

## Transformation of Instructional Practice through Aesthetic Experiences

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### Abstract

This longitudinal ethnographic study involved a professional development project, Project Partnerships Achieve Literacy (Project PAL) in South Africa, with eight rural foundation phase teachers who taught Reception (kindergarten) through grade three (R-3). This Project was designed to support teachers in an under-resourced school as they learned strategic approaches to literacy teaching and learning with the aim to improve the reading achievement of their children. Located in aesthetics theory, researchers engaged teachers in aesthetic experiences, or experiences that were infused with the arts (art, drama, video, music, reader's theater), children's literature, and technology. Research questions were as follows: What can be learned from an aesthetic approach to professional development? What does engagement look like in aesthetic experiences in professional development? Do aesthetic experiences resonate with teachers and inform their instruction? Three findings emerged from a constant comparative analysis of classroom observations, interviews, teacher artifacts, researcher debriefs, video and audio recordings: 1) Feelings and the arts were significant in what and how teachers learned in professional development workshops; 2) Aesthetic experiences led to critical and democratic talk around professional development and issues of social importance; and 3) Aesthetic experiences informed teachers' in and out of classroom practice. Findings from this study suggest that professional development holds significant promise when it is sustained, imaginative, and relatable, and positions teachers to think differently about themselves as learners and teachers through aesthetic experiences. We suggest that drawing only from cognitive approaches and one-shot single-session professional development does not deeply address the qualities, feelings, emotions, and embodied responses that comprise the aesthetic experience in professional development, and argue for a deeper understanding of professional development, one in which aesthetic learning and experiences are central to teacher learning.

### Keywords

Professional development; Aesthetic experiences; Transformed practices; Project PAL; South Africa

Across the literature in professional development, scholars in international settings have argued for professional development that is contextualized and situated (Timperley et al., 2007; Villegas-Reimer, 2003) and have suggested policy implication related to preparing educators to work effectively with literacy (Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin 1995; Day and Sachs 2004; Schulle and Dembélé 2007). Most of the research literature focuses on how teachers shift their conceptual and pedagogical

practices as they engage in meaningful and relevant professional development (Aasaf, Reif, Steinbach, 2016; Flint, Albers, & Matthews, 2017, 2018). What is often not addressed, however, is the impact of the experiences and consideration of how teachers themselves embody the experiences, or what Rosenblatt (1986) terms the "lived through" aesthetic response to ideas and concepts. Said another way, how do teachers engage in professional development that not only attends to a cognitive

approach to learning, but also allows for learning that is felt, seen, and imagined in new ways?

We engaged in longitudinal ethnographic work in a three-year funded World Vision professional development project, Project Partnerships Achieve Literacy (Project PAL) in South Africa with eight rural foundation phase teachers who taught Reception (kindergarten) through grade three (R-3). This Project was designed to support teachers in an under-resourced school as they learned strategic approaches to literacy teaching and learning with the aim to improve the reading achievement of their children. Within this approach, we engaged teachers in aesthetic experiences, or experiences that were infused with the arts (art, drama, video, music, reader's theater), children's literature, and technology. To better understand the impact of these aesthetic experiences on teachers' learning, we asked the following question: What can be learned from an aesthetic approach to professional development? Underpinning questions included: What does engagement look like in aesthetic experiences in professional development? Do aesthetic experiences resonate with teachers and inform their instruction? By exploring this set of questions, we found significance in the aesthetic experiences of professional development. While we ourselves have written about effective professional development focused on teacher questions and inquiry, most recently in international settings (Flint, et al 2018), we want to argue for a deeper understanding of professional development, one in which aesthetic learning and experiences are central to teacher learning.

In *Art and Experience*, John Dewey (1934) referred to aesthetic experiences as objects and activities which deliberately bring about aesthetic experience, especially through arts-based activities (e.g., visual arts, music, drama,

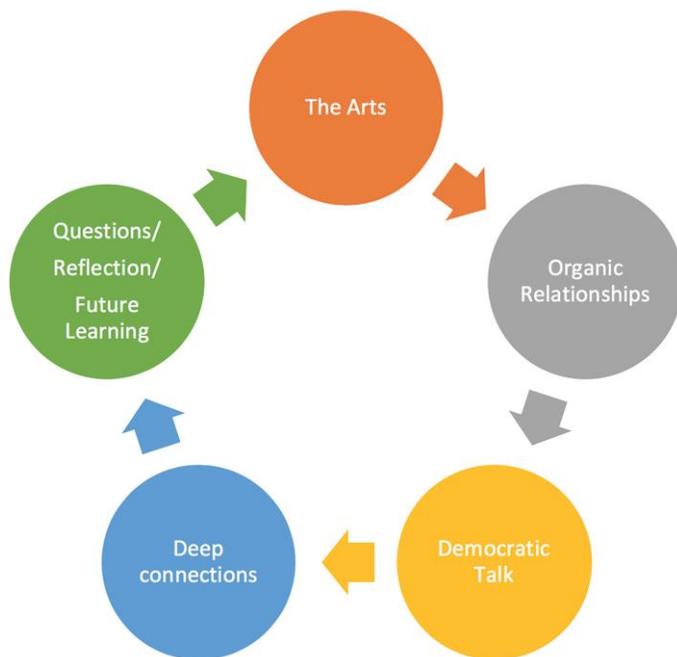
photography, etc.). For other researchers and philosophers, aesthetics includes experiences that are associated with reflective and conscious encounters with the arts, experiences that often alter one's perspectives on nature, human beings, and moment-to-moment existence. Viewed in this way, aesthetics positions experiences as a way of feeling and seeing the world and its impact on cognition (Eisner, 1991). For Greene (1995a; 2001), aesthetic experiences enable people to think differently, looking beyond what is normal and natural, and look critically at learning, seeing, and feeling in order to change one's perspective on the world. Thus, professional development that provides aesthetics experiences for teachers, grounded in their inquiry and questions about teaching and learning, enables teachers to generate new understandings that emerge from these experiences, and discover new ways of working in the world, specifically in their classrooms.

### **Theoretical frame and related literature**

*Aesthetic experiences.* Our aesthetic perspective draws from the research and thinking of John Dewey (1934; 1938), Maxine Greene (1995; 2001) and Elliot Eisner (1991), philosophers and educators who were strong advocates of the arts in learning. We articulate key characteristics we see operating in an aesthetic approach to professional development. **Figure 1** highlights the cycle of learning when professional development is grounded in aesthetic experiences.

First, Dewey noted that educative experiences involve the arts in that "they open the door to an expansion of meaning and to an enlarged capacity to experience the world" (cited in Jackson, p. 195). For Dewey (1934), art provides focused, stunning, and integrated experiences in which learners use all of their senses and available resources to generate

understandings and cultivate the imagination. He stated that when the teacher or artist and their students are prepared, they enter into a powerful learning experience. An educative experience, he continued, that is holistic is only attainable if, and only if, a learner uses her/his imagination as part of this experience. For Dewey, imagination is the chief instrument of the good. Responses to aesthetic experiences are cultivated over time and become part of how learners engage in future experiences.



**Figure 1.** Key characteristics operating in professional development grounded in aesthetic experiences

In concert with this thinking, Greene (1988) saw aesthetic experiences as hopeful, imaginative, and transformative. She wrote: for those authentically concerned about the “birth of meaning,” about breaking through the surfaces, about teaching others to ‘read’ their own world, art forms must be conceived of as an ever-present possibility. They ought not to be treated

as decorative, as frivolous. They ought to be, if transformative teaching is our concern, a central part of the curriculum (p. 131).

For Greene, experiences considered aesthetic open up spaces for critical participation, discussion, and the freedom to “think otherwise, to say it strange, and to release the imagination” (Albers, Holbrook, & Harste, 2010, p. 183). Further, Greene (1995a) stated: “Participatory involvement with the many forms of art does enable us, at the very least, to see more in our experience, to hear more on normally unheard frequencies, to become conscious of what daily routines, habits, and conventions have obscured” (p. 123).

Second, an aesthetic experience must be organic between learners and their environment and which begins on a felt level. Dewey (1934) suggests that the immediate experience is felt or had because of a transaction within an environment. Learners get caught up in experiences, or the immediate “doing-and-undergoing” within an “active and dynamic field of integrate participation” (cited in Mathur, 1966, n.p.). When felt, experiences represent a fullness in which learners find a different way of seeing the world and support the vibrant role of aesthetics—imaginative responses and approaches to problems-- against the anesthetic—passive and rote responses.

Third, aesthetic experiences support the development of tools to engage learners in democracy and citizenry for creating a better world (Dewey, 1916), and grounded in caring relationships (Flint, et al, 2018a). Dewey saw education as holistic, democratic, and critical, and involves experiences that take learners into a deeper and more meaningful understanding to further learners’ intellectual and experiential growth. Experiences should be designed in

which learners develop concepts of what it means to participate as a citizen in a democracy.

Fourth, aesthetic experiences open up imaginative spaces for learners to make deep personal and world connections. Imaginative approaches to problem-solving and decision-making are generated through a range of different art forms (e.g., art, drama, music, photography, reader's theater, etc.) and, according to Eisner (1992), afford divergent thinking (rather than convergent) which leads to a range of possible responses. When engaged in such aesthetic experiences, then, and lastly, we suggest, prompt new questions and reflection which lead to future learning and different possibilities for transformed practices in the classroom and beyond.

*Professional development.* For many school districts and educational ministries, investment in professional development to improve teaching practices and shape the professional identity of teachers is tantamount to improving their children's learning. "We will fail ... to improve schooling for children until we acknowledge the importance of schools not only as places for teachers to work but also as places for teachers to learn" (Smylie, 1995, p. 92). Professional development for teachers comes in many forms, from formal experiences such as workshops, meetings, teacher study groups, and mentoring, to informal experiences such as reading professional articles and watching discipline-specific documentaries (Villigas-Reimers, 2003). In many parts of the world, cascading or "train the trainer" models are common, whereby a school representative redelivers the material presented at an auditorium style meeting to colleagues upon returning to the school site. The content of these isolated, one-time sessions often reflects national policy initiatives, curricula reform, and shifting priorities. Absent in the design of professional development is teacher input, and even less evident is teachers'

profound involvement and engagement in this professional development. Thus, structure and delivery of professional development is fragmented resulting in limited growth or improvements in teaching or learning (Flint, et al, 2018b). Overall, the investment of time, money, and resources fails to provide the expected dividend in teacher learning or increased student achievement outcomes (Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 1995; Day & Sachs, 2004; Schwille & Dembele, 2007).

Critical to professional development, as we and others have argued previously is genuine inquiry, reflection and choice in what teachers want to learn and how they wish to engage in this learning (Avalos, 2011; Borko, Jacobs, & Koellner, 2010; Doolittle, Sudeck, & Rattigan, 2008; Flint, Kuramada, Fisher & Zisook 2011; Flint, et al, 2018a; Hawley & Valli, 1999). When professional development is linked to teachers' concerns and questions about subject-matter content, there is evidence to suggest that child learning increases (Desimone, Smith, & Phillips, 2013). Further and germane to this research, professional development that is critical engages teachers in experiences that are pleasurable and meaningful also find that teachers integrate these same experiences in teachers' practices (Flint, et al, 2018a). For us, then, framing the study in aesthetic theory and critical professional development for teachers that is relevant and meaningful provides an avenue for exploring the impact of aesthetic experiences—ones that are engaging and pleasurable and position learning as a democratic process in which teachers' everyday and ordinary experiences further their pedagogical and intellectual growth.

We now turn to the findings of our work with Project PAL in South Africa that demonstrates how an aesthetic approach elicited transformational experiences for teachers who had previously been exposed to sterile and one-

dimensional approaches to professional development.

### Methodology

*Context of this work.* The data from this longitudinal work from Project PAL was collected from 2013 to 2015, and the focus of this Project was to support teachers' integration of technology into literacy teaching and learning with the aim to improve children's literacy and motivation to learn. The study took place in a small rural school of 400 children in a wine region in the Western Cape of South Africa. Half of the school's population were in the foundation phase (Reception through grade three), and received instruction in Afrikaans, the language of the school, and shifted into English in grade three. We worked with eight foundation phase teachers, seven taught in Afrikaans and one taught a multi-grades 1-3 Xhosa class. Teachers spoke Afrikaans as their first language, and one teacher spoke Xhosa; all but one had relatively strong English speaking and writing skills.

We traveled twice yearly to South Africa for three years and provided five workshops during each visit for a total of 30 across this professional development project. Each workshop was designed with teachers' expressed interests and needs, and we built in aesthetic experiences around community building, literacy strategy learning and application, and teachers' reflection on their learning. For example, our first set of workshops included "getting to know you" experiences using Cisneros' (1991) short story, "My Name," and the picture book *Prayer for the 21st Century* (Marsden, 1998), a poem with statements of hope for the world. For "My Name," teachers wrote about and illustrated what their names meant in their language and within their families. For *Prayer*, teachers wrote a hope for their own school and illustrated it. We then performed their illustrated writings as reader's

theater. Moving across these modes enabled teachers to participate fully in their learning. At the end of the first round of workshops, teachers said, "You are angels." They appreciated the felt connection between learning and teaching, the quality of picture books, and the ability to respond in multiple forms.

*Situating the researchers.* As critical literacy and teacher education researchers from the US, we intentionally used texts that positioned teachers to read from a social justice perspective. We anticipated tensions around cultural and language differences (Afrikaans and/or Xhosa was their first language and English an additional language), differences in educational approaches to learning, and the use of minimal resources with maximum potential for learning (e.g., picture books, digital cameras, paper, markers, pencils, etc.). We also come from the position that professional development is not delivered, but experienced, and learning would be reciprocal in nature: We would learn from them as much as they would learn from us.

*Data collection and analysis.* Across the three years of the study, we collected the following data: videos, field notes and photographs of the workshop sessions that captured how teachers engaged with the texts and strategies; photos and field notes on classroom implementation of workshop ideas; audio recorded researcher debriefs following each workshop; teacher produced artifacts; and group interviews on the last day of each of the five-day professional development workshops (total six interviews).

Our first level of analysis involved open coding (Glaser and Strauss, 1967) of print-based data (e.g., teacher artifacts, researcher fieldnotes, transcribed teacher interviews, researcher debriefs) immediately following each workshop. We analyzed data collected at each workshop in relation to the one that came before, and all data were analyzed across the

series of workshops. We studied and broke down data into first-level concepts (e.g., modal communication, relationships, implementation, shifts in thinking). While identifying first-level categories, we coded second-level categories (e.g., modes they used to communicate their thinking; fun learning; emotions felt in the experience). In one workshop session, all teachers responded that they learned about Wordle (a word-based cloud software), which was coded as a literacy strategy concept, and second-level categories included, for example, building vocabulary, synthesizing, use of shape to symbolize thinking.

For visual data (photos, frames, teachers' visual artifacts), we used critical visual discourse analysis (Albers, 2007b) to understand the structure and discourses in these visual representations. We studied object placement, colors used, orientation of the image, and the discourses that underpinned the elements within the visual artifacts. For example, objects that took up volume/space in the visual artifact were interpreted as having significance to the teacher; repetition of symbols meant emphasis of that symbol; the orientation of the artifact helped us understand if teachers presented information or intended to tell a story (Albers, 2007a); and colors and intensity of application of color helped us understand the significance of that particular element/object.

To analyze video-recordings of teachers' responses in aesthetic experiences, we captured still frames from the video to document teacher engagement and learning. In these photographs/frames, we studied what the teacher was doing, why she was doing it, and how other teachers responded. We also noted which art form was used and why, which

modes carried the information (e.g., gesture, facial, body movement, voiced language). Understanding which modes carried more weight than others contributed to our understanding of the experience itself and aspects of the aesthetic experience teachers valued.

We also studied photographs, noting both the content of the photo and the stance of the photographers (us), what we tried to capture, what we saw operating in these photos, and what experiences teachers expressed in these photos. For example, in **Figure 2**, we studied body positions, how teachers responded to the experience (smiles); engagement (gaze towards a teacher demonstrating on a laptop; bodies leaning into the presenter) bodies engaged outside of the central focus of the photo (teacher working on her laptop, researcher focused on the laptop). As the photographers and videographers, we were aware of our intentions behind what we captured, and the discourses that underpinned these decisions.

**Drama to Build Vocabulary**

- Think of a very important event, place, time in that creates in you a very strong emotion
- Turn your back to the class and “get into character”
- Turn and express that emotion
- Freeze that emotion
- The class shouts out what the emotion is
- Teacher writes down the word choices
- The actor has the “last line” — she or he says the emotion
- Generates a word list (synonyms and antonyms)

Who would like to be an actress for the day?

Oh, I would love to be an actress— choose me!

The image shows a woman in a blue shirt standing at a whiteboard, and a woman in a dark shirt sitting at a table in the foreground, looking towards the whiteboard. The whiteboard has a list of items: Planning for Class, Literacy Strategy, Language, Reflection, and Closing Story One.

**Figure 2.** Use of teachers' experiences as part of PowerPoint presentations used in workshops.

We studied both the visual and print-based data alongside each other. We noted if and how embodied engagement aligned (or not) with their spoken and written reflections. We also noted how teachers responded both in an art form and written form and what they intended to say through the art form to understand the significance of the arts to engagement and reflection in an aesthetic approach to professional development.

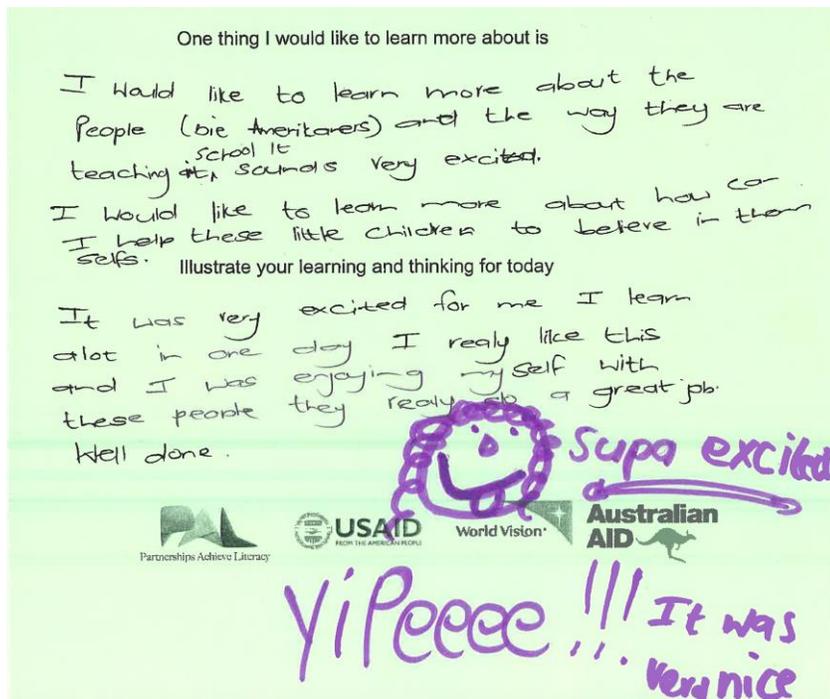
### Findings

Our analysis yielded three findings: 1) Feelings and the arts were significant in what and how teachers learned in professional development workshops; 2) Aesthetic experiences led to critical and democratic talk around professional development and issues of social importance; and 3) Aesthetic experiences informed teachers' in and out of classroom practice. As a study on aesthetic learning, we include a number of different images to represent the data.

*Feelings and the arts were significant in what and how teachers learned in professional development workshops.*

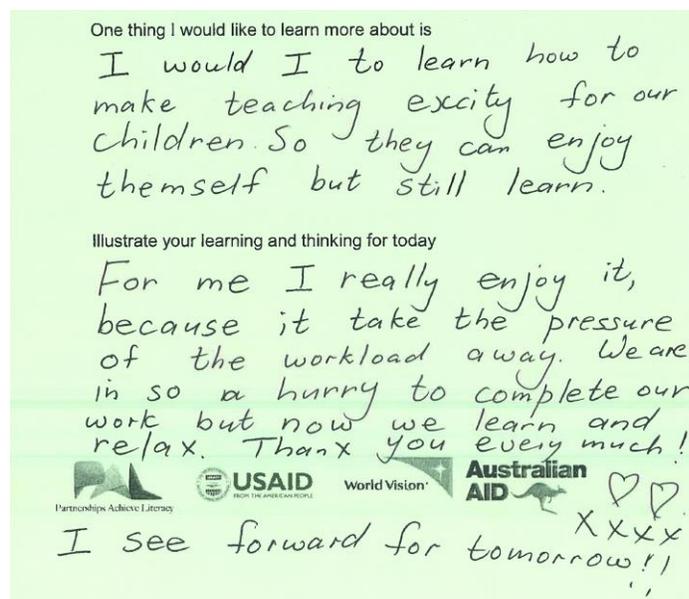
Professional development through aesthetic experiences positioned teachers to “feel” learning through engagements that integrated the arts, develop stronger relationships with their colleagues, and see the value in professional development. In our initial interviews, the teachers reported that their professional development was “boring,” “we were not involved,” and was not “relevant to our classrooms.” In Exit Slip reflections written at the end of each workshop, teachers used terms often associated with aesthetic responses: “enjoy/ing” “excite (sic)” “relax” “really like” “supa excited” “very nice” and “YIPEEE!” Further, as shown in **Figure 3**, teachers also

used color to express the pleasure (YIPEEE!) they felt in their learning.



**Figure 3.** Teachers express their feelings about their learning in PD workshops.

Teachers also used symbols of love such as hearts, Xs, double curved lines, smiling faces to show their felt responses to learning—what they had learned, how they had learned, and how they engaged in what they learned. Teachers now wanted “to make teaching excite” (sic) and wanted their children to feel “enjoy[ment] themselves.” Feeling learning was a new experience for teachers, enough so that one teacher was “supa excited” to continue. At the felt level, teachers found the workshops valuable, and wanted us to “give us more.” They found workshops “Exciting Wonderful and Enjoyable !!!” and “I see forward for tomorrow!!” (see **Figure 4**)

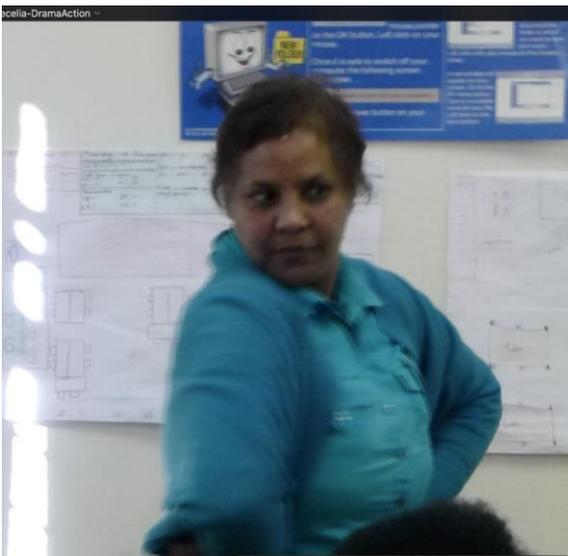


**Figure 4.** Exit Slips: teachers' use of repeated symbols (hearts, exclamation points) to express happiness they felt in their learning.

The visual and dramatic arts in aesthetic experiences supported teachers' responses to a range of texts. Reader's theater was an important art form by which teachers could share the feelings behind their learning through voiced and nonverbal responses to texts we introduced in workshops. Early in the professional development, we introduced "Where I'm From," a poem by George Ella Lyon (n.d.), with the intention to elicit aesthetic responses to prompt teachers to reflect on where they were from. We showed Lyons reading her poem on YouTube video that included images of her home. We then did a choral reading of Lyon's poem with the teachers, followed by a discussion of the poem, including understanding vocabulary used by Lyons. We read this poem a third time using reader's theater with teachers around the room reading different lines of the poems, paired readings of phrases and lines, and group synchronous reading of some lines. We then had teachers write their own poems, using the starter words and phrases that Lyon used: I

am from....; from (noun) and (noun); (and so on). Teachers presented their "Where I'm From" poems at the next day's workshop. As soon as Raabiah said, "I'm from McDonalds," everyone started cheering and clapping; they knew and felt Raabiah's experience. In our researcher debrief, Peggy noted how teachers learned about each other from their poems, and how their poems were valued by others: "The workshops have given Grace the opportunity to learn more about [her colleagues], to foster and build a community, one of our project's goals. I think we got there and demonstrated in what Grace said, 'You know, I know about them now. I think that's really special.'" With English as an additional language, reader's theater enabled teachers to engage with poetic language more than once, to understand different vocabulary yet similar experiences, and to write poetically about their own lives.

We found that reading, visualizing, and dramatizing language provided teachers with imaginative approaches to teach language concepts and skills. In one workshop, drama provided an aesthetic entry point into teaching and building children's vocabulary. We asked teachers to think of an important event in their lives, associate a feeling to that event, and act out the feeling. Teachers shouted out loud their guesses as to what they saw being acted out. Each of these words was written on poster board paper. Figure 5 is a series of three frames of a longer video in which CeCe acted out her word "Excitement," while teachers guessed the word being acted out ("awe", "amazing," "Beautiful", "Joyful"). CeCe's dramatization of "excitement" turned into an improvised and mimed story about a good deed someone had done for her. As CeCe acted out her story, the other teachers belly-laughed out loud. (see **Figures 5a-5c**)



**Figures 5a, b, c.** Vocabulary-building strategy using drama to act out word: Awe...Amazing... Beautiful... Joyful....

The visual arts also provided a strong communicative connection between the teachers and us, especially given our native language differences. We always used PowerPoint to present stories and literacy strategies, often integrating pictures of the teachers with speech bubbles that encouraged their involvement in the presentation of information (**Figure 2**). Teachers like Raabiah used this idea often in her grade two classroom. In addition, we read beautifully illustrated picture books, a visual mode that teachers understood, regardless of their level of English, and asked teachers to visually express their learning after each workshop through Exit Slips. In one workshop we focused on how to teach concepts through maps and mapping using *My Map Book* (Fanelli, 2001). Told from a child's perspective in word and image, this picture book maps out different places and experiences of the main character: the character's room, belly, heart, neighborhood, among other spaces/places. Following a discussion of the picture book, teachers then created their own maps of their classroom.

Limited in her use of English, Robin used art to show which elements of her classroom were important and what she valued (see **Figure 6**). The center rug with children sitting around is the center of attention, and an important part of her teaching. The faint circular colors of the rug suggest a non-threatening space, one in which children should feel comfortable. The other items in her room are on the periphery of the room and have less prominence. Robin's title "Map of my Classroom" has an artistic feel with swirls in letters that allowed them (o, p). The multicolored title is surrounded by a curve cloud that represents comfort (Albers, 2007a) and emphasizes the importance of relationships with her students. The sign on her door says "Welcome," again with the use of multiple colors. Interestingly, desks have strong angles, unlike the rug and title, which represent more

formal spaces of learning. Robin's careful choice of colors and strong application of the color on the paper reference areas of the room that she found important. The brown color around the window in the bottom center is applied firmly and strong, and places significance on having outside views. Use of color, design, and shapes provided Robin with a means through which she could communicate how she felt about her classroom and where and how learning in her space looked.



**Figure 6.** Robin's "Map of my Classroom" informed by *My Map Book*.

Teachers' illustrations of their learning through Exit Slips (**Figures 7a, b, c, d**) showed their felt and lived engagement in each of the workshops. One teacher drew "Where do I start?" (**Figure 7a**) and surrounded herself in symbols with question marks that suggested interest in future inquiry about literacy learning. The eyes are wide, the smile large, and the

swirls, # symbols, and a star in combinatorial relationship are dynamic. These symbols take on the shape of hair; this energy is a physical part of who she is. In **Figure 7b**, this teacher statement, "Learning make (sic) me feel good," is quiet, with a timid thought bubble; however, clear in this image is a direct statement about how professional development for her is a felt experience that continues to make her think.

**Figure 7c**, another timid image, "It's over so sad!!" shows loss, not only of future workshops,

but shared face-to-face learning and development of stronger relationships established during these workshops. A reticent smile, wrinkles on the forehead, and tears large in proportion to the face show the mix of emotions that she experienced: happy about her learning, but sad over the relationships she developed while in this learning. While **Figures 7a, b, and c** show simple emotions on the faces, **Figure 7d**, "Give me more!!" is a literally in-your-face demand. Her wide

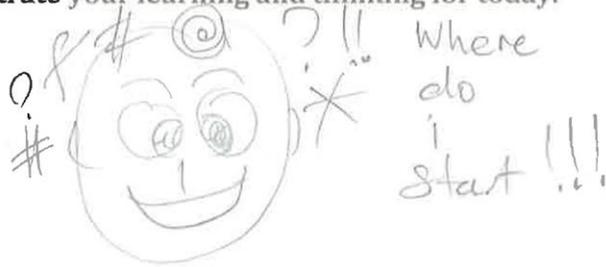
tooth-showing smile and direct gaze at us, the viewers, demand more..."grrr!" (Growl). She salivates at the idea of learning more. We interpret **Figure 7d** as a reflective contrast. She remembers the de-contextualized professional development that was not relevant, and now salivates for more contextualized and engaged professional development. While the image is tough, she tempers her demand with the statement, "This was inspiring." Across these four images, the symbols, elements of emotion in the faces, and language (sad, great, give me,

inspiring, where do I start) convey sincere and felt responses to their learning.

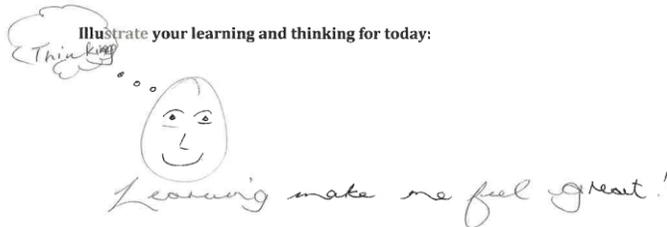
*Aesthetic experiences led to critical and democratic talk.*

**Figures 7a, b, c, d.** Teachers' visual expressions of their learning.

**Illustrate your learning and thinking for today:**



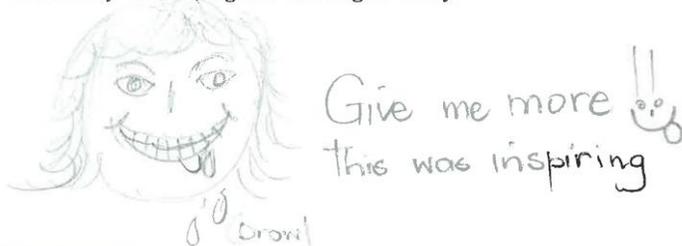
**Illustrate your learning and thinking for today:**



**Illustrate your learning and thinking for today:**



**Illustrate your learning and thinking for today:**



Teachers were not aware that we designed workshops with critical literacy in mind. We introduced a range of print-, art-, music-, and technology-based texts that had strong African and/or African American characters (*One World, One Day; The Best Part of Me; Something Beautiful*). We also introduced texts that carried messages around fairness or unfairness (*Something Beautiful*), difference (*Woolbur, Zero*), multiple perspectives (*Wolf Won't Bite*), among

many others. Exit slips, observations, and photos of children's work on their walls demonstrated how teachers had internalized the importance of critically responding to and analyzing texts, especially picture

books, songs, and photos that featured black and brown characters. Teachers had no experience with beautifully illustrated children's literature that told stories of brown and black-skinned characters; they had only known workbooks with benign cartooned characters, disembodied of emotions, actions, real events and real situations. One story, in particular, *Something Beautiful* (Wyeth, 2002), a picture book about urban blight, resonated deeply with teachers and to which we understood the importance of felt experiences in professional development. As we read the story aloud, Grace, a dark-skinned Xhosa teacher, slowly stroked the face of the young African American female protagonist—attempting to feel the skin of the character. She slowly turned each page, running her fingers over the illustrations, poignant moments of felt emotions embodied in her actions. After reading

picture books, teachers engaged in frank—and welcomed—discussions around discrimination, racism, and apartheid, starting first with their personal stories and moving into issues of racism in society. To extend their learning, teachers created a drawing, responding to the story that they found particularly interesting. Julie connected deeply with this story and, in her Exit Slip, explained how she planned to use with her grade three children (**Figure 8**). She appreciated and learned how children can “express their feelings” and “How they can draw what they see what is beautiful.”

One thing I learned today is:  
 How I can use a book so let  
 the children express their feelings  
 How they can draw what they  
 see what is beautiful in life.

One thing I would like to learn more about is:  
 Every day for me is a learning  
 process. I love to learn how I  
 can integrate the books with my  
 work every day.

**Figure 8.** Teacher’s exit slip suggests implementation of aesthetic experiences in children’s learning.

For us, we found that teachers positively responded to critical literacy texts. They had felt engagement in discussions of social importance: valuing difference, studying negative actions and helping children see how to turn them into positive actions. They also began to notice how and what symbols mean in drawings in response to reading such texts. Hearts symbolized the power of love over hatred. We saw these

responses as moves towards thinking democratically and critically about teaching, integrating experiences in which their children can discuss and draw “what is beautiful in life.”

As a critical literacy engagement, we engaged teachers in constructing learning walls, or trails of their learning (Harste & Vasquez, 1998). These learning walls consisted of photos, texts, artifacts and organized to show connections between and among texts studied and to document growth in learners’ learning and thinking. Working in two groups, teachers organized the many photographs and teacher

constructed artifacts into trails of their learning process (**Figure 9**). During this workshop, teachers laughed and told stories about past learning, and recognized, as CeCe wrote in her exit slip: “We learn so much work in a short time.”

*Aesthetic experiences informed in and out of classroom practice.*

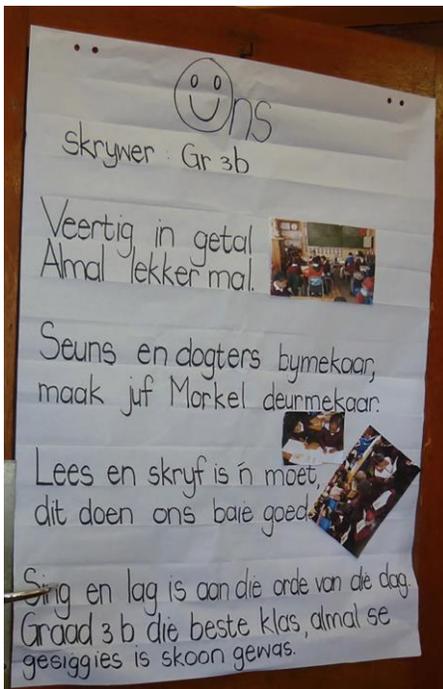
We found that teachers’ integrated workshop ideas, and saw this as direct and visible evidence of how aesthetic experiences affected their thinking and practice in and out of the classroom.

*In classroom practice.* Teachers used their own arts-based projects and experiences (e.g., art, drama, music) as demonstrations to engage their own students in similar aesthetic experiences. For example, Julie implemented found poems, a group poem created from words and phrases found within several texts, into her class instruction. She invited her students to come up with words and phrases that described them as a class. From this, the class created a found poem (**Figure 10**). Julie reported that

students enjoyed this experience greatly, and they found excuses to go to the door (e.g., sharpen pencils, throw away trash, etc.) so that they could stand by the door to read the poem and look at the pictures.



**Figure 9.** Teachers create learning walls from workshop generated artifacts.



**Figure 10.** Class generated found poem. Translation: The poem was generated by a range of different ideas from the students: Forty in number/ Everybody crazy / Sons and daughters make Morkel confused. / Read and write is a must,/ do we are very good / sing and laugh is different from the order of the day./Grade 3 b is the best class, everyone's faces are clean washed.

After seeing how we integrated photos into our workshops and in PowerPoint presentations through speech bubbles (see **Figure 2**), teachers intentionally took photos of their students, printed them out and posted them to work with children's writing, as inquiry projects using PowerPoint, as community building activities, and teach vocabulary around an event. **Figure 11** illustrates how Julie used digital photos with children in the picture around celebrations (translation left to right: cake, birthday cake, congratulation, hug, letter, group work, clean up, sandwich, delicious).



**Figure 11.** Teachers used digital photos to teach vocabulary and feature children learning.

Teachers found the picture books particularly interesting and engaging, and used them to engage students in comprehension activities. Kris read *Home* (Ellis, 2015), a picture book that highlights different homes from around the world, to her Grade 1 learners. She read the book in English and translated sections of it in Afrikaans, moving between languages. This “translanguaging” experience (Garcia, 2007, p. xii) demonstrated the fluidity of language through simple text. Kris also created a PowerPoint with different homes from around this rural area and engaged children in a discussion of how people live in various communities.

Music was one of the teachers’ favorite aesthetic experiences to teach aspects of literacy development (e.g., reading, writing, comprehension, rhythm, following along). We introduced “Kalimba,” “See Me Beautiful,” and “I Look into the Mirror,” all of which were immediately integrated into the teachers’ classes. One teacher reflected in her Exit Slip, “See Me Beautiful” woa woa yeah yeah!”, while another wrote/illustrated “It was the TOPS! (smiley face) (downward arrow pointing to) AWESOME woa woa yeah yeah!” Teachers loved to sing, and they liked turn taking to practice working with the song (see **Figure 12**).



**Figure 12.** Reception teacher, Nancy, practices using music and lyrics with the group as a way to teach print awareness.

In our researcher debrief after one of the workshops, we discussed to what extent teachers engaged in aesthetic experiences and integrated the ideas into their teaching. We noticed that they had used a large number of the ideas presented in the workshop, and made them their own (brief excerpt):

*Amy:* We started the day by visiting all of the teachers' classrooms. We saw some work around the text *Home*. We saw [their students'] “sketch-to-stretch” drawings after reading picture books. We saw teachers, like Nancy, singing the song, “See me Beautiful” with her Reception grade children. Kris used some of the technology to show kids different kinds of poems.

*Peggy:* Kris did an amazing job using the book *Home*. She had her kids identify different homes, and then they were going to create their own book with different pictures of homes. So, she's doing a lot of reinforcement of the same vocabulary and the same concepts [we introduced].

*Amy:* It was nice to see that Raabiah had three of the [workshop] books on display as a text set in her classroom: *My Map Book*, *Home*, and *There*, and she had put them together.

*Peggy:* I loved that Raabiah used *Something Beautiful*. I didn't know if anybody would use that book in their classroom really. It's so deep, but then to go ahead and have her [grade two] children do a negative to positive drawing was really amazing. Children had to think of something negative and turn it into a positive. So that's how she had them think conceptually about that book.

This excerpt from a much longer debrief reminded us of the importance of engagement, aesthetic experiences, and space for teachers to share their learning both in the workshops and implement ideas in their own classroom with aesthetic experiences built into these engagements.

*Out of classroom.* What surprised us the most was when, in our third interviews at the start of the second year of the Project, teachers told us that they shared their workshop learning with family, colleagues and friends. Specifically, they shared experiences with arts-based components.

*Peggy:* Have you talked about any of the ideas that you learned in the workshop with each other after we leave?

*Kris:* Yes. Like our Wordles, how interesting it was.

*Julie:* We also use it at home.

*Peggy:* Yay! And you were able to present it, right?

*All:* Yes! (laughter)

*Nancy:* I just shared the other day ZooBurst with one of my colleagues. She was really excited about it because she said, “Please send them to our school as well. Please send them.” I was like, “No, but I can certainly ask them.”

*Peggy:* Kris, how did teachers respond to the experiences/activities at the district professional development session that you presented at? Did you show them how to do [Wordle]?

*Kris:* Yes. I did.

*Peggy:* Did they all have fun doing it?

*Kris:* No. They didn't have practice with it. I just showed them what you can do. But they did use it because I saw it on one teacher's laptop. She used family words and in the shape of a heart.

*Peggy:* Nice.

*Raabiah:* Some of them had tablets and they did [Wordle] on them.

*Nancy:* Yes, and phones. Some had smart phones.



**Figure 13.** Teachers show intrigue using ZooBurst, software that enabled them to create pop-up books.

This interview offers insight into which aesthetic experiences that teachers found important and fun to experience and share. While Kris was able to demonstrate Wordle on her own laptop at her district-wide professional development, the teachers to whom she presented did not have “fun” because “They didn’t have practice with it.” Kris realized the necessity of aesthetically experiencing “fun” ideas, such as Wordle, to fully appreciate its aesthetic qualities and use in classroom practice. Just “showing” teachers

what to do was not enough to experience this engagement.

Teachers also shared their learning at an international Pan-African/Reading Association of South Africa conference (see **Figure 14**).



**Figure 14.** Teachers present at the Pan-African/Reading Association of South Africa.

None of the teachers had experienced professional development at a conference, and several had never stayed overnight in a hotel. Exceptionally nervous, teachers conducted an interactive workshop for conference attendees, many who were internationally recognized literacy researchers and teacher educators. Teachers designed aesthetic experiences around in children’s literature and literacy ideas to engage their participants. During the conference, teachers had organized themselves so that two teachers attended different concurring sessions so that they could maximize

their collective learning. In the closing plenary, the keynote speaker gave a shout-out to and produced a slide of these teachers, emphasizing the importance of strong and relevant professional development to support teacher learning.

In a post-conference interview, teachers talked animatedly about how they really enjoyed the conference and that they enjoyed sharing their learning with others. After seeing her picture on the slide during the closing plenary presented by Hilary Janks, a critical literacy scholar, Clarice was so proud: “In our school we are on the map in our community. At this conference, we are now on the world map!” This out-of-classroom experience was, as CeCe said, “life-changing.”

### Discussion

*Professional development as a felt experience.* Professional development outcomes are often measured by increased fidelity to prescribed mandates and programs and increased student achievement. Teachers often do not have time to enjoy learning, as they must demonstrate a set of skills that show that they know what and how to teach. This study provides evidence that insights into teachers’ implementation of professional development ideas when aesthetic experiences are an essential part of their learning. As we found, professional development must connect personally and deeply with teachers, situate experiences in the context in which they teach, and include arts-based engagements to elicit the felt experience and relationships between learner and environment that Dewey (1934) suggested is critical to learning and growth. This study evidences how aesthetic experiences supported the development of relationships between the teachers and us. The illustrations and responses to their learning in their Exit Slips and the full engagement with ideas (e.g., singing, reader’s

theater, learning walls) resulted in felt experiences, experiences missing in their previous professional development sessions. The teacher who drew a face with a small smile and large tears on her Exit Slip did not cry because she would not learn another literacy strategy; hers were felt tears at the end of the Project and the relationships we developed over the course of the workshops. We suggest that aesthetic experiences position teachers not only to learn about ideas, concepts, and literacy strategies, but these felt experiences are essential to building trust between teacher educator and teachers that the ideas they learn are important to their own teaching.

Further, teachers' aesthetic experiences in this professional development prompted them to share ideas with their colleagues, friends, and family. Yet, this sharing must be felt and experienced. Kris who taught Wordle to teachers without laptops or computers discovered that this "fun" experience had little impact without "practice" with this software program. We suggest that professional development must start first at a felt level, is relevant to teachers' own classroom setting, and offer innovative approaches to literacy learning that, as Julie stated, are "enjoyable to their learners." That Grace shared her pop-up book with her family on her love of cooking, and shared how to create these pop-up books with her nephew demonstrates how this felt experience could be used across situations—both classroom learning and family celebrations. We also suggest that aesthetic experiences, evidenced by this study, is generative and intergenerational; generative in that teachers' learning was shared with colleagues and friends, and intergenerational when their learning is shared with family. We see this as a powerful move towards professional development that not only is instructionally significant, but personally pedagogical in which

ideas are shared within families and circles of friends.

*Professional development as an imaginative endeavor.* Professional development within an aesthetic stance positions teachers to break through the "boredom" and passivity of de-contextualized professional development, and experience arts-based learning in which, as one teacher stated, "a new world opened up" (Flint, et al, 2018b). We argue that professional development must include experiences in which teachers express their learning in ways other than written and spoken language. To do so positions teachers to engage in what Dewey called "enjoyed meanings" (Alexander, 1987, p. 3). Teachers learned through enjoyment whether it was predicting vocabulary through CeCe's dramatization, writing and performing their own "Where I'm From" poems, and singing along with songs that taught concepts of geography in an imaginative way (e.g., "Kalimba"). Connecting learning with imaginative experiences opens up spaces for teachers to move away from teaching solely from workbooks—the predominant way in under-resourced rural schools (Niadoo, Reddy & Dorasamy, 2012)—and toward new pedagogical strategies. Raabiah's use of rap to introduce a picture book is imaginative. Inquiry through PowerPoint presentations with animation and images created by Grade two children on topics in which they were interested is imaginative. Kris's creation of an image-filled PowerPoint to situate homes across the world to expand children's knowledge of spaces outside their own communities is imaginative. Sir Ken Robinson (2009; 2013), a scholar of imagination and creativity in education, argued that the arts support creativity, innovation, and the potential of human resources. We suggest that these aesthetic experiences opened up the potential for this group of teachers to draw upon their own

personal and classroom resources to work imaginatively with literacy and to motivate their children with experiences outside of workbooks.

*Professional development as a democratic endeavor.* Especially in international spaces, we suggest that situated and contextualized professional development imagined through aesthetic theory is critical and identifies teacher learning as a democratic endeavor. While any professional development situation involves power relationships, we lessened this dynamic by taking on an aesthetic stance in which language forms (e.g., art, writing, speaking, music, drama) are experienced. Language barriers between the teachers and us were reduced because experiences involved communication across modes, and provided space for all teachers to participate in discussions around literacy, stories, and learning. To approach professional development as a democratic endeavor in international spaces is to introduce materials (e.g., songs, picture books, stories, poems) that speak to teachers' experiences, to bring in children's literature with brown and black faces, to know that language must be experienced, and to engage teachers in "fun" engagements. Stories like *Something Beautiful* enabled Grace to have a profoundly deep connection between her and the young African American girl; Grace could see and touch this girl's face, and feel her feelings around racist actions. Aesthetic experiences as felt experiences position teachers as critical readers of language in which they can engage in dialogue about issues of social injustice. When Julie recognized the need for her children to have fun and see themselves in their learning, she took photos and posted them on the classroom wall. This was a move towards a democratic classroom. When she invited her children to write a found poem, children participated in their own literacy learning, learning to write by writing and learning to read by reading. This is a

democratic classroom. When teachers presented at and participated in other conference sessions at the Pan-African conference, teachers participated in education that is democratic. They contributed equally to a larger educational endeavor and discourse around literacy education, and their participation placed them intellectually, educationally, physically, and democratically on the "world map."

*Professional development as a moral endeavor.* Dewey (1934) talked about education, particularly through the arts, as a moral endeavor: "Hence it is that art is more moral than moralities.... The moral prophets of humanity have always been poets even though they spoke in free verse or by parable" (p. 362). Aesthetic experiences are inextricably imaginative, imbued with a spirit that engages learners at felt and creative levels. We suggest several key aspects must be present in professional development as a moral endeavor. First, learning must be joyful and happy. In this study, teachers showed their happiness through their laughter, visual symbols and faces on Exit Slips, and discussions around critical literacy texts (picture books, newspaper articles, poetry, music, lyrics, photographs). Second, literacy teaching and learning involves multiple, imaginative, and innovative approaches. Teachers used many language forms to teach print-awareness, vocabulary, comprehension, and writing. Multiple approaches to literacy honor the languages, backgrounds, and experiences that children bring into the classroom. Third, learning involves trust. Teachers in this study trusted their own learning enough to implement ideas they learned into their classroom. Kris's use of Home enabled children to talk about their homes as well as see other homes across the world. Teachers also trusted their learning enough to present at an international literacy conference, to share ideas with their colleagues and friends, and to

celebrate their families through such software programs as Wordle and ZooBurst. Fourth, learning is dialogic. Workbooks suppress dialogue while reading picture books like *Something Beautiful*, *Woolbur*, or *Zero* are stories that open up dialogue about issues of social importance like racism and difference. Vocabulary lists stifle imagination, while songs like “Kalimba” or recalling important events imaginatively generate vocabulary associated with learning about directions (east, west, north, south). And, lastly, learning is multi-lingual and multi-modal. Through art, reader’s theater, and drama, teachers like Robin, limited in their knowledge of English, could show what she learned, express her emotions about her learning, and share her learning with her colleagues. Communication is always comprised of many modes. Aesthetic experiences generate multiple ways in which learning is communicated.

A goal of moral education is to understand that learning positions learners to see the possibilities of meaningful lives. Dewey’s aim for moral education was not to separate scientific knowledge (e.g., literacy knowledge/theory) from humanistic inquiry (e.g., teachers’ questions about literacy and classroom practice). Both, he argued, are necessary to make sense of the world and our place in it. To engage in education as a moral endeavor, drawing upon aesthetic experiences, is to see issues anew and approach problems with novel insights. An environment and set of experiences that position teachers to think differently about teaching and learning have the power to shape and direct changes in their own pedagogy and practice.

### Conclusion

As this study evidenced, professional development holds promise when it is sustained, imaginative, relatable, and positions teachers to think differently about themselves as learners

and teachers through aesthetic experiences. Those engaged in professional development, national and international, must recognize the importance of how engagements are felt and experienced. We suggest that drawing only from cognitive approaches and one-shot single-session professional development does not deeply address the qualities, feelings, emotions, and embodied responses that comprise the aesthetic experience in professional development. This was brought to our attention clearly when on the last day of one set of workshops, the principal, who also engaged in several workshops, came in to describe what he noticed about his teachers’ learning as well as his own:

Thank you for developing our teachers; a really big thank you to you, the sponsors, and everyone involved in this project. I was just thinking, whenever you leave, you leave something behind. So, as you go back, you left something behind, and that something is what we have learned, the knowledge that we have gained. Our teachers have developed in these few days, not only them, not only they will benefit, but most of all our children in the classes, so thank you so much. Ms. Naidoo (Grace) says life is not measured by the breaths we take, but the moments that take our breath away. This is one of the moments, really; it’s taken my breath away. I really don’t know what to say. So, thank you so much, that’s all I’m going to say on behalf of the teachers, on behalf of our learners, thank you so much.

These parting words of the principal locate professional development squarely within aesthetic and moral education. The knowledge left behind “benefits” his teachers, “but most of all our children.” When professional development is seen not as “delivery of information,” but as a set of relationships and aesthetic experiences in which teacher educators and teachers from different international spaces engage jointly in planning, thinking, experiencing, reflecting, and implementing pedagogical ideas, then Dewey’s aim of

education as moral, democratic, and imaginative endeavor is achieved (see **Figure 15**).



**Figure 15.** Project PAL team.

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