

## **Life Writing and Literary *Métissage*: Polyvocal explanations of relational learning**

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*There is truth in our words. May they fly, have sound,  
say what we mean and carry the beauty of truth.*

– Pauline Sameshima, 2018.

Traditionally, in Québec, people have not been afraid to fight in solidarity for their beliefs. However, cutbacks over the past twenty years have resulted in schools characterized by efficiency, not efficacy. Current political, economic and education policies are homogenizing and debilitating teachers in terms of professional development, capacity and identity. This paper highlights ongoing, iterative and collaborative action research, and constraints experienced along the way. Teachers with shared values and purpose are refining a methodology situating themselves as creators of polyvocal, narrative knowledge through professional conversation (Pithouse-Morgan & Samaras, 2015), and life writing/literary *métissage* (Hasebe-Ludt, Chambers, & Leggo, 2009). In so doing, our living theories (Whitehead, 2018) evolve. Presently, we<sup>1</sup> are seeking the means to extend our *métissages* to be culturally inclusive. We will offer our first bilingual workshop – English/français Québécois – at ARNA 2019. We believe this to be significant, because we sense a malaise at work in our local, linguistically segregated school system.

As members of a writing collective – the Narrative Inquiry Group – we represent various education sectors, cultural contexts, and worldviews. Our collective teaching experience includes public and private sectors, local universities, First Nations schools, the Canadian Far North, Africa and South America, where instruction is delivered in English, français Québécois, and/or indigenous languages. In experience, we range from early career to retired. We strive to respect the history, identity and values of others as we work for the betterment of school as a human endeavor. We face challenges offered by political, social, technological shifts, power structures within the institutions, and diversity of language, ethnicity, culture, ability, need, talent, gender and orientation. We honor each context as diverse yet cohesive. We are committed to living our values in our work as educators striving to improve practices for the good of all through action research (Whitehead, 2018). We know that we are learning through our inquiries. Yet, some may ask, “Really? So, what? Where’s the evidence?” Such is our problem. Pauline Sameshima (2018) asks us: “Can changing the way we use language to convey experience change the way we make

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<sup>1</sup> This paper takes the form of a braid of voice, understanding, influence, experience and learning. Therefore there will be shifts from I to We throughout as I/We shift from personal to polyvocal experience.

**With gratitude, I wish to acknowledge the support of principals Sujata Saha and Jean-René Saint Cyr offered to the teachers undertaking action research in their schools.**

meaning? ... Could we ask better questions? ... Could we use the questions to build different stories of teaching, learning and researching (stories that would have been previously been in the margin but now viewed only as different) so full access, inclusion and equity become pervading qualities of the whole? "(Sameshima, 2018, p. 5). We believe the answer is "Yes!"

Our questions become

- How do we understand living theory methodology?
- How do we understand life writing and literary *métissage*?
- How do we understand relational learning and polyvocality?
- How might the practice of literary *métissage* contribute to, and provide evidence of, teacher researchers' learning in relation, and foster the teacher researchers' professional development?
- How might we gain recognition of the validity of our endeavors?

### **What We know and What We Have Learned From Others**

**Self-study/ living theory.** We understand living theory as a way of being – in action, in flux – ready to be differently, while living our values for the propose of improved practice. Value claims, actions, reflections, productions, evaluations and publications (live or in print) constitute our self-studies.

When I visit earlier, not quite cleanly carved claims, I realise that I think differently yet similarly about what I care about in education. Teaching and learning, teachers and learners form the core of what I care about in education. I did not always understand this as valuing, or valuable. I did not always understand that values guide my practice. I was introduced to action research (Zuber-Skerritt, 2017) in graduate school, and worked with colleagues and a mentor on a project to bring inquiry learning to our school (Bramwell-Rejskind, Halliday, & McBride). I was invited to living theory (Whitehead, 2018) late in my career, and was challenged to write my story and provide evidence of its validity. I documented my efforts to improve my practice. I began self-study (Mitchell, Weber & O'Reilly-Scanlon, 2005), developing an understanding of my Self (Firman & Gila), and my commitment to teaching and learning. Currently, I dedicate myself to the creation of a climate of freedom, safety, trust, courage, and creativity within a community of action-researchers learning in relation (Pithouse-Morgan & Samaras, 2015). I believe that it is my social responsibility to do this. Although I am not always comfortable in this role, I take risks in order to continue to live my values as I inquire with others. I studiously keep myself informed of current views and practices, and I share what I learn with colleagues. New ideas move this work forward. I hold deep respect for practitioner-researchers and the learners in their care, and will continue to devote myself to their educational endeavors in a relationship of empathy, trust and love. Self-study provides me with a perspective from which to consider all of the above. My values are my starting point. My actions provide evidence that I live my values. Self-evaluation and public validation (Eisner, 1998) keep me true to my purpose. Moving beyond life in my classroom, living theory has become my way of being in the world. It allows

me the reflective, mindful means to contribute to the wellbeing of others and to sustain my own. In my original value claim, written 20 years ago, I articulated values I had lived implicitly, somewhat consistently, since beginning to teach in 1969. There were confrontations and contradictions and times when I was overwhelmed. Nevertheless, I wrote that I claimed to love and value my students above all else. I believed that to be true. Still in the classroom today, this would remain unchanged. In retirement, I continue to care about learners and their learning, and do so actively and vicariously through various inquiry endeavors with my colleagues. Within this sphere, I claim to value the possibility of creating new understandings that may inform teaching and learning as I ask “What does it mean to learn in relation?”

Within the Narrative Inquiry Group, we incorporate multiple approaches to inquiry including written, visual and performance methods as we create and share texts which represent and extend our learning. We adhere to the idea of collaborative action research as a reflective, emotive, relational, recursive process in which I/we engage for the purpose of the betterment of my/our Selves and those in our care. The theme of the ARNA 2019 Conference led us to consider new questions: Who am I as an activist? What barriers or constraints have I encountered in my work? What successes have I experienced? What contribution am I making, or would I like to make to the advancement of action research? We have enjoyed much reflection and many conversations with the question. To me, activism is an idea that begins with an attitude framed by democratic principles, that if enacted leads to the development of a skill, that if practiced leads to knowledge that can be used to create a social climate of freedom and safety (Bron & van Vliet, 2012). It is action driven by the goal of being clear about one’s values, acting to openly live those values in all that one does, and being readily involved in solving problems for the common good. Like living theory, activism becomes a way of being in the world.

My early teaching experience with special needs students was problematic. I witnessed the injustices, discrimination and abuse that they experienced at the hands of administrators, teachers, and peers. At the light-handed end, my students were ignored, at the heavy handed end, they were punished for their inability to function in a competitive mainstream school. I could not ignore this problem, and early in my career I developed the attitude that teaching is a problem-solving activity, and the problem that I set out to work on was the creation of a safe and democratic environment in our classroom and the school. Attitude is not enough. Change requires action. I had to learn to speak out with colleagues, employers, parents, and the general population of the school. I had to learn to ask for things – adapted and alternate curricular materials, extended deadlines, advanced access to technological tools, additional support from resource personnel. I had to learn to take the lead. I accomplished this, in part, by teaming with colleagues and a mentor to introduce a school-wide inquiry learning project which is still in place today. My attitude and actions created a way of being as a teacher in me and in my relations with others. These were not always positive. I spent years feeling angry and resentful, and I realized that this was to the detriment of my students. Knowing I had to keep my knowledge about the teaching and learning of special needs students current, I spiraled in and out of university throughout my career, graduating for the last time in the same year I retired. Since

that time I have continued to work with the same attitude, and I continue to care deeply for those students with special needs in the system today. Presently, I work with other caring professionals, supporting them as they pursue their action research projects.

**Life-writing and literary métissage.** In the early years of the Narrative Inquiry Group project, I opened the school's research office on Friday mornings, at 8:00 a.m., put out the kettle, cookies and Kleenex. Colleagues, the occasional student teacher or administrator arrived, and we settled in to share What's Up? stories of practice. On grim days we found comfort within our circle. Other days our conversations were celebratory. After chatting we would journal, share our stories, head off to class feeling relief. After a number of years, there was a felt need to move beyond storying, to address the problem of how to sustain and move conversations forward into professional learning, and to do this within our own and other contexts as well. We positioned ourselves as narrative inquirers (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000), and began experimenting with life-writing and literary métissage (Hasebe-Ludt, Chambers, & Leggo, 2009). We participated in seminars at Concordia University's Centre for Oral History and Digital Story Telling. We invited well-known authors to critique our writing with us. We began presenting at the annual Québec Provincial Teachers' Association Convention in order to validate our work publically, and we published in various journals.

In our inquiries, we use life-writing and literary métissage (Hasebe-Ludt, Chamber & Leggo, 2009), "... a practical tool or strategy ... a site for writing and surviving in the interval between different cultures and languages" (pp. 8-9), as a means to personal growth and systemic change. Métissage, a derivative of Métis sash – a multicolored, finger-woven belt attributed to mixed ancestry North American colonial culture – is a metaphor used in arts-based inquiry praxis involving the weaving of voices “ ... mak(ing) dialogue possible while the dialogue makes possible the rapprochement among disparate, unequal individuals and groups ... lead(ing) to understanding about the self and other and general insight about the world and our place in it” (Hasebe-Ludt, Chambers and Leggo, 2009, p. 38).



*Figure 1.* In conversation about literary métissage [Post Doc Skype Group Conversation](#)

Over time we have developed steps to guide the métissage:

1. To begin, we participate in a discussion, addressing questions, ideas or issues of concern

2. Next, we each record a reflection – list, doodle, poem, rant, rumination, letter, map – in response to the conversation
3. Once we have completed our texts, we share our pieces. Everyone takes note of words, lines or images lines from all pieces, including our own, that particularly resonate
4. Each group member then nominates lines, which are then arranged into a single piece, and organised for meaning, flow and representational voice, working until consensus (Horn-Miller, 2013) is reached.

### Creating a Métissage with Isabelle

Isabelle is an early career music teacher and we began working together during the current school year. Her Y-PAR project, which she is presenting at ARNA 2019, involves her senior students in the problem of electronic waste and action toward solutions. Isabelle expressed an interest in beginning her self-study as she facilitated her students' inquiry. Early in the project, we began discussing values and what it means to work through one's values in order to improve practice. Recently, we met to discuss her presentation for ARNA, and once again the idea of values arose. After chatting, we wrote our reflections and braided these into a métissage.

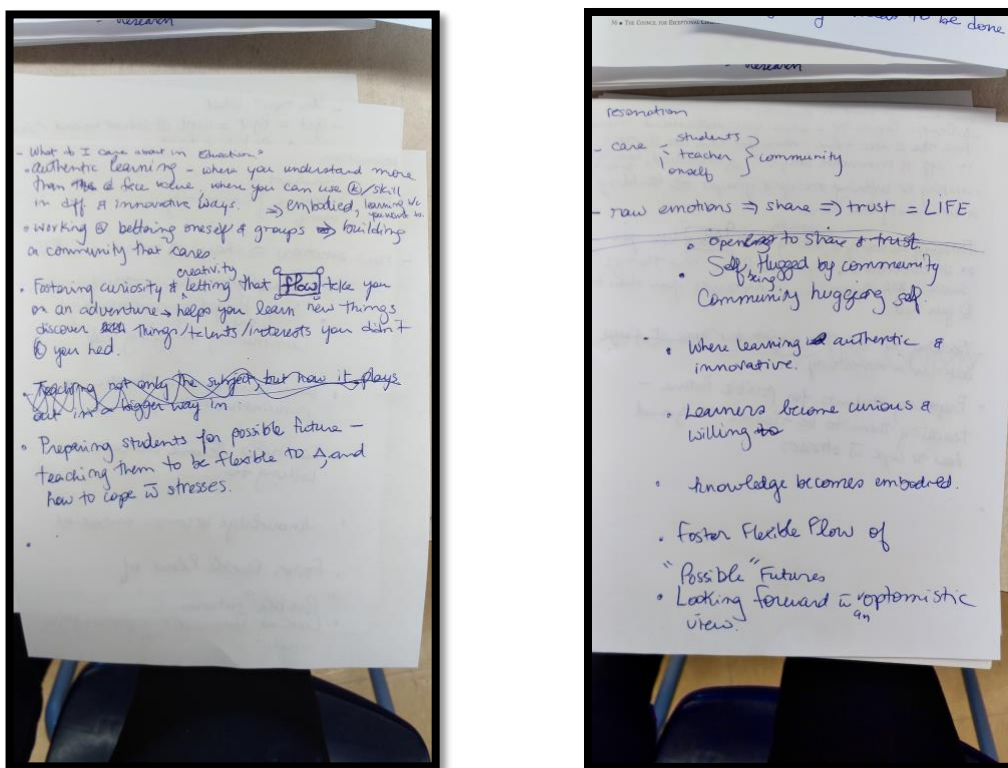


Figure 2. Isabelle's reflection: What do I care about in education?

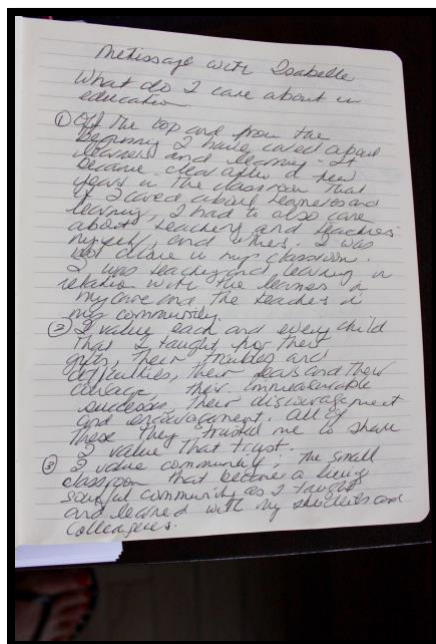


Figure 3. Judy's reflection: What do I care about in education?

### Possible Futures

Openness to share and trust  
 Self being hugged by community  
 Community hugging Self  
 Teachers and learners in soulful community

Learning is authentic  
 Innovative  
 Learners are curious, willing  
 Courageous

Knowledge is embodied  
 Fostering flexible flow of possible futures  
 Looking forward  
 With an optimistic view



Figure 4. Isabelle fostering flexible flow

### How We Understand Teacher Researchers' Learning in Relation

Educative relationship (Wexler, 2019) is fundamental to our commitment within the Narrative Inquiry Group. We support each other as we consider our situations, dilemmas, goals, and translate these considerations into action, professional learning and change. My colleagues

have an intuitive predisposition to learning through inquiry. Each takes the time and energy to critically consider their values and to find the knowledge they need to act on their values in practice.



*Figure 5.* An open-ended, evolving process that is teaching and learning.

Our relational learning provides the space or opportunity to share concerns, fears, successes and dreams that we might never have voiced otherwise. Our relationships engender trust, solace, courage, knowledge and love. Our actions and interactions benefit individuals, the group and others (how many and who?) sharing our values and vision (Kilpatrick, Field, & Falk, 2003). Conversation is essential. We engage in dialogue on teaching, learning, research, on life as we live it, alone and in various communities. We bring it all to the group, largely unfiltered, but sometimes not. We value conversation as the essence of an open-ended, evolving process that is teaching and learning. Vulnerability is a key component of relational learning, as are listening and hearing, and respecting the voice of Other. When we listen, reflect and braid, the syntheses offer relief, encouragement, and, on a good day, transformative insight, as we do “the work of the continuous making of a new world” (Sameshima, 2018). Most, but not all, is captured in the métissage. Nevertheless, we enlist the “power of the we to develop the I” (Pithouse-Morgan & Samaras, 2015). Analyzing the effectiveness of our progress as action researchers has not yet been considered. Some may ask “So, what?” “How many methodological inquiries are underway?” “Who cares?” However, clear evidence of our progress may be found below.

Table 1

*A chronology of the progress of our action research*

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1. Couture, D., McBride, J., Saha, S., Schellhase, D., & Von Eschen. (2011). *Teacher inquiry for educational change*. [Learning Landscapes](#)
2. Cassin, S., Massue, F., & McBride, J. (2014). Inquiry teaching and learning: An action research project. *Apprendre et enseigner aujourd'hui*, 3(2), pp. 23-27.
3. The Narrative Inquiry Group. (2014). *To where teachers learn: Following the Yellow Brick Road*. [Learning Landscapes](#)
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### A Black Strand

Clearly we have asked the wrong questions (Sameshima, 21018). Again. The colors of the traditional Métis sash bear particular significance. The black strand signifies darkness, a time of repression. In 2016, three colleagues and I prepared a presentation for ARNA in Knoxville. The school board denied the teachers' requests for leave and funding needed to present at the conference. (See [ARNA Conference Proceedings](#)). We were encouraged to move forward by sympathetic colleagues, and move forward we have. However, one more time – ARNA 2019 – teacher participants have been denied support from the school board. We are left to wonder how the bureaucrats understand teacher learning.



*Figure 6.* Heidi Yetman, Activist/Artist/Teacher, President of the Québec Provincial Association of Teachers, (QPAT) Vice-President of the Canadian Teachers Federation (CTF)

A conversation with Heidi Yetman, provides insight. Heidi began by saying, “Let’s have a conversation.” I am encouraged. I ask her to talk about activism in our province. She begins, “I find Québec has always been an interesting place to begin with because people aren’t afraid to get out and fight for what they believe in. We had negotiations in 2015. It was a really difficult negotiation. Right now I am president of QPAT, and I’m going into



negotiations next year. That is why I decided to do my graduate work on activism, because of the negotiations we had with the previous government. To get out on the streets and say exactly what you need to say is so important. First, it creates solidarity among people. I think more and more we need to do that ... We need to create that community around voice. I went to 12-13 manifestations where I went alone among strangers. You feel like you are part of a community... the most disappointing part is the after effect. You get out of it and you think okay, we're changing the world, we're doing something. It has to go beyond that thinking. It has to go into action after that. The manifestation is the fuel. It gets you going, and makes you realize you're going to change things. Then things have to happen ... I need to change things. I need to make sure the voices are heard, the voices of those activists ... It's just that first step. It's the feeling that we are all human beings, all the people around me believe in the same things I believe in. It's powerful.

I think mobilization is one of the big issues with unions. I've been thinking about this a lot ... Because the government has cut back so on education in the last 20 years – cutback after cutback after cutback – teachers are feeling the pressure more than ever before. I worked for 23 years as a teacher. The last 10 years were my most difficult years. It just doesn't make any sense. They are putting so much pressure on teachers ... What happens when you are under so much pressure is that you are not efficient anymore. This overburdens the union ... It's pretty smart of the government if you think about it. If we overwork these people, the public sectors, then we're going to make the public sector look bad, and by making them look bad, people will head to the private sector ...

It's very, very difficult to get that activist thing going during your regular mandate, however, I visit schools, and I try to motivate them, or at least try to help them understand the situation, to make them aware that they are not by themselves in this. I think that what happens when you're overworked, you isolate yourself. I often would go into schools and say "Look, I want to hear your voice. Tell me what's going on. What can we do to help you? That's what I'm here for. I'm here to listen. If you have to call someone, call me." I have to say that it's sad that we can't move activism beyond the walls of the union office ...

We have to flip the system. Hearing and listening are so important ... When I talk about the voice of the teacher, I mean really listening to them, educating them, making sure they understand, and hoping to get teachers involved in development of policy. The school board writes policy and then the union is consulted. I asked, "Why can't we do policy together?" and we did. It was hard. They don't like to let go of their power. It's really important that teachers get involved, that they have a say in what's going on. They know the classroom better than anyone ... It's to convince people to get out of their little individual siloes, and be part of a group. So, I'm going full circle. That's the beauty of activism. It's the solidarity, the feeling of being part of something big and important" (Heidi Yetman, personal communication, May 2019).

### **Conferences as sites for learning.**

Ortrun Zuber-Skerritt (2017) writes that, “... neoliberal attitudes and practices of exerting power and control over powerless people, as well as notions of nationalism, competition and authoritarianism, ... have to be replaced by a more participatory paradigm of global collaboration, negotiation, friendship, mutual understanding, inclusion and political wisdom” (p. 11). A learning conference (Zuber-Skerritt, 2017) culture offers such an opportunity, where participative, transformative learning to learn in a democratic and empowering environment is the norm. A learning conference opens the possibility of development of critical and creative thinking and inquiry skills. The learning conference is missing from the experience of my colleagues as we pursue our action research endeavors. Our shared values within our inquiry circle of respect for diversity, individual differences and the environment; our success in fostering engagement, collaboration, lifelong learning; and, our sense of belonging with pride to a safe, caring, stimulating and inclusive community are derivatives of the mission statement of the school board that denies the validity of the teachers’ claims to knowledge of teaching and learning constructed through their inquiries. To the decision makers at the school board I would say: There is truth in our words. They will fly, have sound, say what we mean and carry the beauty of truth.

### **Final Thoughts**

Sameshima (2018) asks “... How do we tell the truth in our words so the words fly, have sound, say what we mean and carry the beauty of truth?” (p. 5).



### **Lynda’s Reflection.**

I am/I become an activist when I see that learning could be better. I believe in life-learning, meaning hands-on and meaningful learning. The barriers that I have faced have been mostly administration and convincing them of the “value-added” of the experience that I was proposing, e.g. in Akulivik, I had to teach home-economics to my secondary 2 & 3 group. The cooking surface was in the staffroom, right beside the teachers’ coat rack! We cooked there for 3 weeks and I could see it was not working. First of all, we were in the teachers’ space. Second of all, the kids had very little room around them and they constantly had to worry about the coats. So, I spoke to the principal to see if I could propose a project that would have us (9 students and myself) go to a student’s home and cook a meal for his/her family. A letter was sent home to ask families if they approved. One mom asked if she had to vacate the premises while we would be there! The answer was “no”, of course. It was a wonderful experience. The kids were proud, authentic and very generous. We all left with a warm feeling in our hearts. We had fed a family.

Same town, different project. I proposed a leadership course for the Secondary 4&5 group. We planned at least 3 events for the entire school. After the Hallowe'en day, Nowra looked at me and said, "Lynda, we should get paid for this work!" I touched his chest, just above his heart and said, "You know that feeling that you have in your heart at the moment, and that smile on your face? No money could give you that sense of pride!" He agreed.

Looking forward. Now, the activism I wish/I am pushing forward with is with regards to the (pre-service teacher) internship strike. The barriers? Students wanting to be paid. The university has socialist values and is quite political. Thus, it's a magnet for such students. It's known as the university of the people. The hope? I would like to have them – the students – understand the fragility of the relationship between schools and the university.

Taima....to be continued.



### **Martin's Reflection.**

Who am I as an activist? As an artist in a school context, I decided to bring an understanding that the purpose of art would be to communicate the essence of each of my students. I try to make them connect to their inner selves and present who they are to the world. If a student is passionate about skateboarding, we should see that sometimes in his art.

Another part of my contribution as a teacher is to be out as a gay man, a role model for the LGBTQ2S\* kids in my high school. Eight years after my professional coming out, I decided to start the Rainbow Alliance Club, to create a safe space place for kids to share a meal and participate in different actions to change the environment of the school. I have learned so much from this experience, and I am still growing with these kids, discovering the challenges and struggles they face during their passage into high school, and helping them to become who they are and are meant to be.



### **Laurie's Reflection.**

To act or not to act. Some of us are natural activists, some of us are content to be led and let things happen, and some of us have had to learn how to be an activist.

An activist, in my mind, is not someone who works to make life difficult. Violence is not appropriate. Acting on a problem and trying to find a peaceful, constructive solution, making shifts in our thinking so we build a common thread that unites, and educating ourselves and

others are the values of an activist. The aim is to make life better. Activists step up when others can't, working peacefully to make a change for the betterment of all.

In this light, I consider myself an activist. I became an educator because I believed that teaching and learning are the key to understanding and improving the quality of life. I strive to teach my students to recognize their strengths and become people who value themselves and the world they live in. I was successful when I made the student more important than the curriculum. In my final year teaching, my principal, while acknowledging that the students' work was exemplary, tried to insist that I teach to the final exam to be sure they all passed. I refused. I could refuse, as I was confident that my students were learning, and would surpass this worried principal's expectations. They did!

I am presently working with a group of teachers to reveal the massive injustices in the classroom and move towards better conditions for the educator and the learner in Québec public schools. In our action research we are working to find a method for sharing ideas that will allow all voices to be heard and a path that leads to a positive consensus.



### **Judy's Reflection.**

To me, activism is an idea that begins with an attitude framed by democratic principles, that if acted upon leads to the development of a skill within the activist, that if practiced leads to knowledge that can be used to create a social climate of freedom and safety. Activism is action driven by the goal of being clear about one's values, and acting to openly live those values in all that one does, and this for the common good. Activism becomes a way of being in the world.

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of being as a teacher in me and in my relations with others. These were not always positive. I spent years feeling angry and resentful, and I realized that this was to the detriment of my students. I had to keep my knowledge about the teaching and learning of special needs students current, and so I spiraled in and out of university throughout my career, graduating for the last time in the same year that I retired. Since that time I have continued to work with the same attitude, and I continue to care deeply for those students with special needs in the system today. However, I presently work with other caring professionals with whom I share values, supporting them as they pursue their action research projects.

### **Taima<sup>2</sup>**

*Je me rendais bien compte que ça ne fonctionnait pas,*

I could tell it wasn't working.

*J'étais bloqué ... I was stumped,*

I refused, I could refuse.

*Pause, tournons la page,*

Stop, let's turn the page.

Attitude is not enough,

Learn to take the lead.

*J'ai besoin d'un renouveau, fier, authentique et généreux,*

I need to re-emerge, proud, authentic, generous,

To reveal and reject the massive injustices

And think of something else.

*Je découvre les défis et les difficultés qu'ils rencontrent quotidiennement,*

Discovering the challenges, the struggles they face daily

*Les accompagnant à reléver leur essence,* helping them to become who they are

*Et à devenir leur unicité,* who they are meant to be

Working peacefully, recognizing their strengths.

Activism becomes a way of being in the world.

*La main sur son cœur, je lui pose une question,* I touched him with my fingers on his heart,

I asked,

*Reconnais-tu la fierté qui t'habite ton cœur?* You know that feeling you have in your heart,

*Et ressens-tu le sourire sur ton visage ...* And that smile on your face?

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<sup>2</sup> En [inuktitut](#), le nom Taima signifie "Assez ! C'est terminé. Passons à autre chose." In Inuktitut the name Taima means "Enough! It's finished. Let's move on to something else."

Sameshima (2018) continues to spark out thinking, asking us, “What if we fully accepted interrelation as immanent to learn, if we foreclosed constructions of dichotomous middles and margins, and instead conceptualized the curriculum of education as fluidly open?” (Sameshima, 2018, p. 5). We don’t know the answer just yet, but we’re working on it. While we do, we carry the values a hopeful and loving educational activism in our living theories, our hearts, minds and actions.

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