

## **TOWARD A SHIFT IN EXPECTATIONS AND VALUES: WHAT WE'VE LEARNED FROM COLLABORATIVE ACTION RESEARCH IN NORTHERN INDIGENOUS COMMUNITIES**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*In this paper we propose that collaborative action research values, goals and practices have much in common with guiding principles for conducting research with educators and community members in First Nation, Inuit and Metis communities, as outlined in the Task Force on Aboriginal Languages and Cultures on Aboriginal Languages and Cultures' (2005) document. We draw on experiences in the Northern Oral Language and Writing through Play Partnership project to make our case, and conclude by identifying needed shifts in expectations and values within the broader academic community for conducting educational research in Indigenous communities.*

In this paper we propose that the outcomes of research examining issues in Indigenous education, and in particular, proficiency in language skills, should aim to benefit individual participating students and their teachers, and that research should have potential for long-term positive change in their communities. We make a case for collaborative action research as a methodology that has great potential to achieve these outcomes. We begin by comparing and contrasting collaborative action research with other research paradigms popular in mainstream education research that has influenced policy development. We then discuss the ways in which collaborative action research addresses the recommendations of the Task Force on Aboriginal Languages and Cultures (2005), drawing on examples from the Northern Oral Language and Writing through Play (NOW Play)

Partnership project, which to this point has focused on children's English language. We conclude by identifying some shifts in expectations and values within the broader academic community that are needed to create a research agenda that contributes to positive change.

The NOW Play project, an example of collaborative action research, is a seven-year study exploring approaches to assessing and supporting young children's oral language and writing through play, and to supporting northern teachers' professional learning. The project involves Aboriginal Head Start, kindergarten and grade one teachers in northern communities in Alberta, Saskatchewan, Manitoba, and Ontario. In this paper, we focus on two northern Ontario Indigenous communities that will remain unnamed to maintain the anonymity promised in our partnership research agreement. One is accessible only by air and winter roads when the lakes freeze over in the winter and the other is accessible by road year-round. Participants are 10-20 students and their teachers in each of five kindergarten classes and one grade one class. Three participating teachers are from the Indigenous communities in which they are teaching and three teachers are non-Indigenous. They have been living and teaching in the communities for 6-14 years.

The research activities of the NOW Play project involve participating teacher researchers using iPods to record their students' interactions while they play, together with photographs of children's writing, drawing and scribbling that are part of the play. University researchers visit teacher-researchers' classrooms and meet with them every six weeks or so. Amanda McLean from the First Nations Student Success Program of the Kwayaciiwin Education Resource Centre in Sioux Lookout, Ontario, accompanies us, whenever she is available, on our research visits. A former teacher and principal in northern Ontario Indigenous schools and currently a School Success Planning Lead, she is well-known and trusted by the education directors and principals of the Indigenous communities. We bring transcripts to the action research meetings to use as starting points for collaborative conversations about the ways children are using language in their play and ways in which teachers can enhance the children's language.

Before moving on to a description of our methodologies and why we chose them, it is necessary to locate ourselves in relation to the research. Absolon & Willett (2004) explain that "identifying at the outset, the location from which the voice of the researcher emanates is an Aboriginal way of ensuring that those who study, write, and participate in knowledge creation are accountable for their own positionality" (p. 97).

*Shelley.* My grandparents on my father's side came to Canada from Friesland, Netherlands, and my great grandparents on my mother's side came from Ireland and Scotland. They settled in central Alberta and southern Saskatchewan, and my parents and I have lived in small towns or on a farm in both provinces. I have been a teacher of Indigenous and non-Indigenous children in rural schools, have engaged in collaborative action research with teachers in rural and urban schools, and have travelled widely in northern parts of Canada. As the principal investigator of the NOW Play project, I am honoured to have been given the opportunity to collaborate with and to learn

from Indigenous and non-Indigenous teachers and community members in northern Indigenous communities participating in the project, along with Laura and Jean-Paul, whose wisdom and inspiration I greatly value.

*Laura:* Boozhoo niichi. Giniwikwe nindizhinikaaz, mukwa nindodem, Tulita Dene Anishinaabekwe indow. Manidoo Baawatigoon indonji. Hello, my Anishinaabe name is Golden Eagle woman. I am of the Bear clan. I am Dene Anishinaabe, born in Treaty 3 territory, married to an Ojibway Anishinaabe, mother and kokum to beautiful Ojibway Anishinaabe children and grandchildren. My home is in Rainy River First Nations. I am recently retired after working in education for 40 years. I have been a K-12 teacher, guidance counselor, principal and special education teacher as well as a post-secondary director for Seven Generations Education Institute (SGEI), and a college and university instructor. My research has been primarily with SGEI programs and other Indigenous institutes seeking to reclaim their teachings. Finding mainstream research partners, willing to watch, listen, and then reflect to understand an issue is paramount to effective change and understanding. It is an honour to work with Jean-Paul and Shelley and the NOW Play team in this work.

*Jean-Paul.* Boozhoo. Jean-Paul Restoule nintishinikaaz. Wazhushk nitootem. Okikendawt mnissing nitoonci. Anishinaabe ndaaw. Wemitigooshi ndaaw. I am Anishinaabe and French-Canadian but was raised in a small town northwest of Toronto and come to learn my language later in life. I was raised with little connection to our communities and our family had experienced disruption of Indigenous ways and relations. I approach this research humbly and from a distance. Although I have contributed to several Indigenous research projects over the last fifteen years, most have been located in or near urban centres and the communities participating in this research are ones that I have not visited. It is a great honour to be included in this work and I thank Laura and Shelley for inviting me to collaborate with them on this project. Chi-miigwec!

It is also important to locate the NOW Play collaborative action research methodology within three widely-recognized modes of action research: technical (teachers are consumers and supporters of new teaching practices); practical (teachers co-design new practices and although power is shared between participants who are considered equals, the individual teachers determine how the co-designed practices will be implemented) and emancipatory action research (teachers initiate and design new practices and power resides within the group, rather than with individual teachers or university facilitators) (Carr & Kemmis, 1986; Grundy, 1982). The NOW Play research fits within the practical action research mode, as teacher- and university-researchers co-design practices that are modified by individual teachers for their own classroom contexts.

**COLLABORATIVE ACTION RESEARCH AND OTHER RESEARCH METHODOLOGIES**

Historically, knowledge production that has been deemed “legitimate” has placed Indigenous children and teachers in positions where they were objects, rather than the creators of knowledge. As Brown and Strega (2005) explain, it is important for research to “trouble the connections between how knowledge is created, what knowledge is produced, and who is entitled to engage in these processes (p. 7) in order for “subjugated knowledges to emerge” (p. 5) and, in the process, contribute to positive change in Indigenous communities. From the initial shaping of research questions and selection of appropriate research methodologies to address those questions to the dissemination of results, it is important for researchers to have these goals in mind. Inherent within research methodologies are assumptions about knowledge creation that shape how data are gathered and analyzed and how findings are disseminated.

Unlike the outcomes of research involving statistical comparisons between Indigenous and non-Indigenous children’s performance on standardized assessments, the outcomes of our collaborative action focus on Indigenous students’ learning at the local level. The sample sizes are smaller, and researchers and research participants know each other well. Contextual information about students’ learning and their socio-cultural environment enriches the findings (Goswami & Rutherford, 2009). Additionally, participating teachers are involved in the data collection and analysis; their insider cultural knowledge about the community, the school and classroom contexts, as well as their familiarity with the individual children in their classrooms, offers richness and depth to the data analysis. Their perspectives and knowledge contribute to broader pedagogical information in ways that are not possible with large-scale quantitative research.

This contrasts with the findings of correlational studies that are often conducted in university offices far from the Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities in which the data have been gathered. These research studies are supported by dominant research perspectives in which reliability and generalizability are valued and the primary research concerns are “representativeness, randomness, and sufficient sample size” (Cunningham, Stanovich, & Maul, 2011, p. 52). The desired outcome, viewed as the basis of “scientific knowledge” (ibid), is a statistically significant difference between the performances of groups of children. Repeatedly, such studies have shown that Indigenous children do not perform as well as non-Indigenous children on standardized measures of achievement (e.g., Cowley & Easton, 2004; Freeman & Fox, 2005; Richards, Vining & Weimer, 2010), which is not altogether surprising given the standards of measurement and achievement are often developed from the non-Indigenous worldview and often contain a cultural bias. Such findings, reinforcing a dominant cultural narrative of competition and a deficit view of Indigenous children’s literacy abilities, do not lead to the enhancement of Indigenous children’s achievement (Silver, Mallet, Greene, & Simard, 2002).

Although a case can be made that experimental research often does result in positive outcomes in terms of student learning, we believe that it is not the ideal form of research to examine educational issues in Indigenous communities. The goals of experimental research are to determine whether a given intervention leads to a desired effect on student learning.

The research design requires that some participants serve as control group members who do not benefit from the intervention. Validity and the comparability between intervention and control groups are of greater concern to the researchers than the individual students' learning (Vellutino & Schatschneider, 2011). Additionally, researchers typically do not return after the research ends. There is often no effort to use the results of the research to continue effecting long-term change after the results of the intervention study are published.

Ethnography offers helpful ways to examine educational issues. Although more similar to collaborative action research than either of the two quantitative research methodologies mentioned above, the goals and outcomes of ethnography are not likely to effect change in Indigenous children's learning and achievement, either. Like collaborative action research, ethnography provides an in depth, contextualized picture of children's learning. Just as ethnographers strive to represent research participants' perspectives and understandings in collaborative action research, teachers' cultural knowledge about the community, the school and classroom contexts, as well as their familiarity with the individual children in their classrooms provide richness and depth to the data analysis that are missing in statistical comparisons. Additionally, because ethnographers spend substantial periods of time gathering data in communities they develop relationships with research participants that are not possible in correlational and experimental research (Heath & Street, 2008). However, their focus is on exploring what is happening in the research setting. Unlike researchers who work with teachers in collaborative action research, ethnographers do not necessarily start their research with the goal of making a difference in the lives of the research participants. Additionally, ethnographers typically do not usually return to work with community members in order to act on the findings and effect change in the community.

Collaborative action research, unlike most quantitative methods and some ways of doing ethnography, can be responsive to an Indigenous framework for research relationships, one that is characterized by adherence to the 4 R's of Indigenous research (Restoule, 2008, following Kirkness & Barnhardt, 1991; Styres & Zinga, 2013; Zinga & Styres, 2013). These are Respect, Relevance, Responsibility and Reciprocity. Restoule (2008), and Styres and Zinga (2013), have also added a fifth R: Relationships, in which the other four R's are essentially grounded. Including relationships as a fifth R underlines its significance to the research process as Wilson (2008) has emphasized in his discussions of relational accountability. When research strives to include these values in how it is carried out, it is much more likely to have benefit for Indigenous communities participating in the research. Furthermore, the research works toward a decolonizing methodology (Smith, 1999) and is more likely to be reflective of local traditional ways and traditions (Absolon, 2011).

In the following we describe collaborative action research in terms of the recommendations of the *Task Force on Aboriginal Languages and Cultures on Aboriginal Languages and Cultures* (2005), presenting examples from the NOW Play research project and introducing the Seven Grandfather Teachings to position our research intent within themes of harmony and balance.

**SEVEN GRANDFATHER TEACHINGS**

Anishinaabe peoples have been placed in this part of the world by Creator and tasked to live in harmony and balance with all of creation. Anishinaabe is an Ojibway word referring to the original peoples placed on Turtle Island, which includes Canada. Anishinaabe is a term which includes FNMI peoples. We also recognize that FNMI peoples have specific teachings resulting from growing cultures, languages and environmental impacts over thousands of years. The past 150 years have been a significant challenge as Anishinaabe languages, knowledge systems and ways of being have been dismantled and replaced with Canadian mainstream teachings, official languages, and provincial curriculums not reflective of Anishinaabe teachings. FNMI people have been challenging assimilation tactics to find space to strengthen our languages, teachings and ways of knowing and being.

Benton-Banai (1988) tells the story of culturally responsive and respectful practices. The story is of returning to original teachings and ways of being, acceptance and recognition of a problem, healthy partnerships, and knowledge transfer over a span of time, collaborative research and growth. Once a problem is recognized, partnerships are formed; truths are articulated and passed forward. This journey of discovery includes observation, recognition of better ways of doing things, application of better practices and adaptations over time. Learning occurs; new beliefs and habits emerge, resulting in better ways of doing things. The story tells that as in all good work, the learner becomes the teacher.

The story tells that long ago, Anishinaabe struggled with living in harmony and balance with all of creation. There was a time when those spirits who watch over Anishinaabe people recognized that help was needed. With much deliberation and coaxing, a helper/teacher and a student/helper were found to receive, carry, learn and deliver the seven teachings which would help Anishinaabe live in a strong, respectful, kind way leading to balance and harmony with all of creation. It is however the journey that holds the wealth of knowledge. It is the journey in which we are opened to wisdom, love, respect, bravery, honesty, humility and truth. The journey helps us see the opposites of each; ignorance, hate, disrespect, cowardliness, dishonesty, superiority and biases. We are challenged again to live in harmony; remembering our challenge to live in harmony and balance.

**Task Force Protocols and Guiding Principles: Standards for Collaborative Action Research**

The *Protocols and Guiding Principles for Conducting and for the Implementation of Research using First Nation, Inuit and Métis Knowledge* are important to ensure that all research “involving First Nations, Inuit and Métis peoples is conducted with the appropriate respect to all cultures, languages, knowledge and values of FNMI peoples and to the standards used by FNMI peoples to validate tradition” (Task Force on Aboriginal Languages and Cultures on Aboriginal Languages and Cultures, 2005, p. 125). We discuss the expectations identified in the *Expected Protocol* section of the document on page 125.

***Protocol: Research in First Nation, Inuit and Métis studies must benefit FNIM at a local level***

Educational research should be a site for contesting and renegotiating identities and for questioning dominant assumptions about what is important for children to learn, what is meant by literacy, and how literacy should be taught. These critiques are when research methods make it possible for “all players to participate in the reflexive critique necessary to facilitate such reconstitution” (Darlaston-Jones, et. al., 2014, p. 88). As Kovach (2005) explains, this respect for “people’s ability to shape and change their own destiny” (p. 30) aligns with a key assumption of an Indigenous epistemology: “receptivity and relationship between researcher and participants” (p. 28). Collaborative action research creates spaces for these relationships, as teachers are involved throughout the research process. Teacher researchers work with university researchers to develop research questions and purposes that are based on their observations of students’ learning and their own professional learning needs. In their collaborative action research, teacher researchers try a new pedagogical approach, and then observe and gather information about students’ learning. Teacher researchers in the NOW Play project are involved in the data collection. They video-record children’s interactions and photograph children’s drawings, scribbles and writing that are part of the play. They upload these digital forms of data to the project website where research assistants transcribe the videos. Teacher researchers then interpret the data alongside colleagues and a university researcher. The results of this collaborative analysis are used to determine the effectiveness of the approach. There is a cycle of collaborative goal-setting and planning. In the process, teaching approaches are refined as the data show changes in what students know and are able to do as a result of the teaching initiatives in each cycle (Burns, 2010).

Collaborative action research starts with an assumption that it takes time to develop relationships and build trust between teacher researchers, community members and university researchers in order for these conversations to take place. Relationship building is only possible when researchers devote sizeable amounts of face-to-face time to meet and talk with community members. The first year of the NOW Play research project involved visits to two northern Ontario Indigenous communities to meet with Education Directors, principals and Band Council members who are on the Local Education Authority, as well as teachers who indicated an interest in participating in the project while attending a conference hosted by the Kwayaciiwin Education Resource Centre (KERC) in Sioux Lookout, Ontario. Amanda McLean accompanied the university researchers each time. She introduced the university researcher to community members as someone she trusted and the project as one from which the community could benefit.

In the second year, the university researcher and a graduate research assistant visited each community five times throughout the school year. Each time, university researchers and teacher researchers took up roles with the children in dramatic play and their play with blocks, sometimes video-recording children’s play, as well. After school, teacher researchers met with the university researchers to talk about patterns observed in the children’s oral language and writing. The teacher researchers’ knowledge of community values, ways of interacting, and expectations for children’s behaviour and learning were

the foundation for creating new understandings about the children's language and writing that reflect the Indigenous community's cultural perspectives and values.

We believe that the emerging findings of our NOW Play project offer alternative views to those entrenched within dominant narratives. Rather than relying on data sources that are culturally-biased, such as standardized tests that present a deficit view of Indigenous children's language, we gather information about what children can do with language in everyday classroom play activities. For example, we noticed that children were using language for a great number of purposes in their dramatic play and play with blocks. Looking across all of the children's utterances that were recorded by teacher researchers and university researchers over a nine-month period, we identified 35 specific uses of language. There were no patterns of difference in the range of language uses when comparing the play interactions of Indigenous children in northern Ontario classrooms and those of non-Indigenous children in northern Alberta classrooms. Language uses included more sophisticated purposes related to higher-level thinking, such as making generalizations and providing explanations, as well as purposes related to getting along, such as encouraging peers and negotiating to get an object from peers, and language for imagining, such as introducing a new narrative or moving the narrative in a new direction.

In addition to contributing to pedagogical knowledge, in the ongoing research project teacher researchers are developing their own theories and principles of effective teaching as they implement practices that they find to be effective in their own research. Reflective conversations with colleagues and the university researcher about the action research findings, also part of collaborative action research, contribute to teachers' confidence in their practice, their sense of professionalism and their greater depth of knowledge (Furlong & Salisbury, 2005). In the NOW Play collaborative action research, the university researcher meets regularly with teacher researchers, providing ongoing access to research results and inviting teachers' input. During visits to participating Indigenous communities, she also meets with school principals and education directors to keep them up-to-date on research activities and to invite their feedback. The reciprocity of input and the feedback between community leaders, teacher researchers and university researchers enriches the research findings and contributes to professional learning. This capacity-building, together with long-term positive outcomes for children's learning and sense of self, are positive outcomes of the action research process for Indigenous communities.

***Protocol: Researchers must be cognizant that First Nation, Inuit, or Métis research in any context is determined by traditions of thought and the experiences of FNMI peoples***

Given the abundant research explaining that disparities in literacy learning arise because of inconsistencies between home and school literacy and language practices (Arnold & Doctoroff, 2003; Heath, 1983; MacNaughton, 2006), there is a need for research that investigates ways to "bridge Indigenous family and community cultural and linguistic experiences with school-based literacy expectations and practices [in order to improve] their educational outcomes and future success and well-being" (Hare, 2012, p. 391). A primary goal of research should be a valuing of Indigenous knowledge and pedagogy (Battiste, 2002). Additionally, educational research in Indigenous communities should be



geared toward the enhancement of Indigenous children's learning and their development of a positive sense of self. Such research should strive to disrupt "discourses of disadvantage and exclusion derived from the structural violence of systemic racism" (Darlaston-Jones, et al., 2014, p. 89). When examining community practices, researchers should recognize the heterogeneous and dynamic nature of community knowledges and practices, and be aware that community practices may not be free from discourses of disadvantage and exclusion.

A key assumption underlying collaborative action research in general and the NOW Play project in particular, is that local knowledge is essential to an accurate understanding of student needs within specific classroom contexts (Hughes, 2003). Teacher researchers contribute their experience and knowledge about their students and community throughout the research process (Thohahoken, 2011). Students' needs come first when determining the research focus and their experiences and perspectives are critically important in the interpretation of data. Teacher researchers and university researchers are considered to be co-researchers who learn from other's knowledge and expertise.

Integral to collaborative action research is the practice of drawing upon participants' knowledge and experience to guide the course of the research. This important principle of collaborative research aligns with a key assumption of Indigenous epistemology—that experience is a legitimate way of knowing (Kovach, 2005). The NOW Play research project started with the issues and concerns of the teacher researchers and school administrators in participating Indigenous communities and the research moved into unanticipated directions that teacher researchers deemed were important to supporting their and their students' learning. Teacher researchers started gathering data when their students were playing outdoors, for example, and together we examined children's language in their interactions on the playground. Grade 1 teachers were concerned that allotting time for play would take away from curriculum learning, so together we produced an alternative that we call creative, collaborative curriculum learning (CCCA) that takes a playful approach to learning.

Additionally, Indigenous teacher researchers who are participating in the NOW Play research study have been supporting all teachers to incorporate the Seven Grandfather Teachings into the play activities and the teaching interventions to support children's oral language and writing.

Carrying out action research with children, teachers and other community members in northern Indigenous communities has led us to believe that the expectations and values that non-Indigenous education researchers bring to research conducted in Indigenous communities need to change. We conclude by discussing these needed changes.

#### **ALTERNATIVE APPROACHES FOR NON-INDIGENOUS RESEARCHERS CONDUCTING RESEARCH IN INDIGENOUS COMMUNITIES**

Indigenous researchers have affirmed the importance and value of their perspectives and values for conducting research in Indigenous education for over 40 years (e.g., Absolon,

2011; National Indian Brotherhood, 1972; Kirkness & Barnhardt, 1991; Kovach, 2009; Smith, 1999; Weber-Pillwax, 2001; Wilson, 2008). These perspectives and values, adopted in Canadian policy as Chapter 9 of the *Tri-Council Policy Statement on Research Ethics* (Government of Canada, 2014), require a shift in views of what is typically valued in education research in order for research to have a positive impact on Indigenous children's learning. We outline these shifts, drawing on NOW Play collaborative action research experience.

*The goal of producing short-term results with minimal investment of time in the data collection process should shift to the goal of producing enduring results that may require long-term investment.*

Devoting considerable time and developing relationships are essential to honouring the 4R's, particularly a sense of responsibility and reciprocity. This relationship-building requires substantial time commitments on the part of the researcher and sizeable amounts of funding to cover the expense of travel to northern communities. In the second year of the NOW Play project, for example, teacher researchers are taking the lead more often in determining the direction of the research, are finding it easier to get parents' consent because the project and the university researchers are familiar to them, and are taking many more videos of their students' interactions than they were in the first year. Teacher researchers have invited colleagues to participate in the second year of the project, as well. Whereas the first year of the NOW Play project was a time of getting to know and trust each other, teacher researchers have been confidently implementing what they have been learning about early writing development and play-based pedagogy in their classroom practice in the second year. Teacher researchers tell stories of the excitement of their students in participating in the play and creative collaborative curriculum activities, and about children's learning.

*Expectations regarding who owns data, in addition to who disseminates research results and the accessibility of those results need to shift.*

There should be an assumption of shared ownership of data and of co-constructed research reports. Publishing research findings using Open Source forums that are widely available to other Indigenous communities makes it possible for larger-scale benefits of the research. With access to research findings, educational leaders and teachers in other Indigenous communities, either in collaboration with university researchers and Aboriginal institutions, or on their own, can adapt the findings to the needs and issues specific to their communities. As an example, teacher researchers participating in the NOW Play project created artifacts (e.g., PowerPoint presentations, poems, collages, video recordings of dance performances) that have been uploaded to the project's public website ([now-play.org](http://now-play.org)) for other teachers to benefit from their learning over the past two years.

*In place of an emphasis on wide generalizability of findings, research should be designed with the goal of addressing issues and questions that are of value to participating Indigenous communities.*

Inherent within Indigenous epistemology is the expectation that researchers will feel a sense of "reciprocity and accountability" to research participants and their communities (Kovach, 2005, p. 28). Meaningful benefits to research participants should be built into every research design. Giving and contributing should be viewed as

integral to the role of the researcher. A research focus on local needs, rather than on generalizability of findings to other contexts also makes it possible for the research process and results to reflect the diverse perspectives and values of Indigenous communities across Canada. As such, it is important that Indigenous teachers and community members are co-constructors of knowledge in educational research, rather than the research subjects. In the NOW Play project, for example, the values, socio-cultural understandings and ways of interacting within each participating community are recognized and valued, and the interests and needs of students in individual teachers' classrooms are the focus. In one teacher researcher's classroom, the creative collaborative curriculum activity centers on play in the snow, for example, whereas another teacher researcher's focus is on traditional hunting and involves inviting a community Elder to demonstrate skinning a rabbit.

Collaborative action research values, goals and practices have much in common with guiding principles for conducting research with educators and community members in First Nation, Inuit and Metis communities, as outlined in the Task Force on Aboriginal Languages and Cultures on Aboriginal Languages and Cultures' (2005) document and in chapter 9 of the *Tri-Council Policy Statement on Research Ethics* (Government of Canada, 2014). Collaborative action research relationships are built on values of humility, honesty and mutual respect for all involved. Researchers start with a desire to give to participating communities in accordance with what community members identify as helpful, and to honour Indigenous teachings and knowledges, and ways of being and interacting. Throughout the collaborative endeavor, there is a spirit of reciprocity, as all parties have a sincere interest in constructing knowledge together. In the process, they work toward creating understandings about teaching and learning that bring about positive change.

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