

New Learning Imaginaries: Youth Perspectives on Learning In and Outside School

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Abstract: This paper draws on the results of an ethnographic project carried out with five groups of secondary students. During one academic year, our research team accompanied youth in an inquiry into learning practices in and outside school. Here their observations and contributions are brought together to problematize the relationship between formal and informal learning, learning and schooling, and the role of students versus researchers. In an attempt to understand the impact of learning as a practice (rather than a result), a mobilities perspective is introduced. The authors use metaphors such as multi-directionality, flow, border crossing and displacements to reimagine learning practices in relation to the personal trajectories of learners, rather than the fixed location of the school.

Keywords: school disaffection, learning mobilities, participatory ethnography, youth voice, secondary school

Changing the conversation on school disaffection¹

How and where young people learn are two pressing questions in educational research, and today they seem irrevocably intertwined. The blurred boundaries between school and non-school, virtual and physical sites, or formal, non-formal and informal education contribute to a rise in studies looking at the way learning is linked to our understanding of social space (Leander, Phillips, & Headrick Taylor, 2010; Brooks, Fuller, & Waters, 2012; Vadeboncoeur, Hady-Rachid, & Moghtader, 2013). However, while educational research has diversified and ventured outside the classroom, it still struggles with finding ways for discussing learning without falling back on normative assessment frameworks used to evaluate school effectiveness (Sefton-Green, 2012). This paper approaches this tension by addressing the representation of learning practices, drawing on the contributions of 39 secondary school students who participated in a study researching how they learn in and outside school.

Gathering students' reflections on their own learning practices is a particularly relevant exercise today. In spite of the perceived multiplication of learning opportunities available to young people, researchers have identified an increase in school

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disaffection in Western industrialized nations (Smyth & McInerney, 2012). In Spain, where this research was carried out, 24.9% of students leave school early, which is twice the European average (Eurostat, 2012). In acknowledgement of this problem, reducing the rate of early school leaving is a high priority in the European strategic initiative Horizon 2020 (Europe, 2020).

In findings published by the European Parliament, early school leaving in Europe is linked to school disaffection: it is “typically caused by a cumulative process of disengagement” (Nevala, Hawley, *et al.*, 2011, p. 3). While a student’s socio-economic conditions are a factor, it is now believed that:

a significant part of the problem can be attributed to lack of support and guidance, disengagement from schooling and to secondary-level curricula which too often do not offer enough options for varied courses, alternative teaching pedagogies, experiential and other hands-on learning opportunities or sufficient flexibility. (Ibid.)

It is clear that young people are sensitive to their role and sense of belonging in their schools (Watkins, 2005), and their decision to leave should not be treated as a casual chain of events. Instead, John Smyth (2005) has found that the decision to not to continue in school is “made consciously and often amounts to the perceived cultural irrelevance of the school and an absence of respect by the schools for the lives, experiences and aspirations of young people” (p. 121).

In light of the consistent findings that young people are active agents in their learning processes (see Smyth & McInerney, 2012) this project follows a research tradition that chooses not to address school disaffection in terms of a failure, or lack, on behalf of schools, students, or teachers (Hernández-Hernández & Padilla-Petry, 2013). Instead, it focuses on how to change the conversation by working with young people, studying the learning practices they identify as meaningful to them. In this way, the study does not describe what young people learn, or where, but rather explores learning according to the representations provided by young learners. As a result, the project shifts from focusing on physical sites of learning (i.e., in and outside school) and takes into consideration the multiple, heterogeneous learning practices that young people engage in.

Learning mobilities: an emerging paradigm for studying learning across contexts

By focusing on learning *in and outside* school the project initially set up a comparative approach between formal and informal learning. However, as our work with the young people progressed, the notion of a fixed in/out binary became hard to maintain; neither school nor ‘the outside’ are categories that stay put in young people’s lives. To better capture the entanglement of the transitions, trajectories, and socio-spatial practices that produce learning, we turn to the “mobilities paradigm” (Urry, 2007) to better interpret our results.

The study of mobilities brings together research from sociology, geography and anthropology, among other fields, to focus on:

“a wide array of economic, social and political practices, infrastructures and ideologies, that all involve, entail or curtail various kinds of movement of people, or ideas, or information or objects” (Ibid, p. 43).

Within this paradigm, a subfield that specifically addresses learning mobilities is consolidating. Leander, Phillips and Headrick Taylor (2010) describe the learning mobilities perspective as a product of the “new geographies of education” (p. 332), one that revives Lefebvre’s critical analysis of the “nexus of in and out conduits” (1991, p. 93) that condition the production of social space. By tracing the influence and evolution of sociocultural perspectives of learning, Leander *et al.* (2010) argue that today, “processes of thinking and learning [are] not contained within individual minds, but rather distributed across persons, tools, and learning environments” (p. 330). This shift towards thinking in terms “learning across contexts”, is echoed in Vadeboncoeur, Hady-Rachid and Moghtader (2013), who advocate

against equating education and schooling, instead noting that education occurs in and out of schools, and that school and non-school contexts are neither homogeneous nor opposites in a binary. (p. 341)

We find that a mobile approach to learning deconstructs what Leander et al. (2010) identify as the “classroom-as-container” discourse (p. 329). It allows us to shift from focusing on learning as a result to considering it as a series of emergent processes – reconfiguring educational research as an “investigation of (re)assemblages” (Landri & Neumann, 2013, p. 5).

A mobilities perspective does not set out to privilege movement, acting instead as a descriptive framework that allows scholars to track “the power of discourses and practices of mobility in creating effects of both movement and stasis, and uneven distribution of network capital” (Sheller, 2011, p. 3). Of particular interest to this project is Cresswell’s (2012) work on the politics of mobilities:

By politics I mean social relations that involve the production and distribution of power. By a politics of mobility I mean the ways in which mobilities are both productive of such social relations and produced by them. Social relations... include relations between classes, genders, ethnicities, nationalities and religious groups... Mobility, as with other geographical phenomena, lies at the heart of all of these. (p. 162)

Following Cresswell’s analysis, we may ask to what extent disaffection is itself a form of mobility, performed as a veritable pushing-out of young people from formal education. If that is the case, approaching learning from a mobilities perspective invites us to think about how young people are navigating between sites of learning, and what effects of movement and stasis are in play.

Developing a participatory ethnography

The national project was developed around a participatory ethnography, where 11 university researchers researched *with* young people, in an effort to study learning in and outside school (Sharpe, Beethan, & de Freitas, 2010; Hernández, 2011; Heath, Brooks, Cleaver, & Ireland, 2009). Through collaboration, we sought a type of en-

agement where “students whose voices may have been silenced or devalued within traditional schooling systems can be heard” (Bland & Atweh, 2007, p. 339). As the young people became more articulate throughout the project, we were able to move past an adult-centred mode of understanding and discuss how their social worlds are moulded and influenced by learning practices.

The research was carried out in five different secondary schools in the metropolitan area of Barcelona. In each school, two members of our research team worked with between 4–11 students in their last year of compulsory education (aged 15–16 years old). Schools either selected students to participate or recruited volunteers, but in each group youth members represented students who both did and did not meet school expectations. Three schools formally recognised student participation and allowed it to take the place of, or contribute to, the research project students are required to complete.² One school informally recognised student participation, but did not grade the results, and one school invited students to participate in the project as an extracurricular activity. In each case, the presence of the teacher and the degree of control the school maintained over the project was different. In three of the five groups, a teacher participated directly in the process and formed part of the core research group, while in two schools the teachers’ presence was more perfunctory, following the project’s progress through informal meetings with the university researchers.

Over the course of an academic year, the youth participants learned to interview their peers, perform observations in and outside school, take field notes, analyse and theme field journals, write a research report, and develop presentations through which they could share their results. Each group presented these results in their respective schools and in a final assembly at the university that brought all the participants together. During the fieldwork, the greatest obstacle was our struggle to maintain an approach to inquiry that was open-ended and exploratory, rather than proscriptive. This position was unsettling for some of the young people who sought clear guidelines; however, as the project progressed the participants gained a critical distance from their identities as students and become more confident as participant observers within the research framework.

Navigating learning mobilities

Not only was learning to research together a challenge, but the notion of learning practices was also a foreign concept. During the collaborative project we worked towards the topic of learning in and outside school while developing a new repertoire of ideas and concepts that allowed us to think critically about learning and its impli-

2 This project is defined in regional curriculum guidelines as “a series of activities of discovery by the pupils regarding a subject chosen and marked out, partly by themselves, with the guidance of the teaching staff” (Department of Education, 2010, p. 251. Authors’ translation.). Effectively, the university team wanted a selection of students from each school to earn their research credit by participating in the project. We hoped that linking the project with the curriculum would provide a strong incentive for the young people, as well as make more resources available to them (namely, in the form of time and space during school hours).

cations. To a certain extent, our move towards mobilities is a result of the non-linear progress we made in our group ethnographies. A mobilities perspective focuses on how learning emerges in an assemblage – a network of relations, sites and practices – which is coherent with the research experience. By adopting this approach, we are interested in considering learning as an *actant* (Latour, 1992) rather than an outcome.³ To this end, the following section introduces four mobilities, using them as framing devices to study how the young people’s contributions expound on issues related to learning in and outside school.⁴

Multi-directional relationships. Learning activities that take place on-line, beyond school walls, are characterized by horizontal (peer-to-peer) pedagogical relationships. The literature on this new culture of learning provided an important starting point when designing the national project (see Thomas & Seely Brown, 2011; Ito, et al., 2010; Patel Stevens, 2005; Cope & Kalantzis, 2000) and the young people confirmed, in many instances, their experiences related to “connected learning” (Ito, et al., 2013).

One youth participant, Yassine, stands out in this regard. In many ways he resisted the academic demands of formal education, claiming that some of the school subjects were not interesting or relevant to him, and reported on feeling uninvolved in his classes. However, he was highly engaged when working on topics he considered to be significant for his own life, and he spent a lot of his free time improving his skills in video production and photography.

Yassine (Els Alfacs): I have friends on the Internet who know how to make videos. We share fields – because to apply an effect you need money – and so we share fields, sometimes. ... They show me their videos, I show them mine. They tell me what I should improve and I tell them what they should improve. Also, I end up helping out my classmates, because sometimes they have to do a project but don’t know how.

I also take photographs. I’ve taken an online course on Photoshop, to learn more. I’m really interested in computers, especially how to fix them and how to problem solve when they’re not working. I’m pretty good at it. I started doing this after watching some videos about it on YouTube, and learning from other people, and I think I’ll keep doing it so I get better at it.

The meaningful learning experiences that Yassine identifies lead him to build a relational network, using sources from the Internet, advice from forums, and the help of a few of his teachers. What is interesting in Yassine’s case is that his high level of engagement outside school does not replace his affiliation with school, leading to a greater sense of disaffection. Instead, his independently acquired skill base provides a path for staying connected with the school community. By positioning himself as the resident expert in technical matters, Yassine was frequently called upon to help both students and teachers on projects, or by troubleshooting technical problems.

Many young people in the project questioned the authoritarian roles implied by the teacher-student relationship, and Yassine is no exception. However, a mobilities

3 *Actant* is a term from Actor Network Theory that refers to “entities that do things” (Latour, 1992, p. 241) or that bring about action.

4 All project participants were given the option of using their own name or a pseudonym and the names cited in the text reflect each student’s decision, we also include the school the participant attended at to avoid confusion when names repeat. The young people’s contributions are citations of either oral statements that were recorded during the project sessions or written contributions made by the students over the course of the project. These statements have been translated from their original version in either Catalan or Spanish.

perspective encourages us to pay attention to the multi-directional character of the pedagogical relationship. We can observe that by developing his competencies with computers and digital media Yassine creates a different space for himself in school, one that allows him to participate in the school community not only as a student, but also as a teacher or collaborator.

While not all the students involved in this project were highly engaged in a learning community outside of school, the idea that the role of ‘student’ is not the only way to understand their relationship to learning was an important point for most youth participants. The young people highlighted their acute interest in cultivating learning experiences where they are not only students, but also experts and teachers; where the pedagogical relationship is not unidirectional but allows for different modes of participation.

Conduits. As we have seen, networks are a central structure within the mobilities paradigm, representing the social space of a connected, mobile society. Within networks the default mobility is “flow” (Castells, 1996/2010), which is frequently, and incorrectly, conflated with movement liberated from the confines of ideological space. Flow is better understood as the state wherein sites and subjects are constantly on the move, even when that movement is directed or forced. Cresswell (2012) reminds us that:

mobility is ‘channelled’ into acceptable conduits. Smooth space is a field without conduits or channels. Producing order and predictability is not simply a matter of fixing in space but of channelling motion – of producing correct mobilities through the designation of routes. (p. 165)

Schooling is a so-called ‘correct mobility’ for youth learning, and provides a template for how young people should progress. It is common to link the project of education to the concept of ‘upward’ mobility, and it can be a gateway for improving young people’s social opportunities.

One participant’s experience was particularly emblematic for thinking about the modality of flow and the processes of channelling. Before we met him, teachers identified Joan as at risk for school disaffection and during the project he frequently commented on his struggle to meet school expectations. He disliked being at school and did not identify any redeeming factors about his experience there.

Joan (La Mallola): It’s like we’re locked up in here [in school]. It’s like a prison. When I leave here, I go home, eat lunch, and then get out of the house. I’m always just, you know, out. Then I won’t go home until 9:00 pm.

As the project developed, Joan represented himself as someone who spends all his time on the street – which he associates with independence and leisure, and perhaps community – while continuing to criticize the disciplinary tactics of the school. This criticism stands out because Joan so clearly articulates a space that is alternative to the school, one that resists the conduit of classes and formal assessment. In fact, as the project advanced and became more technical, we observed that Joan was a master at cultivating smooth spaces – by tuning out, looking at his cell phone or starting conversations, he successfully redirected the flow of the group.

The group working at the school Els Alfacs also considered the conduits supported by the school when the young people took an interest in the tracking system that was in place. In their final report, the students concluded that:

It would be better if schools erased the rule about organizing students by level, because the groups who get better grades advance, while those who are at a lower level get stuck and fall further behind than they already were.

The observation by the students from Els Alfacs illustrates how the channelling that takes place in school is not the same for every student; schools facilitate certain mobilities inside their walls, while also introducing obstacles. Coupled with Joan's description, we are reminded that the act of learning inside school is not just one thing that we can compare to out of school learning. Rather, it is an umbrella concept containing diverse experiences.

Cresswell's emphasis on *acceptable conduits* confirms the idea that no mobility is carried out in an ideologically void space. With the examples given here, we see that disaffection is a complex mobility – the result of getting both pushed and pulled in a different direction. By paying attention to the directionality of mobilities, it is our aim to better understand the negotiations that young people engage in while learning across contexts and become more aware of the contradictory currents that young people are attempting to navigate.

Border crossings. This inquiry began with the assumption that there is a difference between learning inside and learning outside school. However, the young people did not take this division for granted and the separation became increasingly problematic as the project progressed. In the group working at the school La Mallola, when we asked students where they wanted to carry out their observations on learning outside school, there was confusion about what that meant.

Rachel (university researcher): So, let's go over where you're going to do the outside observations.

Jordi: Outside... So, like, outside of class? In the hallway?

Adrià (laughing): No! Outside, like in the street...

Xavi (university researcher): It could be anywhere you associate with learning that's outside school.

Adrià: Yeah, maybe at practice, or with friends, or while you're at home...

Rachel: Laura, you were thinking about writing about the dance?

Laura: Yeah but... what is that? Is it in or out?

[The dance was a choreography that Laura and her friends were organizing on their own time, to be performed at a school assembly.]

Roser: It's in AND out!

Everyone laughs.

While Jordi and Laura's questions are met with amusement, Roser's concession that an experience can be at once in *and* out reveals an unresolved tension regarding the term *inside school*. We see in this conversation that the term inside refers to both the concept of formal learning and the physical site of the school. Laura's question pro-

vides an example of an instance when informal learning takes place *in* school, while still remaining outside the curriculum. Jordi senses this ambiguity, and implicit in his question is the acknowledgement that surely what goes on in the hallway is different than what goes on in the classroom. Jordi's peers laugh at his suggestion that the hallway would count as "outside," reinforcing the idea that "inside" clearly refers to a physical location. However, the slippage regarding the definition of inside occurs in other groups, and it is not as straightforward as it appears.

Sonia (El Palau): We learn a lot of things at school, but I think they could teach us more about stuff that isn't strictly academic. . . . We also learn from our classmates, from the relationships we have with our friends and with adults, even if some of the teachers are more distant than others.

Sonia registers a complaint about the relevance of the school curriculum and in the same paragraph of her narrative, recognizes that other types of learning take place at school (in this case, the development of interpersonal relationships). Once again the school is recognized as a social space and a curricular space, both of which entail learning.

Conversations about *where* learning takes place often overlapped with discussions about *what* is being taught in schools. At Els Alfacs, for example, the students were critical of how little control they had over what they were required to learn. In their final report they write:

We think that often the school spends too much time on certain topics or ideas, which we will never put into practice. This is likely why most adolescents believe that secondary school is a waste of time, because it doesn't explain things that they think are useful for the future. For this reason, we think an improvement could be made to give young people more choice in their academic experience.

We find that when given the opportunity to discuss the topic of learning, there was a strong tendency on behalf of the young people to critique the curriculum. Behind this critique we discover a deeply internalized association of learning with schooling. In an early conversation at La Mallola, for example, it became clear that some of the young people understood learning as something that takes place in the classroom:

Laura (looking at a graphic): Over here, listening and looking appear in. But you also look and listen outside.

Joan: Sure, but you don't learn!

Laura: Of course you do, maybe even more than inside! Outside you learn things you actually need, you know, from life experience.

Joan: Yeah, I guess...

While Laura expresses a different opinion, Joan's outburst indicates how closely tied together learning and school are in his mind.

Working to overcome this assumption, and in an effort to move past merely critiquing the schools, the research team encouraged the young people to think about how the in and out are related. As we have discussed elsewhere (Hernández-Hernández, Fendler, & Sancho, 2014), we were able to refocus the inquiry by introducing a mobilities perspective. We asked: *What inside learning travels outside and what learning from the outside travels in?*

The first part of the question is fairly easy for the young people to answer, and they easily provided examples of how school contributes to their basic competencies (math, literacy), professional competencies, and their ability to relate to the world:

Els Alfacs (report written by all students): Some things we learn in school are useful for our day-to-day lives, like knowing math, or understanding our history so that we can be careful not to repeat the same mistakes today or in the future. Also, learning about different cultures and being able to understand people from different places and communicate with them.

Roser (La Mallola): Well for a lot of careers, you need a degree. If you want to do something specific, and go to university, it's important to stay in school and keep studying.

Nestor (Ribera Baixa): Sometimes when I'm watching the news, they'll be talking about something that relates to what I've studied before, or that I am studying. And so sometimes I am able to better understand what they're talking about because of it.

The second part of the question proved harder to answer. Rather than focus on what outside learning travels into the school, the young people were more likely to discuss how and where they engaged in learning, on their own time.

Sergio (El Palau): School teaches us a lot of interesting things but outside you can learn different things. At school, maybe you take Physics but on the street you get more day-to-day knowledge... Older people know a lot about history and they have a lot of stories. My father's restaurant is a great source of information. My Dad says it's tiring when everyone is always telling stories about when they were in the military, or what things were like when they were younger, but I really like hearing about it.

The young people spoke and wrote about their involvement in sports and music, their foreign language classes, and the time spent on hobbies like drawing or photography. We learned that some of them travelled, some of them cooked and took care of siblings, and all of them are dedicated friends. We observed that when the young people described how they learn outside school, they constructed narratives about who they are and what is important to them.

Laura (La Mallola): People are all doing the same things inside, while outside, everyone makes an effort with things they like to do, which are probably completely different. So, you can tell who a person really is outside, instead of inside.

The young people's contributions on learning outside school and their reflections on how learning contributes to their lives have the effect of establishing a spatial hierarchy, where *in* is a subset of *out*. This is evidenced by how easy it was for young people to identify how school contributes to their life (i.e., "outside"), while thinking in reverse was more difficult, illogical even. In this manner, over the course of the project the discussion around what goes in or out (and what doesn't) reveals an unexpected characteristic of school boundaries. We observed that they are not uniformly constructed; it is easier to go out than it is to get in.

Displacements. When we invited young people to occupy the role of researchers rather than students, we initiated a process of inquiry into the role learning plays in their lives. Over the course of the project, the young people identified how they learn, how learning changes when it passes from inside to outside school, and how their perspective has changed after having reflected on their identity as learners. These changes are the result of a displacement, as the young people gained distance – in the form of a critical perspective – from their own situation as students.

Many observations explored the relationship between personal interests and learning, as well as how information is transmitted and absorbed.

Sara (Ribera Baixa): I learn more the more I'm interested in something. And when someone says, "explain this to me," as if we were just talking or conversing about it, with less formality, than it's easier to feel like I get it, I understand.

Within this discussion, the term "effort" became a key concept, as it allowed the young people to think about both the sacrifice and the reward that are part of the learning process.

Adrià (La Mallola): When talking about learning we used the term effort. It's kind of abstract. We weren't able to measure it or have physical proof, but we were able to reach certain conclusions.

Effort is relative, and depends on where you are and what you're doing. It's not the same to make an effort doing something that you love, as it is to force yourself to do something that you don't enjoy at all. Something can seem to take forever and be really annoying, while sometimes you won't even notice the time passing.

But, well, effort is always rewarded. Even if you just try, it's a process. You can see where you went wrong and go back and try again.

Regarding the relationship between in and outside school, we found that this was initially addressed through a broad criticism of the formal curriculum. As our project evolved we succeeded in moving past the complaints and gained a better understanding of the relationship between learning and schooling.

Jordi (Virolai): When I think about communication in and outside school, I see a contradiction. Inside I can't use my mobile phone, and outside I use it everywhere. In school I can't access any social networks, like Facebook or Twitter, and outside I can. Inside school we aren't really in contact with what is taking place in the world around us because our access is restricted, but when I'm at home I feel like I can be connected to everything.

Jordi points out a contradictory outcome of the school curriculum when it results in a restriction of the access young people have to information (in this case materialized through the use of firewalls built into the school Wi-Fi networks).⁵ Adding to the contradiction, while the young people protest these limitations, they unanimously admit that when they do have access, they abuse it: "computers are a distraction, we pay less attention and are therefore less productive" (Roser, La Mallola). Faced with these paradoxes, some students interrogated to what extent the school actually encourages young people to take responsibility for their own learning.

Els Alfacs (report written by all students): It's said that young people don't have initiative. However, everything in school is so organized, and because everything is pre-planned, adolescents don't take the initiative to learn or discover something for themselves. That is what is different outside, where we have more initiative because everything is just out there, and once you learn something yourself, you become more motivated to gain new knowledge.

A not insignificant outcome of this research project was creating a disruption in the regular school day. The students who missed class or stayed after school to participate in the project weren't just following a syllabus, but developing a research project. In light of this last comment by the Els Alfacs team, we would argue that this

5 The use of firewalls was common practice in most participating schools, not only Virolai.

interruption – or displacement – is as much a “result” of the project as the accumulated observations shared by the young people. Brown (1997) has commented on the inexperience students have in thinking about learning, observing that this can limit young people’s awareness of the learning practices available to them:

[children] had little insight into their own ability to learn intentionally; they lacked reflection. Children do not use a whole variety of learning strategies because they do not know much about the art of learning. (p. 400)

When youth participated in the project as researchers, documenting and reporting on their own experiences, they expanded their repertoire of learning strategies.

Activating collective imaginaries

The young people’s participation in this study provides a portrait of when and where they identify as learners (which is distinct from their role as students). The identity work that took place over the course of the project reflects the extent to which the research design is also an ethical stance. Smyth (2006) advocates that young people need to have agency before they can begin to repair their disaffection and disinterest in school; incorporating students as researchers is one way of allowing this agency to develop.

The youth perspectives in this project contribute to a diversification rather than a categorization of what youth learning looks like. They changed how we understand the relationship between in and outside school and inspired us to abandon the notion that disaffection is the failure of a particular individual or institution. By turning to a mobilities perspective, we position the learner as a figure embedded in an assemblage of interrelations (i.e. a nexus of in and out conduits), a vision that supports an imaginary of learning across contexts.

Bereiter (2002) argues that:

to draw politicians and business people away from their fixation on achievement test gains one must offer them the vision of a superior kind of *outcome*. The failure to do that is, I believe, the most profound failure of educational thought in our epoch. (p. 490. Emphasis is original.).

Focusing on the relationships, transitions, boundary crossings or displacements that young learners currently navigate, we use the mobilities paradigm to develop a *different kind of outcome* in our research into learning practices. We locate in the layered and polyphonic representations of learning a way to challenge the homogenization and standardization found in certain paradigms of traditional education and in doing so, seek to contribute to more inclusive learning practices.

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