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Article

Meditative inquiry for educators: Understanding the significance of spirituality, contextual and cultural awareness, and organic change

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Abstract

This conversational paper explores the concept and practice of meditative inquiry in the context of teacher education. Meditative inquiry is a holistic approach to teaching, learning, researching, creating, and living. Due to its strength and versatility, meditative inquiry has been taken up in a variety of educational settings (Kumar, 2022). By employing dialogical meditative inquiry (Kumar & Downey, 2018), which aims to delve deeper than a typical interview, the authors engage in a dialogue that probes into the significance of meditative inquiry for educators. Leaning into the authors' experiences with secondary social studies and teacher education, this paper: 1) discusses philosophical and pedagogical aspects of mediative inquiry by examining the differences and similarities between critical reflection and meditative inquiry; 2) explores the significance of a spiritual perspective for social studies education; and 3) offer pointers on how teachers can adopt meditative inquiry in the context of classroom teaching.

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Introduction

In this conversational paper, I, Ashwani Kumar, and James (Jamie) Caron explore my experiences of engaging in a holistic approach to teaching and learning called meditative inquiry in the teacher education context (Kumar, 2022). The core purpose of meditative inquiry as a pedagogical approach is to learn to observe one's own mind, body, and emotions with more depth and to experiment with creativity, meditation, and reflective and relaxation exercises in the context of the higher education classroom (Kumar & Acharya, 2021; Kumar & Downey, 2018). We believe that incorporating an integrated and holistic approach to teaching and learning through meditative inquiry – with its focus on happy and healthy students and educators (Kumar et al., 2023) – can promote creativity, peace, holistic health and happiness, community connection, and introspective learning in our classrooms and society at large.

This paper uses a dialogical meditative inquiry (DMI) approach that has been shared and described in my previous works (Kumar & Downey, 2018, 2019; Kumar & Fisher, 2021). While the DMI perspective is same in this paper is similar to the previously published works, fresh insights emerge organically due to the spontaneous nature of the method itself. Jamie asked

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me some prepared questions, and others emerged spontaneously during our conversation. Some key questions that we explore in this paper include: Why is a meditative inquiry approach beneficial for social studies teachers, and how can it be adopted in their classrooms? How are critical reflection and meditative inquiry analogous, and what makes them distinct? Why is self-observation valuable in teaching and living? Given the increasing reliance on digital technologies globally, what role can meditative inquiry play in teaching, learning, and living?

In the next section, Jamie sets the context by introducing himself, describing his experiences engaging in meditative inquiry, and discussing his understanding of its significance for teaching and learning. This is followed by the conversation between me and Jamie. This paper ends with concluding remarks by Jamie and me on the value and significance of meditative inquiry for educators.

Setting the Stage for the Conversation

In 2015, I, Jamie Caron, returned to study in a Bachelor of Education (B.Ed.) program at Mount Saint Vincent University (MSVU). This transition occurred after graduating with a business degree and working in sales for approximately six years, during my first semester in the B.ED. Program, I enrolled in Dr. Ashwani Kumar's course titled *Curriculum Practices in Secondary Social Studies*. This course still stands out in my memories of studying in post-secondary. The course content offered contemporary social studies and geography curricula that were not unusual; however, his unique pedagogical approach provided me with distinctive experiences that created lasting memories. He gave significantly less structure in his instructions for projects and assignments than the other university courses I had taken. Instead, he encouraged us to be unique, creative, and independent; this was my first encounter with holistic pedagogy (Miller, 2019; Miller et al., 2018).

That semester, Dr. Kumar assigned a portfolio project where we developed several geography lesson plans based on a theme of our choosing. He provided us with questions to guide our work; the assignment was designed to allow students their choice of structure, format, and length. I chose the topic of Western-themed films for my portfolio. Doing this project encouraged me to think creatively, as it was my first time developing lesson plans. I was, therefore, creating something new and was being challenged to develop a project that was uniquely mine rather than reproducing what I have seen others do or completing a template that someone else created. The portfolio project was also a reflective activity insofar as I thought deeply about what interested me as a social studies learner, I considered how to develop engaging lessons, and I considered how I could encourage students to be creative, engaged, and learn curriculum outcomes. At the time, I could not communicate how or why this was transformative (Mezirow, 1997), but in retrospect, this was the first opportunity I had been given as an adult learner to explore myself and my interests imaginatively and freely.

Another important aspect of Dr. Kumar's course that impacted my learning was the dialogical nature of his classroom. My peers and I were frequently prompted to share our thoughts, opinions, and reactions to readings, guest speakers, videos, and one another's work. The dialogue was constructive and engaging, as folks were expected to participate equally and learn to share and receive feedback. Relatedly, we were asked to form a group of four and to develop a geography lesson plan, then deliver that lesson to our colleagues. After we taught the lesson, our classmates gave us oral feedback, and we had opportunities to respond to them.

The first time participating in this type of dialogical feedback was uncomfortable; however, the more I practiced, the more natural it felt. Engaging with one another in this way also fostered a community in the classroom in a way that most other courses I have taken did not.

The meditative inquiry approach has helped inform my pedagogy even before I engaged with it on a deeper and more theoretical level. The above reflection of my experience in Dr. Kumar's social studies B.Ed. The course describes how I developed an understanding of how to teach social studies curricula, how to conceptualize lesson plans, how to work with others, how to reflect, how to center myself in the learning process to engage in personal growth, and how to integrate dialogue in my teaching. Above all, this was the first time I was allowed to explore myself and my interests, and I was asked to think creatively to complete assignments that were meaningful to me. After taking the social studies course with Dr. Kumar, I graduated with a B.Ed. Program as a licensed business and social studies teacher in Nova Scotia (Canada), I completed a master's degree in Education, and I am now pursuing a Ph.D. in Education.

In my doctoral studies, I took another course with Dr. Kumar called *Contemporary Educational Theory*. This Ph.D. seminar occurred during the COVID-19 pandemic and was held synchronously via video-conferencing technology. Even though we were not physically in the same room, we practiced different centering activities at the beginning of each class. Some examples that stood out to me were sitting in silence, standing and stretching, and free writing about our feelings and fears. Dr. Kumar's attention to the holistic improvement of his students was obvious, and it drew me to mediative inquiry. For instance, students were asked to engage in a creativity and relaxation assignment that lasted the entire semester. For my relaxation assignment, I chose to engage in meditative exercising, and even though I already exercised regularly, I approached it from a new perspective with the goal of increasing relaxation and creativity. This has been an important discovery in my scholarship and my life. Breaking the unconscious cyclical routine of sitting in front of a screen for hours to engage in holistic physical activities has been one of the more beneficial tools that I have integrated into my life. As I have written about this elsewhere (see Kumar et al., 2023), I believe this has helped me become a happier and healthier version of myself. Having experienced the benefits of engaging in relaxation as a learner, I have since incorporated relaxation activities into my teaching in higher education as a sessional instructor. The feedback I have received from students in a B.Ed. The course has been overwhelmingly positive. Many students initially voiced their concerns about a relaxation assignment since they wanted to know how that assignment would help them become better teachers. Of all the assignments in that course, it received the most questions. By the end of the semester, many of those same students shared their positive feedback with me as they felt that they rarely had an opportunity to work on assignments that focused on their well-being. They, too, found it beneficial and applicable to their day-to-day lives as well as helpful in managing the stresses of studying.

In Dr. Kumar's doctoral course, my colleagues and I were also introduced to his work on meditative inquiry in a much more substantial way as we read about it and got to experience its benefits. Meditative inquiry appreciates a diversity of perspectives and open dialogue, and, therefore, Dr. Kumar facilitated a scholarly dialogue between the students and a diverse group of researchers (William Pinar, E. Wayne Ross, Barbara Bickel, Celeste Snowber, Huey-Li-Li, Kathleen Weiler, Liana Beatie, Peter Taubman, Rita Irwin, Lindsay Morcom, Lisa Merriweather, and others). Students read their work and were given the opportunity to have an open dialogue with them. This allowed us, as students, to explore contemporary theory on a deeper level, and it also allowed us to think more critically, as well as engage in a meditative dialogue.

I have experienced Dr. Kumar's pedagogical approach in several contexts, as I have written about here. I experimented with holistic activities in his courses, and I have observed how he and others describe meditative approaches to teaching, curricula, music, and research (Kumar, 2022; Kumar & Acharya, 2021; Kumar & Downey, 2019). I have also worked alongside him in organizing two conferences and presenting with him and two of my classmates at a graduate workshop and an online international conference. Meditative inquiry, a pedagogical approach that he conceptualized, continues to evolve as he and others explore it in research, teaching, and life. As a learner, the following thoughts describe my understanding of what meditative inquiry means to me.

Like other critical and reflective educators, I challenge my own perspectives, learned prejudices, and other socially constructed views through critical reflection (Brookfield, 2015). I have been socialized and educated in a Eurocentric and colonial structure that is underpinned by neoliberalism and capitalism, where values such as individualism and competition are emphasized (Giroux, 2014; Harvey, 2005; Smith, 2005). Exposure to meditative and holistic approaches to educating and learning through attention to reflection and holism has fundamentally changed my outlook on education and life. The goal of incorporating these approaches is to gain a deeper relational and self-understanding. This focus on understanding oneself is not, however, to satisfy neoliberal ideals of producing better goods and services (e.g., through technological innovations) but to live creative and contemplative lives. Kumar (in Kumar & Downey, 2018) says that 'understanding how the self functions in daily life, rather than its suppression or gratification, is the core of a meditative inquiry approach to education and life' (p. 62). In my view, deepening one's understanding of ourselves and our connection to the world is a core tenet of meditative inquiry.

Focusing on the self to achieve a deeper understanding and transformation or to become a better community member and global citizen are examples of thinking that is guided by inner conviction and requires intrinsic motivation. This line of thinking is not typically emphasized in neoliberal and Eurocentric education. My experience as a learner has been very much extrinsic, which is not surprising given the context in which I have grown up. In my experience, some teachers, guidance counselors, parents, and friends will advise the youth to avoid enrolling in programs that do not have a clear connection to employment. In my case, I was a high-achieving science student in high school; however, I chose to enroll in a business program at university because I was influenced by mentors to choose a path that would give me better employment opportunities. A common question that I was repeatedly asked was, 'What job can you get with a degree in X?' This motivated me to move away from what genuinely interested me most, and I pursued studies in a subject, Business Studies, that I enjoyed but was not my top choice. While I did have good experiences during my secondary studies that included teachers and instructors who appeared to sincerely care for their students, spending time working on the whole self was not emphasized in curricula since it is shaped by a colonial doctrine aimed at preparing students for working in a capitalist society (Kumar, 2019). Through a reflection of my own experiences as a learner, the attitudes and views to which I am accustomed were hegemonized by Eurocentrism. Meditative and holistic approaches to educating resist these neoliberal inclinations; they have, as Kumar and Acharya (2021) say, the potential to be the 'antidote to instrumentalism' (p.1).

Elsewhere, Dr. Kumar has said that the three principles that are central to his teaching are dialogue, freedom, and creativity (Kumar & Downey, 2018). Students who take his courses experience these elements, many of them (like me) for the first time. Meditative inquiry in teaching, to me, means incorporating methods that oppose the Eurocentric didactic, memorization, and technique-based approaches that are widely used in North America. As a pedagogical approach, it requires a philosophy that is more concerned with holistic, critical, and self-reflective education. This anti-oppressive teaching framework philosophically aligns with critical adult educators such as Freire (2012), Hooks (1994), and Battiste (2013), who argue for a balance of power between teachers and students where students feel free and safe to explore ideas. Dr. Kumar's teaching approach demonstrated and guided my learning with (a) an instructor who showed compassion for me and other students in the course, (b) a relinquishing of power in the classroom and an increased comfort level to speak and be heard, (c) a deeper engagement with myself, and (d) a holistic approach to becoming a happier and healthier version of myself. Dr. Kumar points out that systems of education are in a lot of ways built on fear (Kumar & Fisher, 2021), and to break free of the 'banking education' system that Freire (2012), Hooks (2010), and others describe is important for students to experience creativity, critical thinking, and awareness. Meditative inquiry, in my opinion, paves the way for such possibilities.

When Dr. Kumar and I discussed the possibility of engaging in a dialogue about meditative inquiry and social studies education, I felt that it was an important and timely topic as we are living in turbulent times in the wake of a global pandemic, intensifying global conflicts, and systemic social injustices that are widespread. These issues stem from global capitalism and neoliberalism, whose impacts permeate all aspects of life, including the sites where social studies educators learn to teach – higher education institutions (Caron, 2023). The meditative inquiry aims to close that gap, and my experiences of engaging in meditative approaches as a student have greatly impacted the development of my pedagogy as a teacher and my scholarship as a developing researcher. This approach also has provided me with strategies to promote a healthier lifestyle and live more holistically. Thus, a dialogue with a mentor whose scholarship finds depth in meaningful conversations contributes to my personal growth and the advancement of important pedagogical ideas for future preservice and in-service teachers and teacher-educators.

We recorded our talk using Zoom, transcribed it, and edited it slightly. As stated earlier, I have explored meditative inquiry in various ways, from reading texts, discussing it with colleagues, exploring it in writing, and reflecting; I was immersed in meditative inquiry in Dr. Kumar's courses, as well as incorporating it in my teaching. I also reviewed university evaluations of Dr. Kumar's courses related to social studies as well as the feedback sheet he asks his students to complete at the end of his courses. The dialogue presented herein allowed me to explore meditative inquiry more deeply and from the perspective of a teacher educator. This tête-à-tête was intended to be a free-flowing conversation; however, I prepared questions ahead of our scheduled meeting, but Dr. Kumar didn't see those questions as he wanted to contemplate the questions at the moment rather offer prepared answers – spontaneity is central to the dialogical meditative inquiry. The questions I prepared are the result of my personal experience and my interest in knowing more from Dr. Kumar's perspectives since he has been developing and practicing this concept for many years. The questions aim to better understand how meditative inquiry, as an exploration of oneself, differs from critical reflection and what role spirituality plays in it. For social studies teachers, I inquire into the practicality of such an

approach and how it can be integrated into a system rooted in hierarchical and reward-punishment structures. The more philosophical style questions explore Dr. Kumar's understanding of meditative inquiry as a disruptor to the neoliberal system and how preservice and in-service teachers can cope with the opposing underpinnings of the school system and incorporate more holistic, individual, and creative perspectives and practices of meditative inquiry into their teaching.

Meditative Inquiry for Educators

Caron: First, I want to take a moment to say thank you. I have thoroughly enjoyed your courses, having taken two with you now and working alongside you as your research assistant these past two years. It has greatly helped me in my development in so many ways. I have read a lot of your work, and as you are aware, I have transcribed several of your dialogues. My familiarity with and appreciation for meditative inquiry has grown over the years.

I have thought of my questions and organized them for this conversation into three broad categories. First, I want to focus on meditative inquiry conceptually, then I will ask a few practical questions about meditative inquiry and social studies education, and finally, I want to dig into your larger philosophy and how meditative inquiry is a part of that. I am interested in learning how you see meditative inquiry. It is important to share with you first how I see meditative inquiry. To me, it is an exploration of oneself to grow and change holistically. The way that I understand it is quite similar to critical reflection. There also seems to be an element of action that exists in a meditative inquiry framework. The way I have engaged in critical reflection involves note-taking in journals and deep critical thinking about prior experiences, then writing and reading to support that thinking. Although I believe that meditative inquiry has aspects of that, I think it also requires you to take some sort of action, like going for a run or meditating. Can you speak to this interpretation and the importance of action in meditative inquiry?

Kumar: This is a very important question, Jamie. Thank you for taking the time to prepare for this kind of dialogue. As we have discussed before, this is not just an interview; it is more than an interview because it demands a holistic engagement, a deeper engagement with oneself and with the subject matter. Critical reflection is a part of meditative inquiry; however, meditative inquiry's many layers empower an engagement where the deeper one wants to go, the deeper its ability to transform oneself is.

Reflection helps us be aware of our thinking, the problems that the world is facing, our relationships, or the challenges and opportunities we may be experiencing in our teaching. That is all part of the reflection, and engaging in it is important. That is also a principal component of meditative inquiry. In the process of critical thinking, one is reflecting based on certain principles or theories, or one is exploring deeply through certain assumptions (even ideological convictions). I invoke reflection in a vastly different way, in a very 'free' way. If you remember, in the doctoral seminar, in one of the classes, I asked that all of you just write down whatever you were thinking and feeling at that moment without worrying about whether it was connected to the readings or whether it was connected to a particular theoretical tradition or not. I said, 'Just write whatever is happening in your mind, whatever is happening at the moment.' Thus, here, reflection is not necessarily focused on a particular idea, and you are not critically analyzing that idea.

Meditative inquiry also requires reflecting, but in a free or meditative way, where you allow things to come out. For example, in the writing exercise I mentioned above, one allows one's thoughts, experiences, and feelings to come out on paper without judgment. I also engage students in this reflective exercise, where I ask them to write down their questions, fears, and beliefs. Often, I ask students in my courses to pick one of the points that they have noted down and go deeper into it. For example, after the free writing of thoughts and experiences, I ask students to pick one thought or feeling and explore it deeply. What is the source of this thought or feeling? Why is it important? How does it impact their daily living? Currently, I am teaching a course called *Education as Meditative Inquiry*, and students engage in these activities at the beginning of each class; then, they explore the thoughts and feelings they have noted throughout the week. They find it fascinating to explore their self and its deeper layers and structures. In this sense, reflection is a meditative process of purging or expressing what one is experiencing or feeling.

The other component of meditative inquiry is engaging in more active forms of experiences like going for walks in nature and experiencing, observing, and listening to nature. In your case, you chose running for your relaxation assignment for the doctoral seminar course. Some other folks may opt to do knitting, painting, or singing. From a meditative inquiry perspective, we engage with whatever promotes a sense of well-being and relaxation from the perspective of awareness and attention rather than doing it mechanically.

There is one more important aspect of meditative inquiry worth exploring, which is to look inwardly at your thoughts, your feelings, and your actions from a place of deep awareness. Generally, when we are engaged in the critical thinking process, we are analyzing and we are weighing the pros and cons of a particular argument. In that way, we are looking at its ideological underpinnings, biases, and inherent discriminations in a particular line of thinking. In meditative inquiry, we engage in something that takes us to a deeper place in our mind in terms of our thinking and our emotions as we act in daily life. I would like to give you an example. Picture this: you sit quietly, or you lie down quietly, and you observe what is happening in your thinking and what you are feeling. The goal here is to engage in a deeper observation. You are not analyzing thoughts or feelings; you are not categorizing them; you are not favoring some ideas and criticizing others; you do not see thoughts as good or bad; you are also not thinking, 'This is something that I want to do' or 'this is something I do not want to do.' It is a passive form of awareness but also a deep activity of looking at who you are and what is happening to you at that moment.

I think that is an important element of meditative inquiry that folks may often miss. When you are deeply looking at yourself (your thoughts and your feelings), you are not creating a division between you and the thinking and the feeling. You are not categorizing it, nor are you observing yourself as separate from it. You are, however, observing it with the deepest awareness that is possible for you at that moment. What happens in that observation is that you are simultaneously looking at the thoughts and feelings and descending to the root of them within yourself. For example, if you are experiencing anger, one way of looking at it could be to analyze it: 'I am feeling angry because of this reason,' 'I should not be feeling angry,' or 'My anger is justified.' That is the process of thinking. When you allow yourself to fully look at anger itself, then it becomes a meditative process where you are observing anger deeply and entering its roots meditatively.

This deep observation is important since it stops creating a division between you and the anger. It is not that you try to control anger, analyze anger, or get away from anger. Rather, you are truly looking at it, which allows you to see the source from where it is coming, and it connects you with the source in the sense that it does not create a division between the observation and thoughts and feelings being observed. In other words, there is no dissipation of energy, no fighting, no struggle with it; the anger just dissolves on its own, and it gives you a deeper understanding of where it is coming from.

Caron: Your response made me think that maybe I have not been viewing meditative inquiry as a deep reflection. Your response has helped me think about the usefulness of this process. One component of that is the idea of 'spirituality.' Before I took your doctoral seminar, I viewed spirituality and religion as being the same. Since you have written about the difference between religion and spirituality before (Kumar & Downey, 2019), we do not need to elaborate on that here, but I just wonder, from that same kind of frame, how do you explain spirituality to preservice teachers? Ultimately, they are going out there, and they are going to be teaching social studies or any other subject. How is it important to them as teachers and in their lessons to know about spirituality?

Kumar: That is another great question, Jamie. There are so many things built into it, so let us explore it. To me, teaching, learning, and living are not separate things. These are not independent things, as I have explored in my writing previously (Kumar & Downey, 2018, 2019; Kumar, 2022). I look at life holistically, and teaching, learning, and living are all part of one another. To me, the most important thing in life is to live well or to live holistically. That means that we take care of our bodies, our minds, our emotions, and our entire being (Kumar et al., 2023).

I think spirituality is central to meditative inquiry. The way I look at spirituality is consistent with living well and living holistically. That means that we pay attention to our bodies, our minds, our hearts, and our creative spirit. Looking at spirituality in this way releases it from the rigid structures of organized religions. When I am teaching pre-service and in-service teachers, the focus is to prioritize this sense of well-being within oneself and to develop that in students as central to teaching and learning. So, to me, teaching well, and learning well, teaching deeply, and learning deeply are also connected to living deeply or living a life of awareness, living a life of holistic being rather than being driven completely by curriculum outcomes or standardized testing, and all the measurement, quantification, and the comparison that comes with it.

To me, spirituality is living your life holistically, and I believe it is crucial for teachers, students, and every human being. That could be one of the goals of social studies education in particular and education in general. Social studies education should not only be about studying subject matters related to society or analyzing it. Those are important, but a key goal of social studies could also be about living well and living well with each other. After all, social studies is concerned with society. How can we create a harmonious, whole, healthy, and creative society if we do not have whole, harmonious, and creative individuals? So, as I have also highlighted in my previous writings (Kumar, 2013), spirituality can be of central importance to education, where we are concerned with the holistic well-being of the individual and society.

Caron: Thank you. I found the discussion on spirituality and its role in social studies helpful. I am interested in the practical nature of how you talk about meditative inquiry to teachers. I think if you look at any of the feedback that you get from your students, a lot of times, they will say that they were worried at first about your approach, and then as they progress through the course, they seem to feel better about it. My question is about how meditative inquiry discourages focusing on memorization and concerning oneself with only the techniques and strategies. Even after your explanation, I am left thinking that a lot of students will still wonder how to incorporate meditative inquiry into their classroom.

Kumar: Well, I have shared some course evaluations and student feedback with you, and you have also read a bunch of my other writings, which has led to this dialogue. I think what happens is, and I think we were discussing it the other day, due to colonialism and imperialism, the Western ways of thinking, learning, and researching have become predominant throughout the world. Western education, which has now spread globally, has acquired the tendency to emphasize the standardization of curriculum and teaching, and it undermines the significance of local contexts and cultures.

Another issue is the obsession with measuring learning in ways that can be quantified and compared. For instance, PISA tests are widely used. This, along with many other examples of standardized testing that occur throughout the world, aims to rank countries. In the UK, there are 'league tables' where schools are compared. In North America, we compare schools, and in the United States, the hiring and firing of teachers is often dependent on the performance of the school and the teachers on standardized tests (Ross & Gibson, 2007). Furthermore, there is a lot of school funding that is also dependent on that type of evaluation.

We standardize everything, we measure everything, and we quantify and compare. In this process, we are forcing students and teachers to think in ways that are standardized and prescribed through curriculum, which is a product of administrative and political control. This controlled and top-down approach to curriculum takes away the creative freedom of the mind. This approach undermines thinking independently and creatively and doing the work that one is passionate about. Under the pressure of neoliberal standardization, teachers are unable to teach what they are passionate about, and hardly anybody ever asks students about what they want the curriculum to be or what they want to study. When that happens, the possibility of the emergence of creative intelligence is destroyed, which can only flower when there is creative freedom. When there is the possibility of autonomous thinking, working on the projects that you are inspired about and going deeper into them, then creative intelligence flourishes. When students who are pre-service or in-service teachers come to my class (and which you were at one point), many experience a minor shock because of my meditative inquiry approach that questions the established ways of teaching and learning.

In the meditative inquiry approach, the emphasis on freedom, creativity, and dialogue is central. Freedom does not mean that you can do whatever you want to do, but having the freedom to think, to choose your assignments, to choose your readings, and to choose your projects. I give freedom to a great extent, but I also provide flexible structures and guidelines. Often, students ask me how many pages their written assignments should be, and I say, 'You are going to be a teacher; why don't you decide how many pages you would need to complete your project?'. This enables students in my classes to think about what kind of structure of a lesson plan that they want us to use. My students have experienced so many lesson plans in their lives, so consciously or subconsciously, they know what the key elements of a good lesson plan are. I ask them to have a clear purpose for their lesson plans, choose engaging and

interactive activities that they want to do with their students and choose the structure and format for their lesson plans and other assignments. In many of the classes, I also ask students to write reflections, and often they ask questions such as 'how many pages should we write?' I say to them, 'It is your reflection; you decide how long you would like to write a reflection. As long as you can convey to me in your reflection that you have engaged with the subject matter to the best of your ability, I am happy — the length and format are not a problem. This is what I mean by freedom. I allow my students the freedom to choose what they want to do, how they want to do it, and how they want to present it. As you mentioned above when you were in the B.Ed. social studies class, I assigned a portfolio assignment. Students could choose any topic and connect it to geography. Now I ask students to develop portfolios related to anything where they explore a social studies topic in an interdisciplinary manner. Again, the first questions that students have are 'Okay, how many pages? What is going to be the structure? And how should it look'? Inevitably, I respond, 'You must choose it on your own. It is your portfolio; you are choosing the theme. Here are some guidelines and structures that I would like you to think about when developing your portfolio, but you have the full creative and academic freedom to develop it the way you want it.'

In the beginning, this approach tends to cause a lot of anxiety and fear in the classroom. Some of the students think that I do not know what I am doing. You may have seen in some of the course evaluations that students were anxious because nobody gave them that level of freedom on assignments before. In the current system, teachers often tell you what you need to do, and you just do it and meet the requirements. In my courses, I say 'No, you must figure it out yourself. I will of course work with you in figuring it out, but the whole process needs to be driven by you'. I do not give them a universal format that everybody will adopt since I want each of the assignments to look completely different from the others. It is completely shocking to them because they have become accustomed to uniformity. I am teaching a secondary social studies course right now (winter 2024). These students completed another social studies course in the fall of 2023. I asked these students to develop social studies lesson plans on various themes like historical thinking, geographical thinking, and diversity and inclusion, among others. Like my other courses, I asked them to choose their own format for developing the lesson plan. To my surprise each of them adopted the same format – this format was given to them by their instructor in the previous term. Often, I teach this course in the fall so I don't need to face this challenge. Students get anxious but they do experiment and develop their own structures and format. It is hard to teach something new when you have already been conditioned to do things in a certain way. My approach naturally tends to shock the brain because the brain is used to following a linear structure step by step where one must satisfy the expectations of the teachers. Here, the expectation still exists, but it is distinct. It is not the teacher's expectations that are of primary importance; students create their own expectations, and they work accordingly. There is a little chaos and anxiety in the beginning, but then I have a lot of deep discussions with them where I emphasize the importance of freedom, creativity, autonomy, and independence, and slowly they begin to see that I am primarily interested in their growth and development rather than imposing my views on them.

Typically, near the middle of the course, they begin to see one another's work and they see that everybody is doing it differently. Everybody is bringing their passion and understanding to the project and the course. Everybody is choosing their topics to work on. So, in the middle there is stability, there is trust, and there is acceptance of this method of meditative inquiry.

By the end in most of the courses I teach, there is a big celebration because the students have gone through a process in which they have reclaimed their freedom to think and to create their work. I discuss the significance of gaining their freedom since they are going to be teachers. I say to them, 'If you don't claim this sense of being a creative teacher, a free teacher, then, how are you going to inculcate these qualities in your students? You can only allow a classroom to be student-centred and deeply engaging when you've experienced that yourself and when you see the value in it yourself. If you don't see it, you will resort to either the lecture method or whatever method your administrator wants you to adopt, or whatever is in currency in your school board at that particular time. If you have regained your way of teaching, your way of learning, your way of developing your material to teach, then you are going to provide the same atmosphere to your students. Once they have that kind of atmosphere, their learning will be as deep as it is yours in this class.' When we near the end of the course, they appreciate the meditative inquiry because by then they have experienced it fully.

Caron: That was my experience as well. I will be honest, and I think I have said this to you before, but that first month of my B.Ed. It almost felt like chaos in my brain because, in your course, I felt that I just wanted someone to tell me how to do the assignment or tell me how to write a reflection. I think I share the experience that a lot of your students have mentioned. The question I was thinking about when you were talking just now comes from when you said that there is a certain way that an administrator wants you to teach, for example, and it likely will not align with a meditative inquiry approach. Based on that, I wonder what your thoughts are around this idea of giving students the freedom of creativity and what is almost an unstructured learning environment (I know there is structure to it, but it feels unstructured at times as the learner), and demonstrating an approach to a new teacher who will be going into a disciplined and structured school system, where they have evaluators at every step of the way, who may not see the benefits of meditative inquiry. How do you tell your students the way they can navigate the unstructured versus structured dichotomy?

Kumar: I do want to talk a little bit about the terms 'unstructured' and 'structured.' I think there should not be one structure or a one-size-fits-all structure. For instance, even when we are having a conversation, there is structure to it. You and I have some expectations of how it should go. In this structure, however, we also have the possibility of freedom and free exploration. Right now, for example, you are experiencing that as we are talking. We have a structure, and even when we paused for a moment[2] when I felt that you were more focused on taking notes while I wanted us to listen and engage with our whole being with full attention, we discussed that there is a structure, but there is also a space for freedom.

I am not against structure, but the one-size-fits-all structures imposed upon you by somebody else are problematic because they force your brain to conform and follow a particular pattern. When you are doing that, you are doing that to satisfy others rather than something that will deeply transform you or something that you are passionate about. I wanted to clarify this

[2] This footnote was added by Jamie: Our dialogue was paused momentarily. As it was my first time engaging in this type of conversation, I began to revert back to what was more comfortable for me: I was taking notes and paying close attention to my prepared questions like an interview guide. Ashwani recognized this and chose to pause the dialogue and explained the significance of attentive, organic, and emergent conversation to me. Although the conversation was temporarily interrupted, this changed the flow of the dialogue for the better and allowed for more spontaneity and genuine emotions and thoughts in the moment. This was an important learning experience for me that strengthened the overall conversation as more genuine questions and ideas began to emerge. This type of conversation did not initially feel natural to me, and upon reflection, the learning that occurred in that moment allowed me to explore meditative inquiry experientially.

distinction: I am all for structures, but a structure should create an environment in which deep learning can flourish rather than where creativity and learning are diminished or even killed. In my classes, my pedagogy does have a structure, but it is co-created and organic, and it is constantly changing and evolving according to the needs of the students. That is why there is some anxiety and fear associated with it because it is not being imposed on students in the classroom as they are used to.

The other aspect that I often explain to the students is that they need to maintain their jobs. These graduates need to be in the system because if they are not, then who will transform and change it? At the same time, we also need to understand the limitations that the system imposes on us and the power that the system has. I mentioned it to you yesterday; when I started teaching at a university level, some people doubted my approach. I also felt pressure from the people around me in the institution. So, what do you do when you feel that pressure? How do you respond to that pressure as you also go through the hoops of tenure and promotion?

However, I would say my situation is likely far more secure than teachers' because with university teaching comes academic freedom. I have the freedom to teach the way I want to teach and what I want to teach. Of course, there are limits, and you need to prove yourself. I had the space to prove myself, and both my theoretical explorations and my pedagogical experimentations have been regarded not only by my students but also by the larger educational community. My work has been recognized, which gives me confidence, but that does not mean that I have not faced challenges. For anybody who wants to do something creative or unique must assume that there will be challenges to overcome because we exist in a Eurocentric and capitalist system, which has its own set of expectations, standards, and criteria. When you are doing anything that challenges it, of course, it is going to challenge you back. It is not going to say 'Yes, challenge and transform me', there will be resistance and reaction.

This is something that I always share with my students who are preservice or in-service teachers: when your teaching is transformative and creative, there will be push-backs and challenges. Mentally, you must be ready for them, but at the same time, you can also bring about a lot of small changes as many of my students have done in their classrooms. I do often invite my previous students, like I invited you, to share their ideas and practices with the preservice teachers so that can see how the teachers in the system are experimenting with holistic approaches in their classrooms so that preservice teachers can gain the confidence that more is possible, different is possible, and recognize that they have the possibility of doing it.

When you are entering your school for the first time, or when you are getting a teaching assignment for the first time – for a particular class or a particular subject – it is always good to go step by step. You can take some easy and straightforward steps, which can be a transformative experience in and of itself. Therefore, I think one of the important elements should be to carefully study – through attentive listening and observation – the school, the culture, the administrators, the students, and the parents since all schools in Nova Scotia and around the world are not the same. Some tendencies are similar, but the school dynamic is different in different contexts. For instance, a school principal who has gone through a holistic leadership program or restorative classroom management program will have a significantly different approach to education than someone who has been trained in an outcomes-based

approach that is completely devoted to neoliberal principles of standardization, comparison, and measurement. So, you must study your school, your administrator, and your colleagues a little bit and that study will inform you of the possibilities of experimentation within your classrooms.

Certain schools have a lot of independence and flexibility, and in others, teachers must scale back. However, there are certain things, which can be easily adopted in almost all schools. For example, no school will stop you from taking care of yourself and living a more holistic life. The school policies and expectations may affect that or diminish that to some extent, but they are not going to control your entire life. Thus, you have a lot of possibilities of transforming your own life the way you wish to. I think that can easily be done by broadening your horizons. Even though a school board wants you to look at a particular subject matter, likely they emphasize programs on reading, writing and numeracy as there are so many that exist, one can broaden their horizon by studying the perspectives which are not necessarily sellable (or superficial) but are deeply transformative.

In the context of the classroom, so many things can be done. Something that I do in my classes is have a minute of silence before we begin the class. Some people think that this is an insufficient use of class time, but there is a lot that can be taken from an exercise like this. When you become quiet for a few moments, you are challenging the constant activity and the movement that is praised in the capitalist system. In Western societies, we are taught that constant production and higher productivity are necessary. Asking students to give up technology for short moments can help them be less dependent on technology. When assigning students work, even though one may be following the curriculum documents outcomes, it is entirely possible to choose the material and exercise of one's own choice. This way allows one to incorporate enriching and informative material and speakers that broaden students' horizons.

By giving students choice within their assignments, rather than asking everybody to write an essay or do a PowerPoint presentation, they are given freedom in terms of the way they want to engage with the subject matter and the way they want to present it. Creating room for conversations in the classroom is another way that helps to share thoughts and foster learning. As a teacher, you might have noticed when there are conversations in class, everybody is engaged. On the other hand, when the teacher is lecturing, students tend to care less and pay less attention. So, there is so much that can be done, even in the most dogmatic educational contexts.

Caron: I agree as that has been my experience. I am, however, still thinking about how our conversation has brought me back to a prepared question of mine. I was reminded that when you asked me to come in and speak to your class, there was an in-depth discussion about teaching Mi'kmaw studies. Students expressed feeling hesitant to do that, especially those students who did not identify as being Mi'kmaw. One of the things that is always shocking to me is that a course like that, or other courses such as Healthy Living, get assigned to new social studies teachers, or social studies teachers with less experience in the public education system. I feel as though the teachers who choose not to teach those courses prefer working in a structure of a mathematics course or a science course where everything is outcomes-based and the structures are almost pre-determined by the curricula. I wonder, from this idea that you were talking about moments ago about being creative or having students think creatively, does one teaching a Mi'kmaw studies course rely on creativity? Can you speak to this? And does meditative inquiry play a role in it?

Kumar: Again, I think that is a great question and you won't be surprised to know that in different ways that question has been coming up in my classes. The reason for students to be hesitant about courses on African Nova Scotia Studies or Mi'kmaw Studies is that most of the teacher candidates are predominantly White female students. This question that comes to their mind is reasonable. The oppression that has happened to the Indigenous people here in Canada, including Mi'kmaw people and African Nova Scotians in Nova Scotia, as well as other marginalized groups, is grave and needs to be addressed in our classrooms (e.g., Hamilton-Hinch et al., 2021; Throop-Robinson et al., 2021). In my experience, a lot of the students have been sensitive to the problem of oppression and social injustice, even before, but especially after the Black Lives Matter movement came to be more prominent (Coles & Stanley, 2021). There is a strong wave of social justice-oriented teaching, where addressing, not sidelining, the issues of oppression, discrimination, and exploitation (Battiste, 2013; Brookfield, 2017; Hooks, 1994), has contributed to this awakening of social justice issues in the students.

But still, there is a fear, fear of cultural misrepresentation. If I do not belong to the Mi'kmaw culture or the African Nova Scotia culture (I am just giving some local examples, although there could be examples from all around the world), how can I represent that culture? Will I be misrepresenting it? Will I be any good at communicating things in an appropriate way, because I am not knowledgeable about it? In general, students are afraid of whether they can do justice to these topics (Rowan et al., 2021).

Similarly, there is a fear of cultural appropriation. Do I have the right to do it? Do I have the right to teach my students African Nova Scotia Studies if it is not my experience? The other important factor is that I do not want the Mi'kmaw community and the African Nova Scotia community to think that I am appropriating their knowledge and advancing my career. I have been engaging with these questions for a while now. I mentioned to you the other day that since I joined Mount Saint Vincent University in 2011, I have been incorporating Indigenous perspectives particularly Mi'kmaw perspectives and Africentric perspectives explicitly or implicitly in the way I engage with them, but also explicitly in terms of the content. I have been inviting guest speakers from these communities to talk about their perspectives with the students so the students can get a direct experience. I could have also taken a different strategy, that 'Oh, I am not African, so I'm not going to talk about Africentric perspectives, or African philosophy of life and education' or 'Because I do not belong to the Mi'kmaw community, I do not think it is appropriate for me to teach about it or to discuss it in my class'. I do not take it that way at all, because if all things were equal, nobody else could learn yoga in this world, since from that perspective it is cultural appropriation. Although Yoga has been appropriated greatly!

Recently I have become very interested in learning Qi Gong. It is an ancient exercise form that originated in China. I do not feel that I am appropriating the culture when I practice Qi Gong, rather I am loving it respectfully. This is the first year where I have been experimenting with Qi Gong exercises in my classes. I do short Qi Gong routines with the students and the students love it. I do not think I am culturally appropriating anything. I am learning something from another culture, and I find it is something that nourishes me, and I am sharing it with my students. So, not only is it perfectly fine to learn about other cultures and their practices, but it is also a responsible thing to do. Otherwise, all of us would be in our silos of our identities and groups, and there will be an everlasting sense of conflict and tension if we do not understand each other.

Learning about other cultures, respectfully, and then engaging your students with them, I think, is our responsibility (Andrews & Aydin, 2020; Hill et al., 2020). Psychological studies and theories explain the significance of interacting with other cultures and diverse perspectives to develop a flexible mind (see Allport, 1954; Hopper, 2019; Waytz, 2019;) The problem is that it can be done in a 'hodgepodge' approach, where something is not studied deeply, where the teacher does not meet with the people who are the inheritors of that culture and learn from them and begin teaching it without having any deep respect for it. If cultural knowledge-keepers and practitioners are invited to the class, reliable material is used, and educators teach with sincerity, I do not see what the issue is. However, if teaching about another culture is done in a half-hearted way where students or the teacher is simply reading from a textbook, passively watching a video, and doing random assignments to fulfill the requirement of the course without a deeper engagement with the culture and the subject matter, I think it is better to not do it. However, if you do it properly, I do not think there is any problem of misrepresentation or appropriation. It is our responsibility to do that if we want to bring about mutual understanding and harmony in society. Celebrating diverse cultural perspectives and knowledges is central to meditative inquiry (Kumar, 2022).

Caron: I think that is a great response. It is something from my perspective, as a White person especially, I am always concerned about, and it is exactly how you frame it. I am glad that you talked about cultural appropriation, as I had another question that was in a way related. I am a White person who grew up in this very Eurocentric system, where I have been educated and where this way of living and thinking has been integrated into every aspect of my life. Your course was the first time that I had this way of thinking flipped upside down. Even though you already touched on it, by offering the advice of taking small steps to incorporate it into your class, however, at what point do you think somebody is ready to do this as a teacher? As actual practitioners, teaching and educating students, at what point are they ready to incorporate aspects of meditative inquiry into their class? A legitimate fear of mine, similar to the fear of cultural appropriation, is that I do not want to take what I know of mediative inquiry and incorporate it into my pedagogy inappropriately. I know this question is slightly more difficult because you do not necessarily share that same perspective, but you do see a lot of students that come into this program and into your courses with minimal experience (the same way I did), so I am wondering if you have thought about that at all?

Kumar: I think there are a few things that we can discuss in response to your thoughtful question. One is that meditative inquiry is not a technique or a strategy. I have not created a step-by-step process that somebody can follow to adopt it and implement it in the classroom. That would go against the whole idea of mediative inquiry. In other words, it is not a neatly packaged technique that I have created steps for, and that I can give to you, as in, 'here Jamie, here is the teaching is meditative inquiry approach, go and implement into your classroom'. It is not like that as it is a very broad approach, and it is also quite holistic. There are philosophical, reflective, and experiential dimensions that are core to it (Kumar, 2023).

There are so many things that the meditative inquiry approach can offer, but it is not a technique, nor is it a clean-cut laid-out system that can be implemented regardless of the context and teacher's approach to teaching. One must study the context and integrate meditative inquiry into your practice accordingly. To me, in teaching the most important thing is (as we talked about before) that the context must be studied. Then accordingly, based on that study, one can respond to the context. By observing and listening to the context, and by understanding the people that exist in it, one is better equipped to respond from a place of deeper understanding, rather than from preconceived notions.

To understand the full depth of meditative inquiry requires one to engage with the self and to understand oneself. That is the most significant part of meditative inquiry. When students are in my classroom, and I am engaging with them, they experience what meditative inquiry is and how it unfolds, rather than merely listening to me that 'Okay this is meditative inquiry, these are the things that we are doing, you have to follow this approach in your classroom'. I embody meditative inquiry within myself and that is why, it becomes an organic part of my classroom. So, whether I am discussing with them, whether I am giving a presentation, whether I am marking their assignments, or whether I am speaking in front of the class, it is all happening in a meditative way.

Similarly, I have had the privilege of learning from the pedagogical approaches of my teachers. I have talked about it in some of my other writings. One of my teachers, Professor K. K. Mojumdar, and I had intense dialogue with each other for about ten years. I did not know that I was developing a passion for dialogue when I was in his class, but I was doing so organically, unconsciously, and unknowingly. Then I came upon the work of Krishnamurti, who also had a lot of dialogues with other scholars, students, and teachers, and that impacted me significantly. Through these exposures, dialogue became part of my being and naturally a part of my classroom. I did not think 'Okay, one day I will theorize a meditative inquiry approach in which I will include dialogue as a key component'; the whole approach has evolved organically as part of the evolution of my own life. So, when students in my class experience it, it will express itself on its own in their classrooms and live beyond the classroom because meditative inquiry is not just limited to the classroom. Meditative inquiry is a way of being.

Nevertheless, there is also a point of caution. It is not another 'psychological approach' such as the 'growth mindset' that has been tested and then concluded that it is evidence-based and ready to practice in classrooms. Every teacher must develop their approach. Meditative inquiry is also a way for me to help allow my students to develop their approach, maybe they will adopt an element or two of the meditative inquiry approach in their teaching. If they want to be fulfilled and satisfied as teachers, they need to develop their approaches in light of their own interests and the context in which they work. One goal of meditative inquiry is to support my students in finding their way and developing their approach rather than repeating what I do; that would defeat the purpose of meditative inquiry.

Caron: In my understanding, meditative inquiry is the way you live your life. In my development as a teacher, I have experienced this where my philosophy is just so much different than the school philosophy or the ideology of the system, as well as the whole school board or the whole province. Do you talk about this or do students talk about this in your classes? I am thinking about when they come back from their practicum or maybe they are a second-year student. Although I have not looked recently, teacher attrition statistics are staggering. People leave early or perhaps they do not even go into teaching after they have gone through the process of earning a B.Ed. Do you talk about this at all with your students, where you are allowing people to build their philosophy, and you are giving them space to do that and it is great but then when they enter this world of teaching, maybe their philosophy no longer aligns with what is expected of them?

Kumar: I think we did talk about that question before, but I will also engage with it now, to explore it a bit more. As I said before, you must study the system that you are working in, the larger political, economic, and cultural system, but also the local context in which you are

situated. In Canada, educational policies and practices are quite driven by Eurocentric principles. The primary knowledge base is the Eurocentric knowledge base, which is one thing. Then, the second thing is that the system is deeply entrenched in capitalist and neoliberal ways of thinking. So, what is the purpose of education in a Eurocentric, neoliberal, capitalistic context? The purpose of education is to ultimately get a job. Education is viewed primarily as an instrumental process where you go through many years of education, but the ultimate goal is always to get a job. That is why, politicians emphasize these outcomes and testing as a way to ensure that the outcomes are being met. The outcomes can show the public what is being covered in the courses and how will these outcomes help students be ready for the job market.

Related to this, what is the goal of standardized testing? To measure and tell the public how your children are doing – passing, excelling, or failing – based on 'the standards' that we have set. This can give you an idea of what the future of your child will look like. That is why they compare schools, teachers, and students. It is all in the 'service' of sorting for the job market. So, any teacher or any person who has an interest in transforming the system must know that these large-scale forces are in operation; white supremacy, colonial thinking, the capitalist principles are always in operation.

When educators go to teach in a school, they must keep in mind the context of the school. Rather than saying that this is my approach, and I am just going to wholesale impose it on the school, or the classroom. I do not think that is a wise way. Teachers need to develop their approach and philosophy, but it is not in isolation or vacuum, nor is it independent of their context that no doubt has many layers to it. The context includes one's interest and inspirations, that informs their philosophy. The educators with whom we have studied inspire our philosophy, likewise, the kind of literature that we use and read inspires our philosophy. Once a teacher's philosophy has been established, it is informed by so many experiences, ideas, and people, and will impact their practice in the classroom. All of this is the context of teaching.

To play devil's advocate, suppose you have a great idea about giving freedom to all the students and you think, 'I will try to give them as much freedom as possible for choice in assignment in terms of the presentation of the assignment, in deciding the length of the assignment, and all related elements'. A student may have some obstacles due to their unique neurological or psychological circumstances or any reason, and they approach you to inform you that they need more structure to succeed in your course. They may request structure and if you are a freedom enthusiast, you may say 'No, I'm not going to give you any structure because that is against my philosophy'. This means that you are too attached to your approach and not learning from and responding to students who are central to your pedagogical context.

If there are a large number of students in a class and the instructor wants to hear from each of them (I do that because I have about at the most 30 students in my class, sometimes I do a quick round of hearing from everybody to increase communication and interaction among them) it may be difficult. For instance, if a teacher wants to adopt this principle where it is eighty students in a class – there are many large classrooms in India and many other countries – one must have a philosophy that can be adapted to diverse contexts. Our pedagogical philosophy needs to develop and evolve. I would not consider meditative inquiry as something rigid, and I would not encourage my students to adopt a rigid approach either.

When somebody is going to teach in a classroom, as we were talking before, there will be challenges. Parents will pose a challenge, other teachers will pose a challenge, the

administrators will pose a challenge and the classroom itself will pose a challenge. So, I should not completely give up my philosophy because there are so many challenges. At the same time, I should not think that my philosophy is the best one and everybody should give up their ways and only listen to me. I think a better 'middle way' is to develop your philosophy creatively and reflectively about the people who you are interacting with. If I had only relied on my philosophy, then I do not think I would have grown as a teacher. My teachers', students', and colleagues' knowledge and feedback have tremendously informed the way my teaching has grown and improved.

At one point, I asked one of my colleagues to come to my class to just observe my class. That person told me, 'You know, you have so many great discussions in the class, but sometimes I think it could benefit you to include some questions on a PowerPoint (or on the smart board) so that students can visually interact with them. From that point onward, I would share with the students of my courses the questions so that everybody not only had the questions that we discussed in the class but also some of the responses to those questions.

I think that although there are larger forces that are generally against holistic and meditative ways of teaching, it is probably best to not look at everything in a binary or antagonistic fashion. Perhaps it is important to be flexible to integrate the complexities that you can based on your work in the system, rather than saying 'This is my theory, I am going to impose it on the context', one could say 'This is my theory, but I am ready to engage with the context, and I am ready to grow and change.'.

Caron: I think that helps a great deal, and I am curious, even about that last point you made. You have talked a lot about creating change from within, and I think that is important to you – to give teachers the perspectives and practices to go out and bring about change. As teachers in a system, they must conform to a certain extent. Do you view meditative inquiry as being a disruptor or a way to create change? Is that important to you and do you think that is important to teachers studying with you to bring about change?

Kumar: Absolutely. When I say that 'students should study the system and respond to the system and engage in a conversation with the system', I am not saying that change is not the goal or that we should not transform our context. Transformation, however, should not be based on a particular idea or ideology. When I say, 'This is my ideology; this is how I am going to transform the system', I am likely ignoring the complexity of the system. The system is so complicated; it is not straightforward. There are so many complexities, and there are larger forces, like capitalism and colonialism, that are acting and influencing everything. And then there are local contextual and cultural forces that are at play, and there is a complicated interaction between the larger and local forces, so we cannot just impose our ideologies on the context but need to understand the context.

I will give you a couple of examples. You go to a school, and you can identify that a teacher is traditional in their approach. This includes a lot of emphasis on memorization and lecturing where students are passive recipients of the information. It is not necessary to have an antagonistic relationship with the teacher because it does not serve anybody's purpose. It can, however, foster an understanding of where that person is coming from and why they have adopted this approach to teaching. So, there could be a desire to understand, rather than to condemn and disregard.

Similarly, there may be a principal, who is obsessed with outcomes. Of course, we must challenge an outcomes-based approach. Outcomes-oriented thinking limits your capacity, as the outcomes are prescriptive and there has been so much exploration of how they limit your capacity to explore and experience education in a deeply transformative way (Macdonald & Macdonald, 1995). But at the same time, it is also good to understand that the principal is part of a larger school board system, which is part of a larger society that wants comparison and standardization. Ministers and school boards are heeding the expectations and demands of the wider society. One can assume that the principal and the teachers probably are victims of this whole chain.

I am all for social transformation and change, but I think we should be careful that we do not condemn and disregard individuals but try to understand the root of the behaviour, so that we can transform and change the root of the educational problem, despite this rigid and conditioned thinking, that has reduced education to information transmission to get a job.

Caron: Thank you. I think that is a clear and important discussion that we are having because it is one of the things that has deterred me from remaining a classroom teacher. I have such a difficult time with the system itself, so I think having these conversations gives perspective and demonstrates that it is important not to just discredit what is going on in the system, but to understand it.

Kumar: Related to that, over the last ten years, I have engaged with so many teachers. Those who are already in the system and those who studied at the Mount (who were a part of my courses and went into the system). I see the struggle, so I am not undermining the challenges that teachers experience. Some teachers have a placement, where they can teach holistically and meditatively, and there is respect and a space for that. On the other hand, some teachers are struggling, quite a bit, because they are stuck with an administrator who has a narrow view of education. So again, I think we need to understand the system and its complexity and the problem. I am not saying that we should put up with the system, rather, I am saying that sometimes you have to be a little bit patient and understand where the underlying problems are, and the roots of the problems are because then your approach and your response will be much more holistic, than the response: 'I have it right and everybody else is wrong'.

Caron: One thing that occurred to me when you were talking earlier that I wanted to come back to was related to thinking about meditative inquiry itself as a philosophy and how you are teaching future teachers in an era of incredibly fast information transmission. Many people are transfixed with their mobile phones, and they are getting information at rapid speeds. I find that with social media, people are quite self-absorbed in a lot of ways, not everybody, but many people are. Meditative inquiry, and the idea of focusing on understanding yourself, I think is important in responding to the social media obsession. As someone who practices critical reflection, one thing that struck me — and maybe it is my Eurocentric lens — is that it seems that social media focuses on the self where one just thinks about oneself, and I am wondering how that plays into this whole idea of people being already somewhat selfish. Then we are saying 'Okay well now you need to focus more on yourself through this lens [meditative inquiry]', so I am wondering if you have thought about that and whether you can speak to that?

Kumar: I think that is a very important question again, Jamie. The first question is about the technology in itself. I think what is happening through technology is that a lot of insensitivity,

lifelessness, and a lack of presence are being cultivated. What is happening with this technological obsession is that we are becoming self-obsessed and superficial. It is excitement-oriented, it is a constant occupation as if it is filling an empty void in our lives. That is what this constant occupation with the phones and emails is. Capitalism is at play here, because the more you use these things, the more you are buying, and the more you support the mindless production.

Now not only are they selling phones and computers but there are also all these advertisements that you are bombarded with if you search for anything online. In my social studies class this year, I had a unit on teaching social studies through technology and the students enjoyed it. I had a guest speaker, and it was good, although, because everybody is beginning to be so immersed in technology, I have created an assignment called nature reflection journal where students are encouraged to be in nature and listen to and observe nature to learn from it and appreciate it. Students have greatly loved this assignment. I have talked about it elsewhere in a bit more detail (Kumar, 2023).

With the current overemphasis on technology, everybody seems to be stuck in these lifeless digital spaces for more than what is healthy for us. As we all know, there are appropriate and inappropriate uses of technology. We are currently engaging in this dialogue using Zoom, so during a pandemic technology has been helpful in many ways to create connections. Technology, however, also dissociates you from nature and real human beings. When real human beings are present, there is an emotion, an energy, and there is a physical exchange of energy in that interaction. There are also raw emotions when you are in nature and when you are looking at trees and birds, for example. Nature offers us living and vibrant spaces. Digital technologies, however fancy, are dead lifeless spaces in which we are trying to fuse life through our desires, fears, and anxieties but the digital world is a lifeless space. I have been emphasizing a lot in my classrooms that there should be more engagement with the living spaces, the lively spaces, rather than with the lifeless spaces.

The other thing is related to your question of whether meditative inquiry will make people more self-absorbed who are already self-absorbed in technology. I agree with you that there is self-absorption with technology, and we have talked about how it is dangerous, and how it has been affecting us. Meditative inquiry is not self-absorption, it is *self-observation*. When you are observing yourself, you are observing everything. When I am observing myself and have thoughts about my wife, I am also observing the relationship that I have with my wife in my mind because self is not an isolated thing. In other words, myself is not disconnected from you, I am not disconnected from the trees, or the world around us, the whole thing exists together. The 'self' only serves as a beginning unit to study yourself – when you pay deeper attention to your thoughts, your emotions, and your body, that attention does not remain limited to yourself. It extends everywhere. So, when I can observe my thoughts, or listen carefully, that also gives me the capacity to listen to you carefully. The more meditative I become within myself, the more meditative all my interactions become. Meditative inquiry is not thinking about how I am going to get more money or how am I going to get better at defeating people. It is not a self-centred way of being, it is a self-observant way of being. Through meditative inquiry, you gain a deeper understanding of yourself and your relationships.

Through meditative inquiry, one develops a capacity for transformation. I can offer an example here. We all get jealous and comparative. Jealousy is a mechanical movement. We have been trained to be jealous because we have been trained to compare. When we compare, we feel jealous. But when you look at your jealousy and understand it then its mechanical patterns are broken. When that mechanical pattern is broken, then you relate and engage with people in a very different way. Observing yourself does not disconnect you from the world. It gives you the capacity to connect with the world at a much deeper level since you develop the capacity to observe trees, observe the sun, and observe the moon existentially. Observing, in the sense that you observe them so intently that you see them, not only just the image of what you are seeing, but what you are actually seeing. That means you develop a deeper relationship with people and animals and plants and the nature around us. In other words, meditative inquiry helps connect us to nature in a profound way and contributes to developing our ecological consciousness.

Meditative inquiry is not just learning about yourself but also looking at the suffering of the world and the things that have brought about suffering. What are the things that have made us self-centered? So, what are the things that have divided us from each other? What are the things that have created conflicts and antagonism among people? You see nationalism, you also see stockpiling of nuclear armaments, the suffering of so many international migrants because there are tight national borders and people do not have food, they do not have any life so they are moving to find a sanctuary; in the old-world people could move around more freely, but now they cannot. Religious division is one of the factors that has brought about suffering, it has caused so many wars. Nationalism has caused so many wars as well. So, meditative inquiry is not just navel-gazing, it is also looking at the world and its problems like the climate crisis and engaging with it in a more meditative way so that we will learn how to live together harmoniously rather than as isolated entities. The degree of isolation depends on how you want to define it – a house can be in isolation, the province can be in isolation, and a nation can be in isolation. We constantly keep dividing ourselves from each other. So meditative inquiry also allows us a perspective to look at life holistically and connect deeply.

Caron: Yes, thank you. I think that is a fantastic response. We need to understand that when we talk of meditative inquiry we are focussing on self-observation and awareness rather than self-absorption – I think that is key, so thank you for clarifying that for me and readers of this dialogue.

One thing that you said in your response earlier that caught my attention was the idea of making money, and it reminded me of when you said that this concept of meditative inquiry is getting some attention. Folks are recognizing it, and it is gaining a little momentum in certain circles. Going back to making money, and maybe that is the business part of my brain thinking, but do you have any fears that this idea of meditative inquiry, as people recognize it and it becomes more 'mainstream' let's say, do you have any hesitations or concerns that folks are going to pick that up and say, 'I want to make money off this concept, and I am going to create a self-help book called meditative inquiry'? Do you feel that you have any responsibility for attempting to stop that, or have you ever thought about it being an important concept that if somebody embodies it, they will improve their own lives, even though its purpose is not for the rich to get richer, rather it's rooted in trying to make the world a better place? Do you worry about that taking a pivot at some point?

Kumar: I do not think anybody can stop that. Buddha could not stop it. I am not comparing myself to him, but simply stating that nobody could stop the commercialization of good ideas. In a capitalist society, everything that sells is good. Whether it is enlightenment, or it is spirituality, or it is well-being, anything can sell. It is not connected to me at all. Anybody who has an interesting idea, a good idea, or a transformative idea in any field will always be sold.

The only way it can be interrupted is that when you engage with it, you engage with it sincerely. So, when I engage with Krishnamurti, I engage sincerely rather than using it as a means to my career advancement. It comes down to one's ethical perspective. As far as the market is concerned, their purpose is to sell things and make money. That is the whole edifice on which capitalism rests. That is why capitalism does not have morality. They can try to donate a little money here and there, but in its very essence, it cannot be moral because it produces more to sell more. It does not necessarily produce what folks need. It says, 'create the need'. If there is no need, then create the need. You have a business background, I think you know all these things much better than me. We want to sell it, and it has reduced humanity to a low standard because you know when you force people to sell things how horrible that is. Some people can be naturally suited and have a knack for selling things. For some, it can be torture, i.e., 'I have to sell these many cars if I want to keep my job'. When that is the case, you will have to find a way of selling the product because the quality of the thing itself is not important, nor how it will fulfill human needs – what is important is selling a good or service and turning a profit.

This reminds me of the concept of alienation in Marxism and existentialism (see Jaeggi, 2014). When they are forced to produce, there is no love of creation and love of labour, which leads to alienation. When I do something, it is because I love it and the end product is different in quality. Once my creation is done, I would like to sell it, or I would like somebody to give me something in return so that I can also sustain myself. There is no spirituality in capitalism. It can sell yoga and mindfulness because it has no moral or ethical standards of what is right and what is wrong. That is why we have so many laws and regulations to control corporations and companies, but they still find a way through.

Many of the pharmaceutical companies that are producing COVID vaccines have displayed no ethical standards or compassion. If they had an ethical standard, they would realize that this pandemic could be over so much faster. However, this shows you the true colour of capitalism that they do not want to find the fastest way to spread the vaccination. They are slowing it down so much. There will continue to be new variants and the more variants the better, because they will keep on producing vaccines. How much money have they made by now? Billions and billions of dollars. So, there is no sense of ethics. If there was any ethical sense, after a point, even now they would say 'Okay, I think we have earned enough money now we are going to just sell it at our cost price, and we are going to make sure that everybody gets it. That, however, is not their priority.

Caron: I wonder about that too in the context of COVID-19, is everything going to look different in education? Is your job going to change in terms of it going to be online? Is it going to be a hybrid model? How are they adapting and are they changing? What the role of meditative inquiry is in that, in your view, and how that can help, or does it have a role?

Kumar: Universities have always been interested in online and distance education because it increases their catchment area. As you know, in the Western world, universities act like corporations. They are solely responsible or largely responsible for their sustenance, so of course they want to increase their catchment area. My guess is the companies who produce digital education would like all the schools and universities to go online so that everybody can buy computers and software and all that, but they will encounter some challenges, especially in schools. I think for schools, most parents, and teachers, would appreciate face-to-face interaction and learning. I think in universities, there will be more of an increase in online teaching and learning. To me, online teaching and learning directly impact an individual's well-being. As I was talking to you about technology before, digital technologies create lifeless spaces, in which we put our energies into making the digital space alive. The lights that are emitted through the screens that we look at all day, I think it is quite absorbing, and it is quite exhausting.

Moreover, online teaching will always be a poor substitute for one-to-one interaction as the interface is not just the same. When human beings are together their energies are together, they are exchanging energies of each other, they are exchanging emotions with each other, they are hearing each other's voices, their voices and their eyes are touching and interacting with one another. We have energies within us that interact when we are talking because we are not robots. We are holistic and experiential beings. So, the beauty and the significance of being together can never be overemphasized. It is like when you are looking at a tree through a computer and when you are *being with* a tree in your backyard. There is a completely different interaction. So, I do not think that for human well-being technology obsession is good. I think everybody knows now that the more we turn towards technology, the more we are harming ourselves and our relationships.

At the same time, I think, digital technology is also wonderful in many ways. I would not be able to see my family in India by just clicking one button nor we would be able to do this dialogue during the pandemic. But I think we need to use our intelligence to see how much of something is acceptable and does not undermine and compromise our well-being. I think that human beings need to have a deeper discussion on this. The role of technology in human life, I think, has become far too much. It is not healthy for anyone.

Caron: Thank you for your thoughtful response. I would like to take this opportunity to thank you for inviting me to have this conversation with you and co-author this paper. This dialogue was engaging and immersive for me since it developed organically. For current and future social studies educators and teacher-educators, this type of spontaneous exploration helps expand on meditative inquiry and it also provides examples for approaching teaching and research about education in alternative and non-Eurocentric ways. For me, this process has been transformational insofar as I was nudged out of my comfort zone where I engaged in a learning process that is not possible in a lecture-style classroom or by reading on its own. I want again to thank you for involving me in this undertaking and for encouraging me to explore meditative inquiry and myself in the process.

Kumar: Thank you, Jamie, for preparing thoughtful and engaging questions for this dialogue and helping to bring this paper to fruition. I am glad that you found this dialogue helpful to you as an educator and a human being.

Conclusion and Implications

In this dialogical paper, we explored meditative inquiry as a pedagogical approach, especially in the context of teacher education. To begin this paper, Jamie shares his journey with studying and teaching social studies education and his experiences engaging with Ashwani and his work on meditative inquiry. The paper adopts a dialogical meditative inquiry approach that allows for deep listening and a sense of open vulnerability leading to the emergence of valuable insights. The questions were asked in a loosely structured way rather than sequentially, and the questions were posed based on the natural flow of the dialogue.

The beginning of the dialogue starts with an exploration of the differences and similarities between meditative inquiry and critical reflection. We note that meditative inquiry is a deeper self-investigation that centers the learner in their contexts. As the conversation continues, we discuss how spirituality is central to the meditative inquiry approach and that it should be emphasized in teacher education and social studies teaching and learning. Social studies in particular and education in general should aim to educate students so they appreciate the significance of self-exploration and harmonious co-existence with one another and nature.

Tapping into the more practical applications of meditative inquiry, the conversation then shifts to focus on why this approach is useful for teachers and how it can be adopted. Although working in any top-down system comes with challenges, the meditative inquiry approach to teaching and learning emphasizes creativity, freedom, and a less rigid structure. Having this philosophical grounding means that structured classes rooted in meditative inquiry allow for the co-creation of knowledge and promote student choice that aims to shift the power dynamic and empower students with more flexibility. As the dialogue progressed the discussion moved into an inquiry of how to understand fears and why a self-exploratory approach to teaching and living can be beneficial. We highlight that as teachers develop a meditative inquiry approach, they must reflect and engage with the subject matter they are teaching in a meaningful and authentic way. We recognize that having trepidation for misrepresenting or appropriating another culture is natural; however, it is our duty as teachers to explore different cultures, learn from them, and expose our students to various cultures.

Typical to the dialogical meditative inquiry format, this conversation was non-linear and pivoted our exploration of meditative inquiry toward thinking about the role that technology plays in our systems of schooling and our lives, and how that affects teaching and learning. We recognized that technology in and of itself is not bad; the real issue is the mantra of 'more' and the need for more content via quicker information transmission. These attitudes are instilled in its users and ultimately cause problems of self-absorption into lifeless digital spaces. We highlight the significance of spending more time in nature (DeVille et al., 2021) as a way to heal the impacts of excessive use of digital technologies and screens and to awaken our awareness. The need for human interaction cannot be permanently replaced by technological means. Temporary measures during a pandemic made sense, but the energies of a classroom of one-to-one interactions cannot be overemphasized. The dialogue closes with some thoughts on the future of teaching, technology, social studies, and meditative inquiry.

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