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Teacher Educator Growth Across Rhizomatic Landscapes of Praxis

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Article abstract

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TEACHER EDUCATOR GROWTH ACROSS RHIZOMATIC LANDSCAPES OF PRAXIS

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ABSTRACT

I*n this collaborative analytic autoethnography, five researchers and teacher educators from various contexts describe how their participation in a network of critical action researchers led to rhizomatic growth across their landscapes of praxis. Through the authors' narratives, we learn how Deleuze and Guattari's (1987) concept of the rhizome and Wenger's (2015) notion of the landscape of practice are interconnected and have allowed multiple non-hierarchical points for engagement in research and knowledge mobilization. The autoethnography also illustrates how the outgrowth of a healthy rhizome can be more vibrant and lead to innovative approaches to education and research across various contexts.*

KEY WORDS: Autoethnography; Growth; Landscapes of practice; Learning & research networks; Rhizomatic structures

INTRODUCTION

We gather together, five of us, researchers from around the globe, all members of NCARE (Network of Critical Action Research in Education), reflecting on how our network has influenced, impacted, and inspired our research. Thinking of landscapes of practice as a metaphor for the research environment we share with others, we imagine the trees and foliage we encounter in the undergrowth. We notice creeping rootstocks coming out of the earth next to the trees, like interconnected roots through data nodes. Attending carefully, we note that these are not roots but rhizomes that extend vertically, horizontally, in any direction.

Deleuze and Guattari (1987) introduced the concept of a rhizome as an alternative model of thought and organization to the traditional hierarchical and tree-like structures that dominated the current understanding of systems and knowledge. The rhizome represents a non-linear, non-hierarchical, and interconnected system that operates through principles of multiplicity, connectivity, and heterogeneity (See Figure 1). Deleuze and Guattari drew inspiration from the rhizomatic structure of certain plants, like the root system of a strawberry plant, which spreads in different directions with a fixed starting point that connects to other parts of the same plant or others within an ecosystem.

Figure 1. A rendition of a Rhizome. [1]

They introduced the rhizome as a metaphor to challenge the idea of a unified and centralized understanding of knowledge, society, and culture. They argue that the rhizomatic structure offers a fluid, dynamic, and open-ended approach to understanding that social, material and non-material lives are part of complex systems (Guastello et al., 2009). The concept of a rhizomatic framework challenges binaries, dualistic, and siloed hierarchical systems, and envisions relationships of connectivity, multiplies, and nomadism (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987). As a theoretical and philosophical concept, a rhizome is a network of multiplicities that is not necessarily arborescent (tree-like or hierarchical) but a connection of related hypertexts that feed on and nurture each other (van der Klei, 2002). By embracing the rhizomatic interconnections and landscapes of practices, we seek to challenge established modes of thinking, encourage creativity and openness, and promote a decentralized and interconnected understanding of knowledges, languages, cultures, and societies.

Our conceptual lenses of landscapes of practice and rhizomes are interconnected as rhizomatic structures exist across our practice ecosystems. Wenger (2015) describes the landscape of practice as a system encompassing multiple communities of practice and

[1] Photo taken by Yecid Ortega in Bergen, Norway, August 2023.

other entities that influence learning and knowledge sharing within a specific field. The landscape of practice can include various stakeholders, organizations, institutions, technologies, artifacts, and relationships that shape and support learning and collaboration.

A landscape of practice (Wenger, 2015) consists of three interrelated components which include: 1) communities of practice, understood as groups of people who share a common interest, engage in collective learning, and develop a shared practice; 2) boundary practices, which refer to the interactions and connections that occur between communities of practice and other entities within the landscape to facilitate the flow of knowledge, ideas, and resources across different communities and organizational boundaries; 3) broader structures and institutions such as formal organizations, professional associations, policies, regulations, and social norms that may shape the opportunities and constraints for learning, collaboration, and knowledge sharing within the landscape.

These three components form the landscape of practice, representing the larger context in which *communities of practice* exist and interact. The interdependence and interconnectedness between various entities on the landscape of practice highlight the importance of collaboration and boundary-spanning activities for learning and innovation (Omidvar & Kislov, 2014).

CRITICAL ACTION RESEARCH WITHIN NETWORKS OF LEARNING

Critical action research (CAR) is situated within a social learning network. Wenger, Trayner, and De Laat (2011) describe a network as "a set of nodes and links with affordances for learning" (p. 9). De Laat (2012) further expands this notion to include interconnected individuals sharing information, skills, and values. Through these connections, diverse learning opportunities arise, including professional development.

Action research networks exemplify intricate, rhizomatic learning systems. De Laat (2012) characterizes Professional Learning Networks (PLN) as participatory learning systems that remain dynamic regardless of individual objectives or settings. Whether central or peripheral, *participation catalyzes change* in the network and its members. Rowell et al. (2017) emphasize that sharing knowledge and evolving theories have led to intricate networks spanning various locations and time zones.

Such networks or communities of practice foster collaboration and continuous learning where educators disseminate research findings and strategies, prompting collective introspection and potential improvement of practice across various nodes and networks. The learning and insights derived from participation in a network impact how educators make decisions, inhabit present and future educational spaces (Whitehead, 2017), and engage with students and community partners (Thomas, 2017). Additionally, advancements in communication technology have amplified the potential of networking and knowledge dissemination.

Joining local and global networks facilitates collective information sharing and analysis. Exchanging insights enhances analytical depth for all involved (Balogh et al., 2017). Fluid exchange induces reflection, potentially elevating the rigorous vigour of research.

Moreover, the potential impact reaches local and global educational practices when educators disseminate their findings within these networks.

Networks amalgamate resources and expertise to tackle intricate educational challenges. Action researchers may receive feedback from an engaged community on individual or collective problems and provide stimulus for emerging ideas, underscoring the importance of an action-based research approach (Rowell et al., 2017). Educators' varied perspectives and contributions enrich the quality of research and foster a culture of growth that aligns with the iterative process of action research (Whitehead, 2017).

Action research networks have always been pivotal in supporting learning, irrespective of their configuration or scope. These networks serve as conduits for ideas to transcend borders, navigating language and practice differences (Rowell et al., 2017). They foster an environment where individuals can construct knowledge and democratize global knowledge. Such has been our experiences as members of NCARE, a rhizomatic research network in action, which we are choosing to investigate through sharing narratives of our landscapes of practices.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY – CRITICAL ANALYTIC COLLABORATIVE AUTOETHNOGRAPHY

We explored our experiences by participating in a critical collaborative autoethnography. Autoethnography as a research method aims to connect the self with others, the self with the social, and the self with context (Ngunjiri et al., 2010). Its strength lies in its potential to provide a powerful means to discuss and systematically analyze experiences to understand a larger cultural experience (Ellis et al., 2011). It is a research method that helped us to use self-observation and reflexive investigation to extend sociological understanding (Sparkes, 2000). Therefore, our autoethnographies emphasize personal reflections, memories and feelings related to the narratives imbued with emotions (Atkinson, 2015). Although autoethnography has been critiqued as being narcissistic (Roth, 2009), a lazy preoccupation (Delamont, 2009) and me-research (Fine, 1999) that lacks rigour, we have previous experience in autoethnographic work that has allowed us to delve deep and engage in our critical work (Gagné et al., 2022). Our previous autoethnographic work allowed us to be the subject of our research and engage in rigorous and critical reflection, which is the foundation of our praxis as critical scholars. Most importantly, contrary to many other research methods in education, autoethnography, at its core, is meant to be "unruly, dangerous, vulnerable, rebellious and creative" (Ellis & Bochner, 2006, p. 433). This very much sums up our teaching and research.

As members of NCARE, we have engaged in critical analytical collaborative conversations about our unique teaching contexts and critical practices for over a decade (Gagné et al., 2022). One dominant theme that emerged from our critical conversations was how participation in the group led to rhizomatic growth across our unique landscapes of praxis. The vignettes shared by each author in this paper emerged from continued discussions that took place as zoom meetings. We discussed our vignettes and provided feedback to each other at these meetings. Then, we wrote our vignettes and shared them with the group. Our insights were first presented at the World Education Research Association (WERA) conference in 2022 which became the basis for this article. Writing this paper jointly included a further review of each other's vignettes and led us to connect to different theories as well as consider the overall process of our ongoing collaboration.

We adopt an analytical approach to autoethnography (Anderson, 2006), which includes the reflexively positioned self of the author/ethnographer. Analytical autoethnography (as opposed to evocative autoethnography) allows us to analyze and theorize our experiences. As a result, analytic autoethnography generates rich ethnographic material that reflects our inner feelings and the broader sociopolitical contexts where we are located (Kempny, 2022). Analytical autoethnography allows us to engage with the bigger picture in our introspections.

The critical angle in our narratives allowed us to explicitly focus on the power relations that shape our personal experiences and our work contexts. Criticality helped us to stretch, question our narratives, and interrogate the social positions they entail (Reed-Danahay, 2017). Critical autoethnography incorporates three aspects of critical theory that connect to our work: "to understand the lived experiences of real people in context; to examine social conditions and uncover oppressive power arrangements; and to fuse theory and action to challenge processes of domination" (Boylorn & Orbe, 2014, p. 20).

Our autoethnography is collaborative as it is based on the narratives of five educators/researchers (Bochner & Ellis, 2016) located in different global contexts. Our collaborative autoethnography is performative, based on a dramatic enactment of an academic issue (Denzin, 2018) in rhizomatic narratives. Each narrative focuses on our personal and professional experiences and how NCARE has been an energizing force for critical work in our respective contexts.

RHIZOMATIC NARRATIVES

Antoinette

In nearly four decades at the University of Toronto, I have had the opportunity to live across a rich landscape of practice comprised of various communities connected as rhizomes. These include communities of teacher educators, graduate educators, graduate students, preservice and in-service teachers, newcomer support providers and plurilingual students of different ages. Although I could see the rhizomatic connections between these groups and understood the power of their dynamic root system, my colleagues and those assessing my work in the academy most often did not, as they assumed that my academic work would be stronger with deep roots connecting me to one community rather than many. The vast expanse of the non-linear, non-hierarchical, and often heterogeneous rhizomatic structure underneath my landscape of practice confused them. As such, over 10 years ago, I proposed a network of critical action researchers where current and former graduate students now working as professors and/or teacher educators, as well as international colleagues working mainly in the field of language and literacies education and interested in transforming their practice, could meet to consider how CAR might facilitate the changes they envisioned.

This network not only allowed me to live my truth but also provided the space for me to push back against some of the rigid notions of what matters in a top research-oriented university. In addition to wanting a space where I could explore action-oriented research with like-minded colleagues working in various contexts, I was able to support others who, like me, were not always valued or seen as true researchers because they adhered to CAR.

We call ourselves NCARE - Network of Critical Action Research in Education and have been meeting about 10 times a year for a decade. NCARE is a fluid network that has connected upwards of 40 international educators from several countries over varying periods, with some members remaining active and others becoming inactive or leaving the network. At the core, there are a dozen members who have engaged regularly in NCARE activities over several years, including the authors of this article.

During this time, I have been the convenor— a term for the person responsible for bringing the community together and keeping it moving forward by guiding as appropriate. As a senior professor, mentorship has been a core activity for me and has transferred into the multiple roles I have played in NCARE.

After checking in with each member on a personal level, the regular monthly meetings allow each person to explain where they are in terms of their latest critical action research projects. There is a positive climate where members are comfortable talking about their CAR endeavours to push against neoliberalism in their respective communities while attempting to improve the learning opportunities for marginalized communities. Together, NCARE members search for educational opportunities for innovation, intervention, and change. As the convenor of NCARE, I have attended every meeting and never cease to be impressed by the power of multiple perspectives to create new understanding and knowledge. NCARE has always welcomed the diversity of its members' perspectives and backgrounds, which enriches our conversations and ways of thinking about critical action research as a transformative research paradigm. NCARE functions as a catalyst and provides a space for reflection and contesting what has happened to us as critical advocates in our contexts concerning neoliberal approaches to educational research.

As the convenor, I see some of the technical parts of my role as crucial to sustaining the community. These include sending invitations and meeting reminders, populating our Cloud space with videos, meeting notes, and relevant resources, connecting with community members to find out if they would like to explore a particular topic or change the format of meetings, as well as following up with newer members to help to orient them to the culture of the community. Committing to a two-hour meeting each month is an integral part of the success of NCARE. There have been times when I have been tempted to cancel a meeting at the last minute because I was so busy and thought that most members would not mind because they were likely very busy as well. However, every time I have had to work extra-long hours to fit in an NCARE meeting, I found myself energized by the four to eleven or so members who might participate in the entire meeting or only the part that coincides with their lunch break or prep period. At every meeting, I have the sense of coming home as NCARE is a safe place where each member knows they can learn and grow.

When I think of the NCARE membership, I am keenly aware of the importance of our convergent interests in language, literacy, and teacher education, our desire to address the learning needs of marginalized students and teachers, our interest in 'outside the box' research methodologies, and most of all, our commitment to dismantling neoliberal narratives of doing and sharing research. At the same time, I have experienced the power of our divergent positions and locations in creating space for 'ah ha' moments where we finally see what the next step in our research process might be. One such moment

occurred when my colleague Andrés Valencia, described his CAR project involving various identity-focused activities that he implemented in English classes with Indigenous and Afro-Colombian students at the University of Cali. At the time, I had been searching for new ways to learn with and about students of refugee backgrounds in my research. It dawned on me that Andrés' very visually oriented strategies would be ideal for students just beginning their journey learning English. I must say that what keeps me coming back to NCARE every month is the energizing atmosphere and the synergy created by the presence of convergences and divergences within our network.

Sreemali

I have been a language teacher and a teacher educator for over two decades, during which time I crossed linguistic, cultural, and geographical borders multiple times. The constant migration has positioned me in various rhizomatic landscapes of practice that allowed me to grow and stretch myself personally and professionally. I have had the opportunity to work with language learners and educators from diverse backgrounds and living circumstances – many of them working in very challenging and precarious contexts of poverty, marginalization, war and, more recently, the Covid-19 pandemic that disrupted already deeply inequitable educational systems. Irrespective of where I am, I experience firsthand the impact of austerity and how public entities like schools are expected to be content with systematically underfunded infrastructure. I feel that we educators are expected to gracefully make do with less and fix any social problem that we experience in our teaching contexts, such as poverty and inequity, and focus instead on profit and productivity. Rather than having broad and open discussions about how we got here, we are often left to find quick fixes and band-aid solutions to cover up large cracks in fractured systems. The siloed nature of higher education forces us to focus on the task at hand – delivering the curriculum.

Jim Cummins' (2001) notions of societal power relations and identity negotiation, as well as his academic achievement framework, have helped me to make connections between what happens in language classrooms and the world beyond. It has helped me to understand the politically charged nature of English language teaching (Pennycook, 2021). Schools reflect the results of an inequitable society. As a teacher educator, I experience elevated stress levels, emotional pain, a sense of defeat and isolation where I feel left with only two options — I can either be content and silently accept the existing system, or I can be a change agent who actively explores ways of transforming the existing system through my praxis. This involves reconceptualizing my classroom as a rhizomatic landscape that spreads beyond the confines of the classroom and repositioning myself as an activist. Yet, being a lone activist is a hard and unrewarding experience. Critical scholars who advocate for culturally responsive and socially just pedagogies (Cochran-Smith, 2004; Gay, 2002) stress the importance of culturally caring learning communities in activism. NCARE provides a culturally caring community that helps me to challenge myself.

I now know how NCARE provides a safe and fertile learning community that helps me to actively explore ways in which I can transform myself and my praxis. Energized by NCARE, I have come to value and embrace CAR as an integral part of my teaching. CAR helps me go beyond the mere delivery of the curriculum to explore ways of making learning more than a review of the weekly readings. Building on the creative arts-based identity work I had been doing with my NCARE colleagues last semester, I introduced

identity-focused activities to get the students to turn their critical gaze inward and focus on themselves. Decentering academic writing, typically at the core of academic work, each activity I introduced allowed the students to tap into their creativity. They included generating identity portraits (Herath, 2022, 2023), writing a "Where I am from" poem (Valencia et al., 2020) and compiling a creative autobiography (Gagné et al., 2017). At first, my graduate students, who are also teachers, were hesitant to draw pictures, write poetry or create a professional autobiography instead of writing papers to earn course grades. Moreover, like me, most of my students came from academic cultures with little or no focus on the 'self.' Taking the focus away from the individual and placing it on the community encouraged the students to tap into the resources they would otherwise not bring into the graduate program to describe their experiences and identities as well as imagine new possibilities for themselves. Each student presented their identity portrait and *Where I am from* poem and shared their reflections on their creative process. The autobiographical creations were exhibited in class, and all the students did a gallery walk in which they viewed, discussed, and commented on each creation.

Creating and sharing identity work with the class created a fertile ground for professional development and affirming identities. The shift from academic writing helped the students to tap into other literacies and capital. They used technology, arts, crafts, sewing, and music to express their multiple identities in deep and meaningful ways. These activities created space for the students to reflect on aspects of their identities that are not usually part of graduate courses. The students took pride in talking about their past experiences, home countries, traditions, languages and cultures. They also articulated the need for teacher self-care, mental health and the challenges they experienced as graduate students as well as in accessing and navigating their workplaces. One of my biggest takeaways from NCARE is recognising the value of being a member of a community. My CAR project allowed me to create a caring community similar to NCARE in my class. As a community, we learned about the diversity that existed within the class and experienced how this allowed all of us to grow. What would have otherwise been an isolating teaching and graduate school journey became a collaborative process.

Amir

In my work as a teacher educator, I have always been concerned about a lack of institutional interest in fostering teacher communities (Kalan, 2021a; 2021b). This institutional inertia is reinforced by insufficient programmatic and curricular emphasis on the significance of communities of practice as a source of intellectual and professional support in teacher education. With less interest in human relations than offering (or selling) courses that will allow students to have teaching certificates, most current teacher education programs regard pre-service teachers as individual customers (Gagné et al., 2022). Encountering this tendency in teacher education has created moments of dissonance, doubt, and anxiety for me as an educator who believes education is fundamentally a social and communal phenomenon and cannot be packaged as a commodity in transactional relationships.

Over the past years, I have conducted and collaborated in multiple action research projects with a focus on language education (Edwards & Kalan, 2023; Gagné, 2022; Kalan, 2015, 2024; Kalan & Troberg, 2016; Kalan et al., 2019; Simon et al., 2016). The most recent of these projects were developed in conversation with the NCARE community, which served as a valuable support network, offering a rich pool of experiences in action

research. My action research projects often share one objective: creating a community that brings students and teachers together to produce a material outcome, such as an exhibit or book, to be shared with the public as an authentic audience. While these projects have contributed to my academic trajectory, they are also very personal and reflect my choices about the type of instructor I would like to be in response to current institutional and social malfunctions. Here I write about my most recent, and ongoing, action research project at McGill University's teacher education program to unpack these themes.

The project is a participatory action research study in which my students and I try to challenge the dominance of pedagogical practices that promote what we call 'inauthentic writing.' Most writing in teacher education is inauthentic in that (a) it does not usually contribute to sociocultural and political issues debated outside of the institution, and (b) it is performed as a form of assessment and for an audience of one: the course instructor. I launched the project to disrupt this trend by inviting pre-service teachers to write assignments that focused on a significant social issue that would be shared with a public audience. In response to this project, almost 100 pre-service teachers joined our community publishing project (Coogan, 2006; Mathieu et al., 2012) to write and publish a textbook with lessons and activities that can help newcomers to Canada learn about the North American food system.

Unhealthy eating is the leading cause of death in North America, with heart issues, cancer, stroke, and diabetes as top food-related diseases (Murray et al., 2013). Understanding how to access healthy food is crucial for immigrants, who not only enter a new food culture but also must make sense of this new system in a new language, in our case, in English. We have created a pool of 1,000 pages of educational materials that our editorial team is processing to turn into a textbook. Some of the themes emerging from this body of text are food advertisements in North America, using food waste for a better future, food security and the environment, ethnic food and ethnic markets, community gardening, and decolonizing food. We plan to publish this textbook and share it with the public so that it can be used in educational structures that welcome immigrants.

The shift of our target audience from *the course instructor* to *the public* helped us facilitate peer and group activities within each course that allowed pre-service teachers to brainstorm, write, and edit the lesson plans collectively. More importantly, the project connected the students to individuals beyond their cohorts. I invited my students in eight different courses to contribute to this project to challenge the atomization of the dominant course planning that leaves no space for pre-service teachers to collaborate with students from other courses and programs. Representatives of each course are currently coming together in an editorial team to work closely to guide the publishing phase of the project.

The next phase of our network creation through community writing will hopefully happen when language educators and their students start using our textbook after it is released. Because of the centrality of food in the lesson plans, the pre-service teachers had the opportunity to include activities in the writing process that would have to be performed in spaces outside of the traditional classroom. These spaces include the kitchen, farms, local restaurants, and food factories. Entering these spaces would facilitate new social encounters for the teachers using the textbook. When developing

these lessons, we also learned that writing about food requires using genres not often employed in traditional writing classes, for instance, recipes, memoirs, personal essays, illustrated instructions, photo essays, and so on. As suggested by pre-service teachers in their lessons, developing these genres can happen best if newcomers are trained by local writers and artists who can teach the technical aspects of these genres. Moreover, the lessons include activities encouraging students to interview family members, community elders, and other community members who could teach them about healthy recipes.

Our project, developed from a simple classroom assignment, facilitates rhizomatic interactions that, in many ways reflect my experiences as a language learner and an immigrant. The potential of the project for bringing different communities together, in a sense, is a response to my own experiences of being isolated in immigration processes, especially as an immigrant teacher in Canadian and American educational settings. At the same time, it also brings back memories of friendships and relationships that helped me sustain my life as an immigrant.

Yecid

I have been an educator and a researcher for more than 20 years, during which time I have had the opportunity to support and advocate for social justice-oriented pedagogical approaches and research in collaboration and consultation with communities. My journey has not been easy as I have faced emotional distress and traumatic triggering memories that have affected my mental health. My role as a critical friend involves supporting the research and pedagogical practices of those I work with and listening to and providing the necessary emotional care to carry out educational or empirical tasks. I learned about critical friendship from Paulo Freire's work and his notions of humanization and liberation as praxis, which have been guiding lights for my work. Praxis is understood as action taken in response "to the vocation of persons as beings who are authentic only when engaged in inquiry and creative transformation" (Freire, 1970, p. 84). As such, my collaborative work is driven by this question: *how can we create the necessary social and emotional conditions to become more human?* In a research project where I worked alongside English teachers in a marginalized Colombian school in Bogotá (the capital of Colombia), I learned how their pedagogical approaches to teaching English as a foreign language centred on social justice through classroom projects focussed on solving social problems (Ortega, 2021). In this project, I inhabited the same space as the teachers and the students and shared my personal experiences with them in an act of reciprocity (Oviedo Freire, 2020). In addition to being in touch with my own emotions during this project, I asked myself how I could contribute to students' and teachers' emotional well-being.

Similarly, more recently, while writing a duoethnography with a colleague and friend to explore possible ways to address anti-black racism in an ESL adult class in Toronto, Canada (Wong & Ortega, 2024), we became critical friends by attending to our traumatic experiences triggered by our own modes of collecting and analyzing data. I noticed that the more I engaged in conversations about how to address issues of racism in the ESL classroom and learned how my colleague would go about creating lessons to address them, the more I would remember my own experiences of racialization and pain in North America. As this was something that she also experienced, we developed a strong bond and began to connect more deeply with our students while also developing a sense of relationality to the most marginalized communities in society. This made it difficult to

disentangle ourselves from others. Our duoethnography project became about interconnected humans who nurtured and supported each other as part of a social ecosystem at a grand scale - the Pluriverse (Reiter, 2018).

As I experience and expand the concept of critical friendship within educational settings, I understand a critical friend as a person who provides constructive feedback and support while also challenging another individual or group in a respectful and non-judgmental manner. The term "critical" does not imply negativity or criticism in the usual sense. Instead, it emphasizes reflection and emotional support to others so our practice leads to a deeper meaning of what we do and a better understanding of those with whom we engage. A critical friend aims to help the other person or group by identifying areas of strength, pointing out weaknesses, and offering suggestions for growth and improvement (Stieha, 2014). In my work with English teachers and colleagues, I offer my heart and mind should they need me at any time. I have learned that the relationship between a critical friend and those seeking feedback is based on mutual trust, respect, and openness. I remember the moments in which I provided honest and thoughtful feedback, challenged assumptions, provided alternative perspectives, and helped to identify blind spots or areas for improvement in classroom practices. This type of feedback can be especially valuable for the personal and professional growth of those involved in a critical friendship and lead to growth as human beings.

Being part of NCARE as a community of practice provided me with the necessary tools to continue connecting and supporting other members within the network and expand and reach out to others beyond my close peers. In this experience, I learned that my role as a critical friend was different from that of a mentor, as the focus was primarily on providing constructive criticism and challenging thinking rather than providing direct guidance or instruction on how to do things or not. My ultimate aim as a critical friend within the confines of research and education is to foster reflection, critical thinking, and self-improvement as well as to provide emotional support to promote, create and sustain a world worth living for all (Reimer et al., 2023). In my current work at the university, I connect with migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers in Belfast, Northern Ireland. I continually seek ways in which I can help them to integrate into society more smoothly by creating safe and brave spaces (McNeill, 2022) for them to learn to thrive and celebrate their own cultural, linguistic identities and whole funds of knowledges (Ortega & Oxford, 2023).

Nayibe

In my life as a teacher and teacher educator, I have walked an exciting path. Educated as an ELT teacher in Colombia in the 1980s, my initial education provided me with knowledge and skills focused more on the what and how of teaching English than on the whys (García-Chamorro et al., 2022). My positioning as an EFL teacher was energetic and positive, but looking back, I realize it was also rather instrumental and acritical. It wasn't until I critically reflected on my practice that I began to question the deeper purpose of my teaching and how broader systemic influences shaped it. Learning from English teaching methods books, workshops and conferences reinforced the orientation prevalent in my initial teacher education program (Gonzalez, 2003). Little was I aware of the impact of the teacher education curriculum on my learning trajectory or the role communities of practice could have in shaping that trajectory.

As my education continued, I had mentors to help me notice the technical orientation underlying my work as an EFL teacher and the tremendous forces surrounding EFL teaching in the South, where I was located. I distinctly remember a powerful realization during a conversation with one mentor: I could no longer separate teaching from the social realities of my students. Their mentoring helped me walk new professional development paths in a caring community of practice. Sharing and learning with my mentors and peers facilitated and amplified the possibilities, ideas, and connections to embrace my job as a teacher and teacher educator in the Colombian Caribbean context, where I have grown as a professional. In the process, my decision-making has become increasingly informed by theory and firmly grounded in an awareness of the importance of context and the multiple needs of my students, some of which exceed the limits of learning EFL and transcend into social issues (García-Chamorro & Rosado-Mendinueta, 2021). Another transformative moment came when I became aware of the profound influence that those other factors had on my students' learning and their process of becoming and developing to their full potential. I realized that teaching English was not a neutral activity but a transformative act. As an EFL teacher, I could teach in ways that helped students expand their linguistic competencies and position them as critical human beings. English teaching could help develop their awareness of social issues. Action research and critical action research (CAR) have been my allies.

My engagement with NCARE has enriched me in multiple ways. For instance, my mentoring of other practitioners-researchers has gradually changed—one transformation is the exploration of issues relevant to researchers and the communities themselves and not necessarily to what is expected methodologically or topic-wise in the ELT field in Colombia (García-Chamorro et al., 2022). For instance, supervising the first autoethnographic study in the ELT master's program was undoubtedly a disruption (André Arenas, 2015). That initial push helped open the path for others (Salas, 2018; Castro, 2019) and expanded new inquiry possibilities for practitioners exploring issues other than specific language skills and techniques for improving their teaching. This engagement with issues that catalyze social change and transformation has been normalized in the program since then (see Arrieta & Rosado-Mendinueta, 2020; García-Chamorro & Rosado-Mendinueta, 2021; García-Chamorro et al., 2022; Montes-Perez et al., 2023a).

In line with my positioning, I have engaged in various projects to understand and support change and enhance agency in various contexts. One project I hold close to my heart and mind involves designing a curriculum to strengthen Colombian cultural diversity. My doctoral student and friend Surjey Montes, and I are reflecting on and conceptualizing how to infuse intercultural education (IE), particularly ethno-education (EE) in teacher education. EE refers to education in contexts of cultural diversity and interculturality. As we have realized Colombian teachers' critical role as agents of change, we have explored the role of teacher education and its impact on implementing multilingual IE policy in Colombia, especially in Afro-Colombian ethno-educational schools. In our work so far, we have found that interculturally sensitive teachers are essential to strengthening cultural identity, autonomy, the global life project, and the linguistic diversity of native populations (Montes-Perez et al., 2023b). NCARE was our initial forum to discuss the seed of this project. The ideas, feedback, and support we got from the community members helped us strengthen our decision to walk this less-travelled path.

Surjey and I are also exploring the development of ethno-education by designing curricula relevant to the cultural identity of communities. We are revising aspects of the written and lived curriculum that align or clash with the practices of the community served by the ethno-educational institution where Surjey is an English teacher. By exploring concepts such as cultural diversity, ethno-education, intercultural education, and intercultural curriculum and using ethnographic action research comprising several stages and engaging the school community as well as community leaders, we hope to make visible their ancestral educational practices in the social, political, historical, territorial, and cultural context of the school. So far, the results highlight the potential of practices that connect the community and the school. An insight from our work was the realization that community-based practices, often overlooked in formal curricula, are crucial to creating truly intercultural and multilingual educational experiences. We have also learned how difficult it is to include ethno-educational pedagogical experiences and project-based learning in the national curriculum divided into fundamental and compulsory areas and subjects. However, our initial findings confirm the essential role of community-based practices in developing an intercultural and multilingual curriculum (Montes-Perez et al., 2023b).

These insightful moments as a researcher and a mentor have profoundly shaped my critical positioning and orientation. I continue to be invigorated by my participation in NCARE and other networks and believe they are essential to my development as a practitioner-researcher.

RHIZOMATIC RECOGNITIONS

The concept of the rhizome (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987) helps illustrate our transdisciplinary work across our landscapes of practice. Embracing the rhizomatic approach means moving away from traditional hierarchical structures and encouraging collaborative partnerships among ourselves as well as the students, teachers, and researchers we engage with. This can lead to more inclusive and participatory networks where everyone's contributions and perspectives are valued, regardless of their position or experience. These experiences align with Wenger's (2015) landscape of practice, demonstrating the potential of interconnected communities to challenge traditional hierarchical structures and co-create more socially just and participatory learning spaces.

Through boundary-spanning activities and non-linear connections, we have cultivated a dynamic and inclusive space for professional growth, knowledge mobilization, and collective action. Similar to how a rhizome flourishes through diversity and interconnectedness, our community thrives on diverse ideas, experiences, and teaching methodologies from around the world. This healthy and nurturing interconnectedness can lead to more vibrant and innovative approaches to education and research in various interdisciplinary contexts.

This collaborative autoethnography (mirroring the functions of a rhizome) allowed us to connect our experiences, similar to connecting roots and vines as networked rhizomatic assemblages (see Figure 2) in which we helped each other and fed each other's knowledge from our collective experiences within NCARE with the prospects of infinite future connections with other beings or networks. Our narratives highlighting our interconnections are a rhizomatic landscape of praxis in which our voices are heard, interwoven and celebrated.

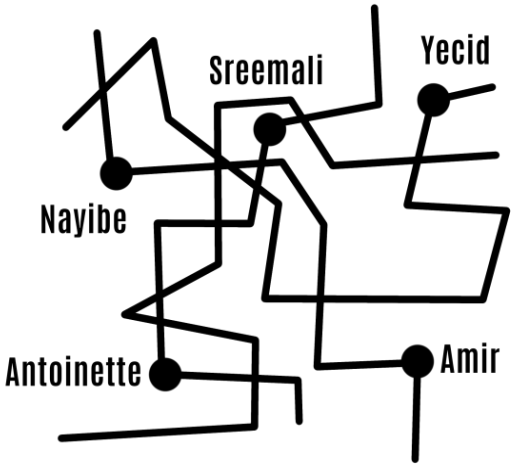

Figure 2. Networked rhizomatic assemblage

Just as plants release oxygen as a byproduct of photosynthesis, our narratives rooted at NCARE generated new insights and ideas through various collaborative efforts. These contributions, like oxygen, continuously fed the well-being of our communities of practice. Just as oxygen is essential for living organisms' survival, exchanging knowledge, ideas, and collaboration among ourselves is crucial for the growth and sustenance of our community. Just as all living beings require oxygen to breathe, we have learned to rely on exchanging information and insights to thrive. Our interdependence and support have become paramount in our work. In the same way oxygen supports various bodily functions and systems, our global network supports our growth, learning, and professional development.

Following this line of rhizomatic thinking, this collaborative autoethnography celebrates the interplay of diverse ideas, experiences, and methodologies that have nourished and sustained our shared ecosystem. Like similar ecosystems found in nature, our collective efforts have generated new insights, practices, and opportunities for transformative language education. These contributions, rooted in the interconnectedness of our global CARE Network, highlight the power of mutual support and shared purpose in fostering professional and personal growth.

Moving forward, we envision NCARE in connection with other similar networks as catalysts for continued engagement, offering pathways for others to participate in these rhizomatic landscapes of praxis and expand to healthy, vibrant, and innovative approaches to education and research across diverse disciplines. We have done so for over 10 years (Gagné et al., 2022), and we continue impacting the communities we serve; each member contributes to the overall health and vitality of their communities, creating an interdependent ecosystem in which we hope to foster a world where we all live well with each other (Escobar, 2014). Ultimately, we hope our work has a profound impact on multiple levels—personal, professional, and communal—ensuring that our collective efforts resonate widely and deeply within society and beyond.

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