege is often unearned, to discuss systemic oppression, and ultimately, to foster empathy.

### *Power of the circle*

In the context of the TI course, both Vanessa and Meaghan had participated in complicated conversations (Pinar, 2004) about salient pedagogical issues with thinking partners, both one-on-one and in small groups of peers. One key aspect of these conversations was practicing various forms of *listening*. In particular, we focus on *generous listening* (Thayer-Bacon, 2003), where we are conscious of our own beliefs and try to suspend them so we can imagine what might be true for another. We also practiced *listening to be changed*, where we listen to actually let other perspectives sink into our paradigmatic depths and change our epistemology and ontology. The second key aspect is creating and holding *safe enough space*, where emotions can be held gently, and yet risks can be taken in the process of becoming more fully who one is and perhaps, even becoming a different person (Tanaka, Tse et al., 2014). Both Vanessa and Meaghan consciously moved these concepts forward into their practica.

**VIGNETTE 3. Meaghan: Dismantling a brick wall**

And now whom do I have to turn to? All my friends from school are in the middle of their own practica, and many are not in the same city anymore. My parents are often a source of comfort, but I did not need the unflinching support of people coming instantly to my defense. I was upset. They would want to take the hurt away as best they could – but not this time. I needed to stay in that feeling of hurt and discomfort.

What I needed was a true thinking partner, someone who would listen generously (Thayer-Bacon, 2003) as well as offer an honest, different perspective. Typically, I had numerous people with whom I could share my struggles (a roommate, a boyfriend, several coworkers, and plenty of classmates), but not this time.

I turned to my mentor teacher and a fellow student teacher at the same school. Both were able to listen openly and patiently. They offered advice that was relevant to me and gave me a new perspective on my situation. “It’s one more hoop to jump in the program, we can do it,” my fellow student teacher comforted me. I started to see that it was something I could deal with and get through, to just let it be, and put one foot in front of the other. My mentor teacher helped me to pull out what I needed from the feedback and discern what would get me to the place I wanted to be. Given the notion of master teacher used by my supervisor, he asked, “What from that do you want to be?” I felt like a brick wall was being turned into doable steps. After listening carefully to both, I was able to extract the advice that I needed from my supervisor’s report and continue on. The next week I was more comfortable in the class and I was able to be more dynamic as a teacher.

**VIGNETTE 4. Vanessa: Sharing a lens**

One of the issues I wrestled with while in the TI course was wondering if my students saw me as an “other” or as their “brown-skinned teacher.” As a biracial teacher working in predominantly white classrooms, I am always required to negotiate liminal, hyphenated space. Somehow the image of the small girl on the streets of India, while tapping into my passions, also prodded my fears.

The turning point towards finding the courage to share the photo came through the words of my practicum principal. Like the girl in the photo, he too was from India and we often shared stories of our time in a country and culture very different from Canada. Early on, he took time to read a letter of introduction I composed for the parents of my students, in which I described many of my past experiences, such as my time overseas that had brought me into education. I felt he listened to and understood my experiences on a deep level. He encouraged me to bring those experiences into the classroom.

The resonance between my principal and me provided me with the footing I needed on the shaky ground of practicum. We viewed education through a similar lens, one in which issues of inequality and race were not just topics in a textbook, but living realities. It was through our discussions that I began to become more deeply attuned to what truly matters for children. The essence of his words still resonates with me. They spoke to me that my experiences abroad had value in the classroom and that there is space for those stories to be heard.

*Discussion of the power of the circle vignettes.* Too often in educational contexts, the process of listening has come to be marginalized as a secondary aspect of dialogue (Gordon, 2011), where speaking is privileged over hearing (Remedios, Clarke, & Hawthorne 2012). Through an analysis of the work of philosopher Martin Buber, Gordon (2011) asserted that “deep listening...is not really a skill that can be displayed or modeled but rather a mode of existence toward others,” (p. 218). Thus, deep listening becomes a *way of being* rather than a *state of being*. This is not to suggest that there are not skills embedded within deep listening, but rather, the process of TI emphasizes listening as “much more about *being present* to the other than about displaying some proficiency or following a set of techniques” (Gordon, 2011, p. 218). The TI process supports a riskier practice of listening where we “speak to be revealed and listen to be changed.”<sup>3</sup>

For Meaghan, the conversations with her thinking partners were filled with empathy. This moved her away from being paralyzed into shame and instead into action. The empathy and compassion given by her colleagues gave her the confidence to figure out how to move on from that place of feeling frozen. Note how the typically negative metaphor of “jumping through hoops,” a feeling of perceived uselessness, became beneficial in that it spurred her on towards growth. She was then able to open up to the ideas of her supervisor and focus more clearly on her goals.

Vanessa’s conversations with her principal validated her passions. In part, this was due to having a more experienced educator support her ideas and experiences. She knew that there was someone else who could relate to the complex social realities of India, and this resonance gave her confidence to think about and act on her feelings around a racialized topic. It brought to the surface something previously in her subconscious: as a racialized teacher within a very white space, she felt a deep responsibility to address this topic.

Within their respective thinking partner conversations, both young teachers felt they were in safe enough space. Meaghan was glad to have her emotions acknowledged and respected, leading her to being able to explore them more fully and relax her expectations around what it means to be a teacher. Vanessa felt herself understood by a kindred spirit, where her explorations were accepted as being professionally appropriate. From there, she was able to propel herself forward to a more authentic way of teaching.

### *Living the questions*

Both Meaghan and Vanessa were in the vulnerable process of simultaneously being and becoming teachers. In this *becoming*, Meaghan was wrestling with her own unattainable goals of perfectionism reinforced by the educational status quo. She was trying to find a way of letting herself be where she was in the present moment, both as a learner and a teacher rather than chase an unrealistic identity based on a dream of achieving perfection. Vanessa was

struggling with integrating her passion for social justice into her teaching. She sensed a tension between her goals and the unspoken culture of schooling where straying from the hallowed ground of Prescribed Learning Outcomes (PLOs) is dangerous and uncomfortable business.

**VIGNETTE 5. Meaghan: My ideal teacher**

I found practicum often pushed me into thoughts about perfection: what is perfect? Why do I expect perfection from myself? Why do I assume others expect perfection? I was trying to stay afloat but it seemed to me that striving for perfection felt an awful lot like drowning – not exactly the feeling I was hoping for in my teaching practice!

Armed with a list of objectives, a stack of unit plans, assessment ideas, and teaching strategies, did I feel ready for the experience? Not in the slightest. It wasn't the curriculum outcomes or the lesson plans that held me back the most, it was the pressure I put on myself to not struggle. It was the expectations of being told that I was a fabulous teacher and ready for the real teaching world. The hardest part of preparing for practicum really had nothing to do with preparation at all. It was the self-inflicted pain of trying to live up to my *ideal teacher*.

I wondered if I would ever feel that the job I was doing was good enough? At what point in time was meeting *most* of my students needs going to be good enough? These questions led to feelings of inadequacy, which led to the question of “why am I doing this?” and, again, “do I really want to be a teacher?”

This began to shift when I started to acknowledge what I should have done differently in my lessons *on my own*, which led to being acknowledged as a maturing teacher, not just as a student teacher. For the first time, I felt satisfied that I could actually use my imperfection to help me figure out what to do next time a challenge of this sort occurred. I started to embrace the cracks.

**VIGNETTE 6. Vanessa: Revealed**

In the struggle of becoming a teacher I found myself battling the traditional paradigm, which over many years in the system, had become grafted into me. Up until this point I believed that school was about curriculum and the teacher's job was to deliver it. My experience in the TI course opened up new possibilities to me...

What happened with my Social Studies lesson? Gathering my courage, I put up the picture on the classroom wall. I described to my students how I had met this little girl on the streets of India and together we pondered what might be true for her. When I first put up the image, I felt the familiar swell of tears mounting up inside of me. They did not spill over, but looking back, I wonder what was at stake for me in holding them at bay.

I will never know what, if any, impact that small teaching moment had on my students. Perhaps it was just a passing blip in the stream of curriculum that dominates classroom life. Nevertheless, after my practicum ended, that moment was one of the things I was most proud of. In revealing my passions, I too was revealed. I allowed my students, in some small way, to see me as I really am: a learner, someone who is uncertain, and someone who does not always know.

*Discussion of living the questions vignettes.* What do these practicum stories have in common? Both Meaghan and Vanessa were finding ways of dwelling in vulnerable spaces long enough to feel their own way forward as teachers amidst deep classroom complexity. If there is any truth in the claim that *we teach who we are* (Palmer 1998), then *we need to know who we are*. As Meaghan and Vanessa took identity risks, both moved towards actualizing who they really were as educators. For Meaghan there was a sense that who she was in that moment was enough. Her questions began with, “can I handle not being perfect as a teacher?” while today she asks, “how do I become the kind of teacher I want to be through discernment around what’s really important?” Vanessa found courage to let her convictions take hold, knowing she could not feel authentic proceeding any other way. She started by wondering, “is this even what teachers do?” She now asks, “what really matters for my students in terms of becoming compassionate people?”

The poet Rilke (1986) suggested we live the questions, to dwell in the unknown rather than seek immediate answers. The TI course gave both Meaghan and Vanessa a model for how to practice living their own questions. They were careful to not rush towards packaged answers created outside of their own experience. Instead, they took the time and courage to stay with and explore the cracks of their experience to find a new way forward. This then became an integral part of attending to the complexity of teaching within their practica. Living the questions meant that their queries did not necessarily lead to easy answers, but rather inspired a partial understanding of their situation and thus unearthing further questions.

### *Continued reflexivity*

At the time of this writing, both Meaghan and Vanessa have completed the program and have moved into their professional careers as teachers. They continue to reflect on the touchstone stories from their practica and what these experiences mean for them now.

### *VIGNETTE 7. Meaghan’s reflection*

Through what I learned in the TI course I am able to allow myself to be uncomfortable in the questions. I permit myself to think about what it is that is unsettling and where that unsettledness comes from. I allow myself to take time when I need it and to nurture my soul. I have started listening to what my soul needs: space, time, solitude, positivity, and strong relationships. Sometimes I am still confused by these new changes and the discoveries I have had. My need for solitude is so opposite from the ways I used to nurture myself, usually choosing friends and family over my own thoughts. Is this need for aloneness new or is it something that had gone unnoticed my entire life? The thought of dealing with my own needs before giving myself fully to others is another constant struggle in my mind.

I am learning to prevent the breakdowns when I lose my footing, instead of just preparing for the repairs.



VIGNETTE 8. *Vanessa's reflection*

I am still troubled by my story. Why was I afraid to take one step forward in be~coming the type of teacher I yearn to be? Why was I afraid to move out of the mind and into the heart with my students? Reflecting back, I am reminded of Judith V. Jordan's (2008) words, "When we are struggling to be certain and invulnerable ('strong') we become less open, less ready to listen responsively, more rigid and dogmatic" (p. 229). This reminds me that I default to being an *expert knower*, rather than a *fellow learner*. I see how accessing my own vulnerability, my humanness as a teacher, becomes an inevitable key to bringing passion into the classroom. Bringing the spirit of TI into practice requires something different from educators and myself: vulnerability. This moves me beyond the curriculum to pondering why I am there at all? Why do I even care about teaching? It is questions like these that drive the spirit of TI into my practice. I need to identify and voice my passions to be authentic and feel alive in my teaching practice.

In many ways I fail to be progressive. There is the back pat of the institution when I have "control" of a class and my students silently complete their work. Many of the elements of TI resonate with why I want to teach: generous listening, following passion, unbounded questioning, relational accountability, other ways of knowing, reflexivity and mindfulness, and the teacher acting as a facilitator, coach, and mentor. However, entering a practicum, we are given a stack of subjects to teach and are under glaring scrutiny as to how we go about performing them. While many student teachers are unable to bring in TI in all its fullness, its spirit is nonetheless present, without TI, the photo and the story behind it might have been swept away in a tide of PLOs and assessments.

## CLOSING REMARKS

TI helps pre-service teachers appreciate the complex and ever-shifting landscape of learning and teaching. A vital challenge many of these new educators encounter is that of not being prepared for the ways in which the call of a teacher will problematize and even come to define their identities. To return to Cole and Knowles' (1993) concern, most teacher education programs center almost exclusively on the practice of teaching rather than the process of becoming a teacher. Despite the realities of most secondary institutions, TI exemplifies how one course can support pre-service teachers within the complex processes of becoming authentic teachers. As Meaghan and Vanessa's stories demonstrate, their struggles on practicum had very little to do with crafting lessons and everything to do with issues of identity; of be~coming more fully who they are and yearn to be as educators.

Part of Meaghan and Vanessa's process of identity development required an encounter with and an acknowledgement of the traditional images of teachers that are entrenched in societies and schools. For Meaghan, this was espoused through her supervisor's intonations about a (fictitious) master teacher. In Vanessa's practicum, she found these images had been internalized and surfaced when she found herself fearful of sharing her passions in the classroom.

When confronted with the reality of these images that define what it means to be a respectable teacher in most learning environments, many pre-service teachers buckle and conform, especially when in the pressured-filled space of practicum. Yet, in order for new possibilities of pedagogy to be enacted and for identity to be authentically expressed, teachers must resist many of these traditional images.

For Meaghan and Vanessa this had everything to do with embracing imperfection and vulnerability – two characteristics rarely associated with teachers. Yet in doing so they were able to shift towards nourishing new possibilities in education, beginning their journeys with intention and courage (Tanaka & Tse, 2015). As Leonard Cohen (1992) sings, “There’s a crack in everything. That’s how the light gets in” (track 5). Like roots pushing through cement, Meaghan and Vanessa found cracks in themselves and in the system and the fortitude to press through. TI begins with a belief that the teacher is an agent of change in schools. As Palmer (1983/1993) stated, “the transformation of education begins with the transformed heart of the teacher” (p. 107).

## RECOMMENDATIONS

We have discussed in depth the need for emotional support whereby pre-service teachers are given space and time to grapple with the complexities of education and identity shifts. Further issues we view as critical for teacher education programs to respond to are as follows: developing a community characterized by generous listening; fostering an environment where imperfection, uncertainty, and vulnerability are honoured; opening time and space for pre-service teachers to process and discuss pedagogical experiences until each feels satisfied; cultivating an awareness of self, and of self in relationship to others; developing critical, non-judgmental reflection and reflexive skills; practicing mindful awareness along with examining personal and professional binaries frequently forged in academic settings; and finally, fostering of courage and perseverance.<sup>4</sup>

Practicum is a crucial time for pre-service teachers as they negotiate identity shifts and encounter the traditional image of a teacher. To change enduring cultural images on a personal level they are well served to know who they are *and* know of the differing perspectives of others, thus teacher education programs would do well to intentionally attend to these issues at the heart of becoming a teacher.

## NOTES

1. We use the tilde (~) between words like learning~teaching and be~coming, because while pre-service teachers are learning to be teachers, in many ways they are already teachers. They are both being and becoming at the same time, hence, be~coming.
2. For examples of their transformative work, please see *Summit to Salish Sea: Inquiries and Essays* (<http://cedar.wvu.edu/s2ss/>).
3. As suggested by Kathy Altman at her “All My Relations: A 5-Rhythms Workshop” held in Victoria, BC in September 2012.
4. For further discussion on these issues, please see Tanaka, Stanger, & Tse (2014).

## REFERENCES

- Akkerman, S. F., & Meijer, P. C. (2011). A dialogical approach to conceptualizing teacher identity. *Teaching and Teacher Education, 27*, 308-319.
- Alsop, J. (2006). *Teacher identity discourses: Negotiating personal and professional spaces*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Aoki, T. (2005). Teaching as in-dwelling between two curriculum worlds (1986/1991). In Pinar, W. G. & Irwin, R. L. (Eds.), *Curriculum in a new key: The collected works of Ted T. Aoki* (pp. 159-166). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Beijaard, D., Meijer, P. C., & Verloop, N. (2004). Reconsidering research on teachers' professional identity. *Teaching and Teacher Education, 20*(2), 107-128.
- Britzman, D. (2003). *Practice makes practice: A critical study of learning to teach*. New York, NY: SUNY Press. (Original work published 1990)
- Brown, B. (2010). *The gifts of imperfection: Let go of who you think you're supposed to be and embrace who you are*. Center City, MN: Hazelden.
- Brown, B. (2012). *Daring greatly: How the courage to be vulnerable transforms the way we live, love, parent, and lead*. New York, NY: Gotham Books.
- Clandinin, D. J. (1985). Personal practical knowledge: A study of teachers' classroom images. *Curriculum Inquiry, 15*(4), 361-385.
- Cohen, L. (1992). Anthem. On *The future* [CD]. New York, NY: Columbia Records.
- Cole, A. L., & Knowles, J. G. (1993). Shattered images: Understanding expectations and realities of field experiences. *Teaching and Teacher Education, 9*(5/6), 457-471.
- Cranton, P., & Carusetta, E. (2004). Perspectives on authenticity in teaching. *Adult Education Quarterly, 55*(1), 5-22.
- Gill, S., & Pryor, J. (2006). The person who teaches? Narrative identity and teachers' experience at an international conference. *Forum, 48*(3), 285-296.
- Gordon, M. (2011). Listening as embracing the other: Martin Buber's philosophy of dialogue. *Educational Theory, 61*(2), 207-219.
- Greene, M. (1978). *Landscapes of learning*. New York, NY: Teachers' College Press.
- Hawkey, K. (1996). Image and the pressure to conform in learning to teach. *Teaching and Teacher Education, 12*(1), 99-108.
- Jordan, J. V. (2008). Valuing vulnerability: New definitions of courage. *Women & Therapy, 31*(2/4), 209-233.
- Lingis, A. (1994). *The community of those who have nothing in common*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.
- Norquay, N. (1990). Life history research: Memory, schooling and social difference. *Cambridge Journal of Education, 20*(3), 291-300.

- Palmer, P. J. (1993). *To know as we are known: A spirituality of education*. San Francisco, CA: Harper-SanFrancisco. (Original work published 1983)
- Palmer, P. (1998). *The courage to teach: Exploring the inner landscape of a teacher's life*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Pinar, W. F. (2004). *What is curriculum theory?* Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Remedios, L., Clarke, D., & Hawthorne, L. (2012). Learning to listen and listening to learn: One student's experience of small group collaborative learning. *Australian Educational Researcher*, 39(3), 333-348.
- Rilke, R. M. (1986). *Letters to a young poet* (Mitchell, S., Trans). New York, NY: Vintage Books Edition.
- Schultz, K. (2003). *Listening: A framework for teaching across difference*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.
- Stanger, N., Tanaka, M. T., Tse, V., & Starr, L. (2013). Winter counts as transformative inquiry: The role of creative imagery as an interpretation of adaptive change. *Complicity: An International Journal of Complexity and Education*, 10(2), 87-110.
- Strong-Wilson, T. (2008). *Bringing memory forward: Storied remembrance in social justice education with teachers*. New York, NY: Peter Lang.
- Tanaka, M. T. (2014). Transformative inquiry in teacher education: Evoking the soul of what matters. *Teacher Development*, 19(2), 133-150.
- Tanaka, M. T., & Tse, V. (2015). Touching the inexplicable: Poetry as transformative inquiry. *Journal of Curriculum Theorizing*, 30(3), 45-62.
- Tanaka, M. T. D., Farish, M., Nicholson, D., Tse, V., Doll, J., & Archer, E. (2014). Transformative inquiry while Learning ~ Teaching: Entry points through Mentor ~ Mentee vulnerability. *Journal of Transformative Education*, 12(3), 206-225.
- Tanaka, M. T., Stanger, N., & Tse, V. (2014). *Transformative inquiry* (iBook version 4.0). Available from iTunes: <http://transformativeinquiry.ca/downloads/>
- Tanaka, M., Tse, V., Stanger, N., Piché, I., Starr, L., Farish, & M. Abra, M. (2014). The edge of counselling: Mindful negotiation of emotions towards transforming learning ~ teaching. In L. Thomas, (Ed.), *Becoming teacher: Sites for development of Canadian teacher education* (pp. 469-502). Retrieved from <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/557c6e70e4b0d40fa1a3ddc2/t/559d2600e4b02b38b55cacf0/1436362240933/Becoming+teacher.pdf>
- Thayer-Bacon, B. J. (2003). *Relational "(e)pistemologies"*. New York, NY: Peter Lang.
- Timošćuk, I., & Ugaste, A. (2010). Student teachers' professional identity. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 26(8), 1563-1570.
- Weber, S., & Mitchell, C. (1995). *That's funny, you don't look like a teacher!: Interrogating images and identity in popular culture*. London, United Kingdom: Falmer Press.
- Weber, S., & Mitchell, C. (1996). Drawing ourselves into teaching: Studying the images that shape and distort teacher education. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 12(3), 303-313.
- Westheimer, J. (2008). Learning among colleagues: Teacher community and the shared enterprise of learning. In M. Cochran Smith, S. Feiman-Nemser, D. J. McIntyre, & K. E. Demers (Eds.), *Handbook of research on teacher education: Enduring questions in changing contexts* (3<sup>rd</sup> ed., pp. 756-783). New York, NY: Routledge.

VANESSA V.TSE is an entrepreneur and educator and currently serves in orphanages in north India. Her research interests include holistic education, resilience, and spirituality. [vanessavoyatse@gmail.com](mailto:vanessavoyatse@gmail.com)

MEAGHAN ABRA is a middle school teacher in the Greater Victoria School District. Her teaching and research interests are focused on balancing the use of technology in education and building strong relationships through curriculum design. [mabra@sd61.bc.ca](mailto:mabra@sd61.bc.ca)

MICHELET. D.TANAKA is an education professor at the University of Victoria and helps future teachers address the complexities of classrooms through Transformative Inquiry — a mindful approach to the social, environmental, and personal struggles of each learner. Research interests include teacher as researcher, cross-cultural understanding and indigenous ways of learning and teaching. [mtanaka@uvic.ca](mailto:mtanaka@uvic.ca)

VANESSA V.TSE est entrepreneure et formatrice. Elle travaille actuellement au sein d'orphelinats situés dans le nord de l'Inde. Ses recherches portent sur l'éducation holistique, la résilience et la spiritualité. [vanessavoyatse@gmail.com](mailto:vanessavoyatse@gmail.com)

MEAGHAN ABRA enseigne dans une école intermédiaire du district scolaire de la région de Victoria. Comme pédagogue et chercheur, elle s'intéresse à l'utilisation équilibrée de la technologie en éducation et à la création de relations solides dans l'élaboration des programmes. [mabra@sd61.bc.ca](mailto:mabra@sd61.bc.ca)

MICHELET. D.TANAKA est enseignante en éducation à l'Université de Victoria. Elle aide les futurs enseignants à aborder la complexité de la salle de classe par le biais de la Recherche Transformatrice (Transformative Inquiry), une approche en pleine conscience des défis sociaux, environnementaux et personnels auxquels fait face chaque apprenant. Ses intérêts de recherche comportent l'enseignant comme chercheur, l'entente interculturelle et les approches autochtones à l'apprentissage et l'enseignement. [mtanaka@uvic.ca](mailto:mtanaka@uvic.ca)