

**Understanding Self and the Other: Hermeneutic Pedagogy and Dialogic Instruction in  
Teacher Guided Novel Study**

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By

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## **Abstract**

The English Language Arts classroom has long placed reading and writing for, as, and of learning on a pedestal limiting the opportunities of those who do not excel in these areas to fully partake in learning. To fully engage students in the critical thinking and learning in English Language Arts (ELA), more needs to be done to develop cultures of conversation. The purpose of this study was to examine the impact that hermeneutic pedagogy and dialogic instruction could have on educators in their attempt to engage students and to increase discourse during the planning and implementation of the teacher guided novel study. Hermeneutics and dialogism encourage participants to consider their own and other's perspectives as they interpret numerous texts—written, oral, visual—and make sense of the world within which they live. This self-study looked at how the teaching of Frederik Backman's *Beartown* through the lens of hermeneutics and dialogism allowed for the building of a culturally responsive classroom. The findings of this research assess the value of hermeneutics and dialogism in the ELA classroom and how these instructional tools can support teachers in integrating diverse voices and stories into their program.

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## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

At the heart of dialogism and hermeneutics is an attempt to better understand the self and the other by investigating, analyzing, and interpreting our experiences and the stories we tell in relation to those experiences. As such, this thesis is my story and my experience with dialogism and hermeneutics: it is an account of an educator seeking new ways to bring literature to students in a way that is culturally responsive and anti-oppressive and in a way that promotes critical thinking and discourse. It is the account of an educator engaging in conversation with the self and with others in seeking answers to the question: Can the use of hermeneutic pedagogy and dialogic instruction support educators in creating anti-oppressive content and classroom culture?

I feel that it is important to recognize that as I write this the world is in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic which has altered teaching and education in ways many of us could not have predicated. Dialogic instruction is about how we create spaces for real, spontaneous, and meaningful conversations in our classrooms with each other and with the texts we read. However, much of how we build that culture of conversation has been removed from the classroom. We are forced into rows, students are asked to face forward, partner work and side-by-side learning is restricted, social distancing means limited opportunities for partner sharing, masks mean limited opportunities to read the words we do not say but wear on our faces. We are in a different learning environment than the one when I began this journey. I hope that my learning reflects both those worlds, but even more, I hope that it will allow me to be a better educator in this new world and the one that I will enter when the masks come off.



## **Beginnings: Student**

Much like Scout Finch in Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*, I do not remember a time before I could read. For me, books have always been a tool for learning, a comfort in moments of angst or unknowing, an escape from the day-to-day stressors that plague us. For as long as I can remember, all I have wanted to do is read and talk about books. This meant that when it came to school, I was successful in my English Language Arts classes. I recall my Grade 6 teacher telling my parents that I had scored off the charts in reading comprehension on the Canadian Test of Basic Skills (CTBS). My love for reading and literature meant that I had the skills to succeed in the traditional classroom. I was capable of reading for understanding, and I was able to reply to answers correctly. I used to think this meant that I was a good student. I now understand that what this truly means is that I was good at 'student-ing': I was able to decipher text without much guidance and provide the necessary answers for full marks. And, for a while, the A's and the A+'s were enough for me and left me without much to question or think about in my education. This changed for me in Grade 9 while studying an abridged version of Mary Shelly's *Frankenstein*. On an assessment piece we were asked to write about our opinion of Frankenstein's monster. And I did. I remember clearly empathizing with the monster as this lost entity unable to understand his place in the world after being abandoned by his maker. I also remember clearly being given a 0/5 on that question. I was devastated. Eventually I garnered the strength to approach my teacher and ask why I had lost marks, to which he responded, "I just disagree with you." It took every ounce of my fourteen-year-old courage to reply, "But you asked for my opinion, how can my own thinking be wrong?" Now, putting aside the fact that I stand by my take on the monster as the more accurate one, the important lesson that I took away

from this moment was that when it comes to critical analysis of a text, as long as one is able to defend their thinking, there can be no wrong answer.

This lesson was further solidified in my fourth year of my Bachelor of Arts English degree at the University of Saskatchewan when a professor wrote on a paper I had written, “I disagree with the entirety of your argument.” Just as in Grade 9, I was devastated. All my hard work and my interpretation and my understanding seemed for naught. However, on turning to the back of the page and seeing my grade, I saw that, regardless of my professor’s distaste for my argument, he accepted the value of my defense. This has shaped much of my approach in supporting student thinking in the classroom. I encourage my students to disagree with me and with each other as they pose and defend their thinking. In my classroom, we avoid thinking in terms of right or wrong answers, rather we seek to explain and defend how we came to a certain way of thinking. But the question remained: How do I get them to that place of academic discourse?

### **Beginnings: Teacher**

When students ask me why I became a teacher, my first response is often because it was a career that allowed me to spend my days sharing and discussing my passion for reading. Unfortunately, early in my career I found that most of my time in the English Language Arts (ELA) classroom was spent assisting students in answering prescribed questions in a prescribed format that often reflected my own thinking, or worse the answer key, more so than theirs. I struggled continuously with how to engage students in the reading and inspire them to think critically about the texts we were studying. Why did they not love the same books I had always loved? Why did they not engage with the stories and the worlds in the pages the same way I had? Perhaps the traditional approach to teaching ELA that had been successful with me only worked

because I was already a book lover, it had not actually turned me into a book lover. Even more significant, perhaps those stories from the English canon resonated with me because I—a white, middle-class, heterosexual, female—was easily able to identify with the protagonists in ways that marginalized students could not. As a new teacher in 2006, I had never heard the terms culturally responsive teaching, anti-oppressive teaching, or decolonizing the curriculum. I thought good literature was that which came from the English canon and that all it would take was some enthusiasm to capture the imaginations of my students. And so, with this limited scope of the journey ahead of me, I began to look at other ways of approaching literature and story that might engage students in ways beyond attaining right answers and good grades. In doing so, one of the questions I started with was how I had learned best when I was a student.

It was in 2015 when the answer truly began to take shape. I was in attendance at the literacy institute hosted by my school division. I had been to several of these literacy professional development courses in the past and had tried every trick and tip they had offered with little success in lighting the light of literary love in my students that I was desperate for. As such, I was not expecting much from this one. I had never heard of the speaker before, but it was not long into her presentation that I was completely captivated. Penny Kittle began to articulate the same questions I had been mulling for quite some time and then provided strategies on how I could find answers to those questions in my own classroom. I learned about writers' notebooks, readers' notebooks, quick writing, conferring authentically, and more. In that weekend, I learned that I did not need to completely transform my classroom, I only needed to tweak a few strategies and focus on providing students with opportunities to explore what was important to them in their reading and writing.

## **Beginnings: Student...Again!**

For the past ten years, conversations about work inevitably led toward an admittance that I was planning on going back to university to complete a master's degree in curriculum studies. In 2019, all those years of talk finally became action. I remember the nerves and the trepidation of re-entering the world of academia from a student perspective: the feeling of being completely out of my depth and the real fear that soon I would be realized for a fraud. Self doubt infiltrated my brain as I worried whether I would know the same things others knew, would I be able to keep up with the conversations, and of course, what if I am not in the right classroom and what if no one wants to sit near me? Fortunately, it did not take long for these nerves and worries to subside as class began and I found that I was still able to perform as a student. However, as I drove home from that first class, I could not help but think about how the worries of being a student have the potential to keep one from partaking in academics. Are my students consumed with worry about where to sit, who to sit with, and being revealed as a fraud? My nerves were quelled because I have a confident grasp of the preferred methods of academia—reading and writing—but what if I did not have those skills? What if the primary methods of learning and assessment happened to be my two greatest weaknesses? It was not long after that first class that I began to consider more earnestly the power of talk in the classroom as an instructional strategy and an assessment tool in an ELA classroom which has traditionally been focused on reading and writing as the primary means of accessing information and delivering understanding.

## **Connections**

As an educator, one of the greatest struggles I frequently find myself in is in delivering the curriculum and ensuring that my students are getting an equitable and competitive education while allowing for freedom of thinking and freedom of expression of knowledge. As teachers,

we are so pressured to ensure that curriculum outcomes are met that at times it feels as though we lose sight of the learning: assessment becomes paramount to learning. In fact, while attending the teacher introduction course for the new ELA 30 curriculum, we were told that the document was no longer a guide but was now to be viewed as a directive—a mandatory list of skills that every student in Saskatchewan would acquire. That moment has lived in my memory and niggles at my conscience every time I try something different with a class. I question whether I have done my students a disservice if they have only written one essay in a semester, or only read five short stories, and what if we did not have enough time to read a full-length fiction and non-fiction text. At times it feels like we are handcuffed to the curriculum and are unable to provide our students with what they need or want because we are so focused on checking off all the necessary boxes. To meet the demands of the curriculum, I relied heavily on direct instruction, question and response, and other traditional instructional strategies that I felt provided my students with the correct information they needed in order to be successful on assessments. However, while students did well on said assessments, the reality was that their responses all ended up being varying degrees of the same thought: my thoughts, or the thoughts of literary experts. They were not the individual thoughts or experiences of my students. While they were able to pass my class, the truth was that I was failing them. I had become so preoccupied with outcomes as assessments that I had forgone the learning. Then, in 2014 while attending a professional development seminar through my division I heard the phrase, ‘The person doing the talking is the person doing the thinking.’<sup>1</sup> It was a thunderclap, an epiphany, a shot to the stomach. I was the one talking, not my students. I kept reading my own thoughts written back to

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<sup>1</sup> I can no longer remember who the speaker of this phrase was, and the internet attributes it to several different people.

me because they were the only thoughts I was validating in my classroom. It was time to incorporate genuine and meaningful talk into my instructional repertoire.

One of the first attempts I made at incorporating authentic talk began with trying to model those moments in my own learning when dialogue was the main tool for learning. I thought back to the seminar classes I had taken while doing my Bachelor of Arts English degree. I thought of how much learning had happened as six people sat around a table and talked about and disagreed about literature. All the professor had to do was pose a question and we were off, sometimes spending the entire seminar on that single question. Could my Grade 12 students manage the same? We were studying William Shakespeare's *Hamlet* at the time, and I thought I would start small with the question, "Did Hamlet ever really love Ophelia?" I often look back at the hour that was consumed by that question as one of the greatest learning moments in my career. Students were standing up at their desks trying to get a word in; they were flipping to specific quotes to defend their thinking; they were arguing with such passion that I genuinely thought I might have to step in and break it up. More than anything though, they were learning. They were doing the talking and the thinking. What I didn't realize at the time, was that I was engaging in hermeneutics and dialogism with my students. The conversation that ensued was engaging because there was no one way to get to the answer. Arguably, there is no one answer. As the teacher, I had a goal for my students which was to develop and defend an opinion, but as the questioner, I had no one answer myself. According to Gadamer, the question was genuine because it was presented to the students when the answer had yet to be determined while at the same time providing a sense to "which the direction to *that* question must come" (Palmer, 1969, p. 199). What followed was true dialogue in that students were not simply arguing with one another to prove themselves right but were testing their assertions and challenging each other's

perspectives. Each student brought with them different experiences of love and thereby different interpretations of the word. Before they would be able to answer the question, they would first have to understand their understanding of love and whether that understanding could be applied to Hamlet and Ophelia. I needed to build this into my instructional strategies more than ever. I was not aware of it at the time, but this moment began my foray into dialogic instruction.

My first attempt at using the seminar—what I would come to find out was the Socratic Seminar which had evolved from the Socratic Method designed by Nelson and Heckman (Mitchell, 2006)—in my teaching was an attempt to move from the traditional question and answer novel study. However, as I was unsure of how successful the strategy would be, I offered it to students as an alternate method of assessment. Students who signed up for the seminar would commit to taking on the facilitation of group conversation for one chapter. They would be assigned topics to cover and questions to answer, but their primary focus was to encourage conversation. The information they prepared was to act as the incitement of dialogue. Only six students took me up on the offer and so we divvied out the twelve chapters of William Golding's *Lord of the Flies*, two per student. By chapter three, the students in the seminar group were showing engagement levels far beyond what I was used to seeing in the classroom and it was not long after that that administration was coming in to watch the learning they were hearing about. However, what really struck me was not just that my students were actively directing their own learning and conversations, but I too was an active learner. I still credit students with some of the new insights I gleaned through their dialogue. What I owe most to this group, however, is the lesson that when students are given the opportunity to talk about literature and decide for themselves what is important, the learning that happens is far more meaningful and lasting than anything I could convey through lecture, note-taking, or comprehension question and answer

assessments. I took the successes of this little experiment and immediately applied it to all my novel studies, and I continue to see those successes today:

Such an encouraging day today discussing Joseph Boyden's *Three Day Road*. We were allowed to use the library as a space for learning and students were able to set up desks in a socially distanced circle...we were finally able to take part in a conversation where we weren't just looking at the back of someone's head. And they shared! Students who are normally quiet and reserved were motivated to speak; dare I say compelled to speak. Yes, they talked over each other at times, but more out of a need to share their thinking than as rudeness. And the ideas they shared were rich and meaningful and carried the conversation into directions I hadn't anticipated. In the hour of class time, we were only able to get through five of the ten assigned questions and students eagerly asked if we could continue tomorrow. A successful day was much needed for us all. (personal journal, 2020)

Aside from the lack of authentic dialogue, one of the other issues I found with the traditional novel study—which is often structured in a read this, answer this format—is that students spend more time trying to figure out what someone else thinks is important or the right answer while being provided little time to discern what is important to them. To move away from this, one of the first things I got rid of in my classroom was the standard question and answer approach to assessment. Instead, students are provided with focus for reading—a selection of themes or motifs present in the readings—and are tasked with finding moments in the text that articulate those ideas or that stand out to them as readers. In this, students come to read like writers as they look for the moves writers make (Kittle & Gallagher, 2019). While reading, students are focused on not only deciphering the text but looking for the deeper



meanings and the connections they make with the text. This allows students to make meaning based on their own curiosities and their own experiences. From these connections, students begin to annotate the text providing analysis of character, plot, theme, and literary devices. By the end of a novel study, student notebooks are full of their unique understanding of the novel and the important details they choose to take away. This method of assessment, my first approach at hermeneutic pedagogy, avoids the old habit of seeking right answers and allows students to delve into the literature in a way that encourages them to reflect on how the literature impacts them as readers and as humans.

It was not long after I had established what I wanted my novel studies to look like that I began to question the books we were reading. When it came to stocking our classroom libraries and selecting teaching texts, the common phrase among my colleagues at the time was “No more dead white guys.” I wanted to provide my students with texts that reflected their lives and their values, but I also believed it was necessary to challenge their thinking and provide them with opportunities to see the world from varying perspectives. While text selection was a constant struggle for me, it was while sitting in a master’s class when the real question I had was articulated. There in front of me, written in bold black letters was the question, “Whose knowledge?” Whose knowledge are we honouring in the texts we select and the way we assess student understanding of said texts? It was one of those “Aha” moments we seek in our students, only I was the one who had finally got it. In the past, I had chosen texts that I loved and that had resonated with me with the hopes that they would fuel the same love for literature in my students. What I had failed to see in the past was that my experiences allowed me to connect with those texts. What I now understood was that I and my students had different experiences and would require different texts. Now, I can think of little else:

When I look back at my notes and journals, I notice that a lot of what I write begins with questions. As I attempt to learn new content and grapple with these ideas that seem too big for me to understand, I break them down into manageable questions that I may or may not be able to answer, but at least I am able to see the path they lead me down. I am comfortably resigned to not knowing the answers to some of these questions that tumble around my brain, but the one question I cannot leave alone lately is, “Whose knowledge am I honouring?” This question has pervaded my mind and will not allow me any time off. Every book we read, chapter we study, poem we dissect, I am haunted by the thought, “Whose knowledge does this honour?” (personal journal, 2020).

I have come to understand that I owe it to my students not only to honour their knowledge and their experiences, but also to provide them with various opportunities to expand and explore these areas. I must provide them with literature and content that acts as a mirror and a window so that they leave my classroom with a sense of self and an understanding of the world around them.

### **Positionality**

It would have been easier to walk away. I could have just kept my mouth shut, moved on with the day’s lesson, and avoided further conflict. I could have just walked away and not said anything...because I’m white and that’s my privilege. I could have just walked away. How many times have I taken that option, knowingly or otherwise? How many times have I cut short racist rhetoric and just moved on with the lesson without any real opposition or lesson outside of, “We don’t say those things in this classroom”? Have I ever explained why we don’t say those hateful words? Have I actually provided my students with opportunities to educate themselves on the connotations of hate and racist

speech? Have I actually educated myself? How many times have I walked the road of privilege and walked away? Today I didn't. Today I walked forward. Today was a really hard day. Tomorrow will be harder as now I must journey down this path with my students although it would be much easier to walk away. (personal journal, 2020)

I love literature. I love teaching literature. I love analyzing and talking about literature. My greatest desire as an educator is that students will leave my classroom with these same loves. This passion drives my teaching, but it also means that I have an inherent bias in the approaches I have taken in the research task. I sought out ways to incorporate dialogic instruction and hermeneutic pedagogy into the classroom with a pre-conceived notion that they would be successful based on my limited previous work with them. I entered the research believing that by incorporating more opportunities for students to have meaningful dialogue with texts and with each other that they would develop a better understanding of the literature, and of themselves and the world they inhabit. It was important that I not only be aware of this bias, but that I constantly maintain a critical eye over the work I was performing. I needed to ensure that successes were not over glorified and that failures were not glossed over. As I was the sole researcher and participant, I needed to recognize that each role had the potential to interfere with and influence the other and to be open to the possibility that incorporating dialogism and hermeneutics into my instructional repertoire may not have the desired outcomes I was seeking.

As part of the research goal was to incorporate the view of the Other into my classroom, as the researcher I needed to situate myself to better understand the Other. In doing so, I was able to recognize the power and privilege I had in the classroom and acknowledge how this had shaped previous instructional choices. I am a white, heterosexual, female of settler-Canadian descent. These qualifiers of power and privilege have often led me to select texts that reflect

Western worldviews and normative values. I hold an honours B.A. in English. This has led me to hold fast to the traditions of the English canon with little previous question to its modern validity. I have taught what I was taught because those texts were mirrors of my own worldviews, my values, my experiences. I have had the privilege to never consider whether these stories reflected the experiences of other people. It is the understanding of this previous ignorance and continuing privilege that I wanted to look at strategies that would honour experiences of other voices both inside and outside of my classroom.

### **Research Question**

From the time I was a child listening to my parents read me stories, through my younger years spending all my allowance on books, to earning a B.A. in English and becoming an ELA educator, literature has been my passion. I have always been a reader. Writing has rarely been an obstacle to relaying my knowledge. I never had to work through difficulty or adversity when it came to acquiring the necessary skills to be successful in the classroom because I could read and write. But now I find myself wondering how I can help the students who enter my classroom who do not have the advantages I have had: how can I build a passion in students who struggle with reading and writing, the skills that are the bedrock of ELA; how can I tap into students' knowledge of themselves and the world they live beyond the traditional scope of ELA. These questions have led me to explore hermeneutic pedagogy and dialogic instruction leading to my final question: How can the strategic use of dialogic instruction and hermeneutic pedagogy support educators in creating culturally responsive content when implementing the teacher guided novel study?

## **Chapter 2: Literature Review**

The following is an examination of the historical roots of dialogic instruction and hermeneutic pedagogy and the current trends and implications of these methodologies in a modern classroom. The literature considers the historical roots of each concept as well as the effect of these practices on teachers' pedagogy and student learning. While conversation and textual analysis are not new theories to education, recent literature suggests that they have not been used to their best effect. Educators need to focus on supporting—or scaffolding—students as they develop conversation skills that encourage challenging their own thinking by recognizing the voice of the other and challenging previously held perceptions of the world in which they live. A common thread within the studies surrounding dialogism and hermeneutic pedagogy is that teachers need to re-evaluate their role in the classroom and provide more opportunities for students to drive the course of their own learning. To analyze their learning, another recurring theme within the literature suggests that students be further supported in their appreciation of language and its role in the development of identity as well as its role in socio-political power dynamics. A final theme is the importance of text studies—through reading, writing, and conversing—in providing students with opportunities to challenge thinking through encounters with the other. By selecting relevant texts and authentic writing activities while also providing students with choice, educators support students as they develop more open-minded and inclusive worldviews that reflect anti-oppressive education.

### **Coming to Know the Language of Dialogism and Hermeneutics**

In beginning my exploration of the areas of hermeneutics and dialogism, I quickly realized that I had a lot to learn in terms of the language of these theories. I also came to

understand that for most of the terms, there was no easy definition to resort to. Rather, each was layered with history, context, and interpretation. As I came to understand the meaning of the words and build my own understanding, their true meaning became all the more apparent, and I soon realized that I was taking part in the very processes I was trying to define. I would talk with friends and family about my readings, I would make notes in the margins asking questions and jotting down thoughts, I would make connections to previous knowledge. I came to understand that for me, it was impossible to learn about hermeneutics and dialogism without practicing them. The following is an account of that learning: a brief overview of the terms, their history, and their relevance to the classroom and my research.

### **Dialogism**

Dialogism is the exploration of meaning through conversation or dialogue. However, for Mikhail Bakhtin dialogism is much more than talk but also considers the significance of language. For Bakhtin (2017), the word is multi-layered and the voice speaking the word is equally multi-layered by the context within which they live and their belief systems, what he would term heteroglossia. As educators, this becomes important to understand for we must consider not only author's intent or character's motivation when reading a text, but also our students and how their socio-political and cultural belief systems will dictate their ability to construct meaning and what meaning they will construct. Furthermore, words take on meaning in accordance with our experiences and, as such, the works we read and interact with are interpreted through the perspective of individual experience:

The word, directed toward its object, enters a dialogically agitated and tension-filled environment of alien words, value judgements and accents, weaves in and out of complex interrelationships, merges with some, recoils from others, intersects with yet a third

group...The living utterance, having taken meaning and shape at a particular historical moment in a socially specific environment, cannot fail to brush up against thousands of living dialogic threads, woven by socio-ideological consciousness around the given object of utterance; it cannot fail to become an active participant in social dialogue.

(Bakhtin, 2017, p. 276)

We must remember that intent is only part of the meaning making that happens in discourse; rather, perception based on experience is the key to understanding—“discourse is [...] dialogized in the belief system of the reader” (p. 283)—and we must remember that our students come to us with diverse experiences.

### **Dialogic Instruction**

Dialogic instruction occurs when teachers and students work collaboratively to make meaning through conversation with each other, with text, and with self. However, it is not enough to simply build conversation into the classroom, but it must be a type of conversation that allows for exploration and expression of self and the other. Teachers and students are active participants in the dialogue and questions seek to further understanding rather than to prompt specific responses. In this, dialogism moves from the tradition of the Socratic Method which sought right answers and moves toward a method that seeks to make critical thinkers of all participants. Rather, it seeks to accept that there will be a multitude of responses based on the various experiences had by the participants and that these responses are what drives the direction of discourse: “In the give and take of such talk, student responses and not just teacher questions shape the course of talk. The discourse in these classrooms is therefore less predictable and repeatable because it is "negotiated" and jointly determined—in character, scope, and direction—by both teachers and students as teachers pick up on, elaborate, and question what students say”

(Centre for Research on Dialogic Instruction and the In-Class Analysis of Classroom Discourse, 2017). This type of instruction may take the form of seminars in which teachers and students partake in discussion about a text or topic, in reader's notebooks where students are in dialogue with the text and at times the author, and in writer's notebooks where teacher and student converse with each other in writing.

## **Hermeneutics**

Hermeneutics is the theory of the interpretation and understanding of texts to gain knowledge. At its core, hermeneutics is the “art of understanding and of making oneself understood” (Zimmermann, 2005, p.5) and is focused on interpreting the various texts we encounter and making sense of those texts and the impact they have on our understanding of self. However, it is important to note that hermeneutics is not only applied when we are working toward mere comprehension of information but is also used as we try to grapple with that information and interpret it as a meaningful whole. As such, hermeneutics considers how the impact of language, socio-political and cultural frameworks, and history have shaped the way that we interpret and understand. It further claims that “our understanding of the world emerges through conversation with others, and that textual communication is an important part of this process” (p. 57). One of the first modern theorists in hermeneutics was Daniel Friedrich Schleiermacher who asserted that the hermeneutic process occurs when the hearer is able to receive and make meaning from the words of the speaker (Palmer, 1969, p. 86). Schleiermacher also contributed to our understanding of the hermeneutic circle—one cannot understand the whole without understanding the part, and one cannot understand the part without understanding the whole—by stating that we can only attain knowledge when we consider others ideas, concepts, and worldviews: “The hermeneutic circle means that *some* greater context always



influences how we understand a particular part...Our better understanding of particular lines will reshape our grasp of the whole” (Zimmermann, 2015, p. 26). In order to understand the text, we must also understand ourselves: our experiences will shape our interpretation, and our experience of the text will shape our sense of self.

Wilhelm Dilthey’s work in hermeneutics takes on a new significance as he came to it as more than just the interpretation of texts, but the study of how “life discloses and expresses itself in works” (Palmer, 1969, p. 114). Dilthy would also bring to hermeneutics the belief that in order to understand ourselves and others we must accept that we are beings who have made history and can only know ourselves through history. That is, we are the result of the contexts within which we live and the experiences we have as a result of these contexts (Zimmermann, 2015).

Understanding occurs when we are able to explore human experience through our own eyes and through the eyes of the other. This is what literature can provide for us, an opportunity to experience the world in ways beyond our own limited experiences and gain deeper understanding and knowledge: “Great literature is rooted in the lived experience of the riddles of life: the why and how of birth and death, joy and sorrow, love and hate, the power and the frailty of man, his ambiguous place in nature” (Palmer, 1969, p. 122). The text is the expression of human experience, and we are its interpreters.

Furthering the field of hermeneutics and its relevance in the classroom are Martin Heidegger and his student Hans-Georg Gadamer. Heidegger believed that interpretation is motivated by our personal interests and concerns. In the classroom, this means that students will interpret the text based on their experiences, which may be limited and layered with assumptions and biases. It is therefore the responsibility of educators in the humanities to present their students with texts that will challenge these limited scopes, make students aware of their

assumptions, and widen students' perspectives. This also means that as students expand their perspectives, they will approach the text in new ways. Our understanding emerges and is enriched through our experiences (Palmer, 1969). Gadamer's hermeneutics takes into account that we are all products of and participants in history which is "like a stream in which we move and participate in every act of understanding" (Zimmermann, 2015, p.41). Therefore, students need to be made aware that they are not separate from the past but are shaped by it and their interpretations of texts will be impacted by this. In understanding that their experiences are different than others based on their socio-cultural contexts, we come to understand that we are not knowers but rather experiencers who are trying to interpret the world as it opens up: "Reading a work is an event, a happening that takes place in time, and the meaning of the work for us is a product of the integration of our own present horizon and that of the work...An application to the present occurs in every act of understanding" (Palmer, 1969, p. 190). Much like dialogism, Gadamer's hermeneutics was also concerned with dialogue and the way we question one another and the text within that dialogue. According to Gadamer (Palmer, 1969), to ask a genuine question means to "place in the open" (p. 198) as there is no predetermined or sought for answer. The dialogue that follows is where understanding and knowledge are formed as students interact with one another and their experiences to articulate possible answers. It is important that members of the dialogue work toward testing each other's assertions rather than attempting to argue each other down if understanding is to be formed. This becomes an important aspect in hermeneutic pedagogy.

### **Hermeneutic Pedagogy**

Hermeneutic pedagogy takes shape when educators work alongside students to interpret their individual experiences, the contexts within which they find themselves, and how these

understandings can help them interpret and make meaning from texts; however, “In a classroom foregrounding interpretation, the teacher assumes that there is no ultimate, immanent meaning in a text, that is the activity of interpretation which continues to generate new textual meanings” (Sotirou, 1993, p. 369). This means that the hermeneutic teacher must be willing to accept multiple interpretations as knowledge is construct by students. It is also the role of teachers in a hermeneutic classroom to support the cultural awareness of students in their interpretive practice. The objective of the work is to broaden cultural horizons, so texts that are chosen for interpretation need to reflect that. Further to this, according to Palmer (1969), “Teachers of literature need to become experts in “translation” more than “analysis”; their task is to bring what is strange, unfamiliar, and obscure in its meaning into something meaningful that ‘speaks our language’” (p. 29). It is also the role of the educator to help students to interpret by taking part in the process and encouraging them to use their own experiences to understand texts more fully. Palmer further explains that in order for full understanding to occur, the interpreter “must have a general talent for empathizing with the thoughts of others” (p. 81). Educators can help their students explore this empathy by encouraging them to engage in relevant literature. When it comes to understanding the other, it can be said that the interpreter should have as much cultural knowledge as possible. A hermeneutic pedagogy holds the teacher responsible for providing students with cultural awareness so that they may better interpret texts, their world, the world of others, and themselves.

In the work of E. D. Hirsch, he came to distinguish between “meaning and significance to ensure that the object of interpretation is one ‘universally valid’ meaning. What we as readers then do with that meaning—how we apply it to our own context—constitutes the work’s significance, which changes from reader to reader” (Zimmermann, 2015, p. 60). For our

purposes in the classroom, this means that we can work with students to decipher the meaning of text by examining figurative language, characterization, and other elements of literature, but we must encourage and accept that the significance of this interpretation will differ from one student to the next. Our students are diverse and their responses to the texts they encounter will likewise be diverse.

### **Dialogic Instruction and Hermeneutic Pedagogy**

From changing instructional methods and access to ever changing technologies to social movements leading to the increase of anti-oppressive content in curriculums, the turn of the twenty-first century has borne witness to several changes in education and the dynamics of the classroom. In order to meet these changes and best serve the needs of our students, educators need to move toward pedagogical systems and instructional methods that are inclusive of diverse voices and cognisant of the myriad experiences that students bring to the classroom, and they can do so through the inclusion of hermeneutics and dialogism. The ELA classroom has long been considered the obvious choice for the learning that aids students in coming to understand their own identities, their place within larger social constructs, and their perception of others. Dialogic instruction and hermeneutic pedagogy in ELA support students not only in coming to understand themselves and the society within which they live, but it also provides them with opportunities to interact with and come to understand voices of the ‘Other’ (McHenry, 1999). As much of our time in ELA is spent analyzing and interpreting text, hermeneutics is an easy fit within any teacher’s pedagogical toolkit. In his work on hermeneutic pedagogy, Smith (2009) begins by providing an interpretation of post colonialism as being involved in the work of revealing that the Western tradition is no longer the dominant/prevaling carrier of universal truths and the impact that this knowledge has on modern education systems. He goes on to question the

evolving role of education in a world that recognizes that the system has been “complicit in the subjugation of many of the world’s peoples, peoples now claiming their place as interlocutors equal with anyone bold enough to make proposals about the future” (p. 251). This notion is brought to a stark reality when one considers much of the literature still used in today’s ELA courses. The books in classroom libraries are largely representative of the white, heteronormative structures that have long dominated worldviews, and the history texts fail to recognize that any valid history happened outside of the European experience. If our students are to see themselves and each other as valid voices with agency, then we must work to bring them face-to-face with stories of their existence. This variety is important if we are to work toward providing students with the vast amount of information they need to make sense of the world in which they live and to construct meaning from their experiences and the experiences of others. This is where hermeneutic pedagogy becomes a valuable model for educators as it seeks to do more than previous pedagogical models such as the transmission model or facilitator model. According to Smith, in the hermeneutic model teachers act as interpreters of culture and as such they must be able to “speak across disciplines, across cultures, and across national boundaries” (p. 255). The perspective shifts from receiving an education to being a constant learner and being open to the various ways that we can make sense of the world we live in. In this learning environment, the teacher is an active participant in the learning and engages with students as new understandings are developed: “The pedagogical modus of the hermeneutic classroom is *dialogue*, in which the teacher has the capacity to interpret culture and information in such a way that students can appreciate their participation in it” (p. 255). The hermeneutic classroom then is one that sees teacher and students working together to understand text and experience as they strive to make sense of a culturally diverse world.

Through the perspective of hermeneutic pedagogy, we move beyond interpretation of the text for mere comprehension toward an interpretation of the human condition and the implications for our own lives. Furthermore, and perhaps more critically, through hermeneutics we are able to use texts to present our students with the opportunity to investigate, interpret, and make meaning of what it means to be human through the lenses of various cultural perspectives. This connects with the notion of the engaged self “that is fundamentally connected to the world and to other people” (Zimmermann, 2015, p. 11). Whereas the disengaged self believes that truth is something that happens through empirical observations and removal of the self, the engaged self differs in that it recognizes that truth is an event that we are actively engaged in as it has an evolving nature (Zimmermann, 2015). However, it is to be noted that hermeneutics does not deny the value of empirical truth but accepts that it is not the only way to achieve truth and understanding. It also goes further to suggest that truth is something that can evolve: as we encounter new realities and new perspectives, our understanding of the truth of the human condition evolves. Through hermeneutic pedagogy, we work alongside our students and work with them through the interpretation of texts which will ultimately lead toward the interpretation of and understanding of self and others (Smith, 1999; Sotirou, 1993). The voice of the ‘Other’ is an integral part in hermeneutic pedagogy which strives to see individual pieces as well as the whole - the forest cannot be separated from the trees and vice versa (Zimmermann, 2015). To achieve this, hermeneutic pedagogy uses texts to explore different modes of thinking and understanding; it seeks to understand larger themes regarding the human condition by understanding and interpreting what has been written down. Furthermore, when we come to understand something, we must consider other interpretations and other perceptions in doing so. We are constantly involved in learning moments and opportunities, and we are the product of our

own experiences, but also of the experiences of others, and because of this our learning and our knowledge becomes layered with the voice of the other. This aligns with Rosenblatt's work on reader-response theory in which she states, "Teachers need constantly to remind themselves that reading is always a particular event in a particular reader at a particular time under a particular circumstance" (1991, p. 445). We need to be sure that all the variables that could potentially impact interpretation are taken into consideration and are honoured in the ways students make meaning. However, in order for hermeneutics to work in the classroom, educators need to select texts that students can see relevance in. Students will not engage with texts that they cannot see themselves in or see relevance to their own lives (Perry, 2006). When working with students, therefore, our goal is not to have them develop understanding of the parts, but to be able to put together those parts into a meaningful whole. Furthermore, hermeneutics invites us to consider 'Other' perspectives when we interpret (McHenry, 1999). We cannot come to an understanding solely on our own, we must invite the voice of the 'Other' to provide its own interpretation so that we can come to a true understanding, which is where dialogism becomes a fundamental part of the ELA classroom.

One of the goals of literacy educators is to help students attain the necessary language skills that will allow them to critically evaluate their world and their experiences, and dialogic instruction is one method we can utilize to ensure student growth in these areas (Alfassi, 2009). While conversation and dialogue are not new concepts to learning, they are often underused—and arguably misused—as a pedagogical tool. As early as Socrates we see the impact of a questioning mind on the learner and on the teacher, but questions that seek only one answer, or monologism, can be ineffective and fail to recognize more than one perspective. As educators began to see the flaws in the Socratic style of teaching, they moved toward more effective and

collaborative questioning models that sought to probe the thinking of the learner rather than matching the thinking of the teacher. Piaget's work looked at how students adapt to and learn new information through the dialectical processes of assimilation—the incorporating of new information into a pre-existing construct—and accommodation—adapting to the new information (Kazak, Wegerif, & Fujita, 2015). Piaget's work aligns with our understanding of hermeneutics as it acknowledges that our understanding of truth—our schema—evolves as we come into contact with more information or perspectives. Vygotsky's work is also important for our consideration of the advancement of dialogism as he looked at how learning and mental functioning in the individual were the result of social interactions and contexts. The work of Piaget and Vygotsky can both be seen in what Bakhtin would come to call dialogism which understands knowledge to be the result of our dialectical interactions with others (Bakhtin, 2017). Central to Bakhtin's dialogism is the concept of heteroglossia which weighs context over text in all utterances. Heteroglossia acknowledges that the words we use are rife with social and historical contexts and that in order to truly understand one another—in order to truly learn—we must be aware of our and other's language usage. For Bakhtin then, learning happened as the result of a conversation between two voices willing to be heard, to be challenged, and to be changed until we are able to see the world beyond our narrow perspective (Bingham, 2000; Kazak, et al., 2001; Braun, 2019).

Working within Bakhtin's dialogism, educators have developed dialogic instruction which strives to provide students with the skills necessary to partake in meaningful dialogue—such as understanding the impact of different experiences on developing knowledge and world views and the power dynamics in language—and multiple opportunities to do so (Boyd & Markarian, 2015). However, when speaking of dialogism or dialogic instruction, we mean more



than just encouraging dialogue or conversation in the classroom. Dialogic discourse seeks to make meaning by taking into account the socio-political contexts within which any utterance is contrived (Wegerif, 2008). Dialogism is a continual conversation between many voices; it is the language that ties communities together as it works together to decipher language, text, and their meaning (de Man, 1983), it is the history of a people and their language usage. It is our responsibility as educators using dialogic instruction to then support our students in understanding the language they use, the connotations inherent in word choices, and the power dynamics of various forms of language. Through this dialogic approach, students gain agency in their learning and become aware of how knowledge is acquired and whose knowledge is being honoured as they come to see perspectives other than their own (Wegerif, 2008). Dialogic instruction is not just to build a culture of conversation in the classroom, but to ensure that the conversation that is being developed is used to challenge student thinking and perception. It seeks to build into the conversation—either authentically with the voices in the classroom, or hermeneutically through text analysis—the voice of the other. However, it must be noted that the voice of the other is not necessarily a combative or antagonistic voice (Nealon, 1997). Rather, it is the voice of another perspective; it is the opportunity to see the world through the lens of those who have had different experiences. And, ultimately, this inclusion of voices and perspectives is what the classroom of the twenty-first century should consistently be working toward.

Unfortunately, much of the dialogue that takes place in the classroom continues to be monologic in nature. Students continue to participate in question-and-answer textbook work which is essentially reading comprehension rather than learning. By subjugating verbal learning opportunities to reading and writing, we have weakened students' abilities to respond to the world around them resulting in disengaged learners (Applebee, Langer, Nystrand, & Gamoran,

2003; Braun, 2019). To promote engagement, learning must be relevant to the learner, and they must have space to discuss their experiences in order to make meaning from them. One of the key ways to increase substantive engagement—engagement that goes beyond the procedures of the classroom and rote memorization as a method of learning—is to integrate more dialogic instruction (Nystrand & Gamoran, 1991). A culture of dialogism can be created by encouraging daily opportunities to discuss perspectives on experiences in students’ own lives as well as their experiences with a literary text (Boyd & Markarian, 2015). Important to this practice is the need to be inclusive of diverse voices. Our students must be able to see themselves and their problems reflected in the texts studied if any meaningful dialogue is to take shape. However, in order to assure true dialogism, the voice of the ‘Other’ must also be given space, otherwise we continue to take part in monologism. The onus is on the dialogic teacher to seek out texts that will act as windows and doors to the students’ lives.

### **Hermeneutics and Dialogism: The Role of the Teacher**

As education has evolved over the last decades, so too has the role of the teacher. Whereas teachers were once the gatekeepers of knowledge who transmitted facts to their students who were then expected to memorize and regurgitate the information for assessment, today’s teacher is expected to act more as a facilitator of learning. In a hermeneutic and dialogic classroom, the teacher’s role evolves further as they work alongside students to support their learning and, at times, take an active role as a learner themselves (Reznitskaya, 2012)—a daunting prospect as this means there must be a willingness on the part of the teacher to relinquish control over knowledge (Perry, 2000). However, the expectation here is not a complete loss of authority or control in the classroom or over the curriculum, but an understanding that the path toward outcomes can be determined by students and their curiosities

rather than by a strict adherence to lesson plans. In accepting the role of teacher as facilitator rather than primary knower, teachers encourage students to grapple with content on their own or with their peers rather than seeking authoritative answers (Aukerman, Belfatti, & Santori, 2008). Furthermore, as students gain more agency over their own learning, they come to gain confidence in their ability to make meaning and as the teacher removes themselves as the authoritative voice of learning—the gatekeeper on the path to knowledge—students come to trust in the validity of their own thinking (Nystrand & Gamoran, 1991).

In order to access the thinking of students and facilitate their learning, the dialogic instructor needs to be a master at questioning. This art of questioning as a means of activating thinking and learning traces back to Socrates; however, Socratic teaching has come under criticism as it originally implied that the teacher questioned the student until the student was able to articulate the answer the teacher wanted. That is, the Socratic teacher questioned the student until they got the answer the teacher wanted. However, in today's dialogic and hermeneutic classroom, the teacher functions as an expert questioner whose main goal is to help students dig into their own thinking as they draw their own conclusions and challenge their assumptions and perceptions (Shields & Edwards, 2000; Mitchell, 2006). The dialogic process goes beyond question and answer, however, and moves toward more authentic conversation between various voices. Another criticism of the Socratic Method—a strategy developed by Nelson—is that the teacher is removed from the conversation after asking the question which can often lead to narrow or stilted conversation (Mitchell, 2006). However, when the teacher acts as a learner within the conversation and actively participates as questioner and discussant, dialogue has the opportunity to meet a much richer depth. This also provides opportunities for scaffolding dialogism into student skill sets as they can witness and interact with skilled questioners and

conversants. Through daily practice with dialogism—either with the teacher, with peers, or with a text—students develop confidence in sharing their thoughts and ideas even when they conflict with the thinking of others (Boyd & Markarian, 2015). Eventually, students become accustomed to having their perspectives challenged and their learning is enriched as their thinking evolves.

In order to truly engage in the dialogic model of instruction, teachers must also be willing to recognise and share their own positionality. One cannot appreciate the voice of the ‘Other’ until one has come to understand one’s own place in the world and how that place impacts thinking and knowing. By understanding positionality, we understand our privilege, or lack thereof, and how that impacts our teaching and the ways we have honoured knowledge in the classroom. As educators we must be vulnerable and open with our own positionality to help students understand how our placement within socio-political demographics impacts the way we interpret and understand texts. This will help students better understand how their own situatedness impacts their understanding and how that understanding may be different for someone living with differing world views and experiences. Part of the dialogic process is not to ignore our biases and prejudices, but to put them out into the open where they can be examined (Shields & Edwards, 2000; Darder, 2012; Braun, 2019). Once teachers and students have grasped their own positionality and its impact, the inclusion of diverse voices becomes all the more powerful on learning. Where these voices are unavailable in the demographic construction of the classroom, texts must be selected in such a way that students can interact with the marginalised of society. Through the integration of dialogism and hermeneutics, textual analysis leads to conversations and dialogue that is more about challenging and shifting normative perspectives rather than upholding archaic worldviews leading toward the legitimizing of the ‘Other’ (Roy & Swaminathan, 2002). In choosing dialogic instruction and hermeneutic

pedagogy, teachers choose to support students in seeing their place in the larger world and the diverse perspectives that make up that world.

### **Language and Developing Sense of Self and the Other**

Beyond reading and writing, the primary goal of English Language Arts educators needs to be supporting the work of students as they come to understand themselves and others within the walls of the classroom and beyond into the broader, and often more complex, social world. In order to facilitate this personal growth and understanding of identity, educators need to help students develop an understanding of language usage that goes beyond the denotative meanings of the words we use and explores the depth and breadth of the connotative meanings from the standard figurative meanings to the more controversial and challenging socio-political implications. Bakhtin's (2017) concept of heteroglossia helps us to better understand the complexity of language in shaping identity as it asserts that language is multi-layered and entrenched within it are our individual and social experiences. This means then, that the context of language is where meaning can be derived rather than in its base textual form (Bingham, 2000). Middendorf (1992) further reflects on the importance of language in the dialogic process stating, "Heteroglossia is a life lived; canonization removes that which is canonized from life. The dialogic imagination—dialogizing—is a manner of living which acknowledges our tentative and multivoiced humanity" (p. 36). We must utilize the layers of language diversity available to us in the texts we read as well as in the language usage of our students in order to access the breadth and depth of the human experience. Experience shapes who we are, and we interpret those experiences through our language usage. Consequently, as we gain experience, our language usage and interpretation will expand the connotative depths of language. As educators,

we need to acknowledge that this evolution of language knowledge and meaning is not exclusive to the language we use, but also that which we encounter in the texts studied in the classroom.

While language is a reflection of self, it is also a reflection of culture. Our ability to find belonging within social groups is often marked by our ability to communicate using the linguistic markers of said group. An adult needs only spend a short time with teens and pre-teens to recognize the evolutionary and exclusionary nature of the English language: ‘lit’ no longer means a light, but now refers to something worthy of awe or admiration, ‘jam’ used to be a spread for your toast but is now a favourite song. However, exclusionary language is rarely this innocent, but is more often the cause of societal, cultural, and racial exclusion. ELA educators frequently push the use of Standard English—or the Queen’s English—on their students without recognizing the colonial implications of such an action. By enforcing only one form of language usage, we are ignoring the ways in which language builds identity and—inadvertently or not—are claiming that all other forms of language and the identities to which they ascribe are wrong. We need to provide students with the understanding of the layers of language, but we also need to validate the various forms of and understandings of language if we are truly working toward an understanding of sense of self and of others (Lyiscott, 2014). As bell hooks (1989) states, “Language reflects the culture from which we emerge. To deny ourselves daily use of speech patterns that are common and familiar, that embody the unique and distinctive aspect of our self is one of the ways we become estranged and alienated from our past” (pp. 79-80). Language is a powerful tool in attaining knowledge, but it is also a tool of power in determining whose knowledge is valued. Those students who are comfortable in the language of the dominant socio-political, heteronormative framework will inadvertently have power over their marginalized peers. The history entrenched in the words we use goes beyond the control of the speaker and

their weight is often more burdensome than our intent (Wegerif, 2008). This results in a need to be aware of not just the intent of our language usage, but the way in which our words are perceived by others with differing experiences and socio-political contexts and how this can often ostracize minority students. It is through language instruction that these power structures be made visible so that we can come to better understand them. Darder's (2012) work affirms this stating that "important to [students'] development of social consciousness and their process of concretization is the awareness of how language and power intersect in ways that include or exclude students of colour from particular social relationships" (p. 278).

### **Impact of Dialogic Instruction and Hermeneutic Pedagogy on Student Learning**

For Bakhtin (2017), the novel is unique as a literary genre for it alone is ever evolving and changing after its completion and throughout its interaction with multiple generations: "The novel... is determined by experience, knowledge, and practice...When the novel becomes the dominant genre, epistemology becomes the dominant discipline" (p. 15). This is in large part because the novel allows space for the reader to bring in their own experiences in making meaning. The diversity of the novel - language, character, plot, structure, etc. - makes it the perfect text for a hermeneutic and dialogic classroom as students will be able to approach the text from diverse viewpoints and experiences. This allows students to extend their thinking beyond the typical comprehension activities leading toward dialogic possibilities. In the classroom, students and teachers work together dialogically to make meaning from the texts they encounter as fits within their unique community of learners—a concept that fits within Bakhtin's idea that all interpretation of text is based on personal experiences (de Man, 1983). As each reader brings their own experiences to the text, multiple interpretations are explored and discussed, perceptions are challenged, and ideally, new understandings about ourselves and others are developed.

Combining text studies with opportunities for discussion challenges students to think critically about their own worldviews. Furthermore, teachers need to provide students with literature that acts as a mirror reflecting their own experiences as well as a window into the world beyond. Literature needs to be reflective of the issues students are facing and feel are relevant to their own lives. This is what Bakhtin referred to as the zone of maximal contact: the space where the distance between the reader and the character is abolished; a space where we are able to see ourselves reflected in the text and the possibility for growth (Bakhtin, 2017). Literature allows for teachers to provide students with a multitude of various voices and perspectives. The characters that students encounter in literature - while not superior to authentic, in person conversations - can act as the voice of the other. When students are given opportunities to assess the decisions, experiences, and perspectives of literary characters, they are able to do so without fear casting judgement or aspersions on a peer which allows students to speak more freely and honestly. Furthermore, literature allows students to explore and evaluate thoughts, characters, and worlds that they may never otherwise have the opportunity to do so: through literature, students are able to vicariously live through the experiences of characters they may never meet and in worlds they may never visit (Delehanty, 2001; Malo-Juvero, 2014). Instead of making personal references, students discuss the experiences of characters: “Literature can be a way for teens to release these tensions, and literature class can become a forum for talking about issues adolescents want and need to talk about but are too shy or embarrassed to address” (Alsup, 2003, p. 160). When we use the dialogic model and provide students with opportunities to explore problems or dilemmas that are pertinent to their own lives, students will develop stronger literacy and critical thinking skills that will continue to serve them well beyond the ELA classroom (Alfassi, 2009). Furthermore, by providing students with texts that challenge their thinking—



especially thinking that has been conditioned by western, patriarchal, heteronormative worldviews—we are able to encourage conversations that can begin to shift perceptions toward a more inclusive way of thinking (Haertling Thein, Beach, & Parks, 2007; Malo-Juvera, 2014). This aligns with Gadamer’s Hermeneutic Circle which states that we must understand the whole by considering all the parts but can only understand all the parts when we are able to consider the whole. Through hermeneutic pedagogy, we help students grapple with difficult texts by considering multiple aspects of the text as well as our own experiences and assumptions before delving into the author's intent and message. This will help students avoid assessing texts and characters through the lens of a single story (Shields & Edwards, 2005; Aidichie, 2014).

The dialogue between teacher and student and among students is not exclusive to verbal discourse but can also be used through written teacher feedback to encourage students’ engagement in their own writing. When reading the work of others, we partake in metaphorical dialogue with the author in what De Man (1983) would call the hermeneutic mode. Through this dialogue, the reader comes to ask questions of the author, of the text, and of the characters. When students engage in their own writing, this same system can occur between teacher and student in the comments made on student writing whether in oral or written feedback. Regardless, the writing that students are doing must be meaningful to them and must be relevant to their lives. Nystrand and Gamoran (1991) recommend that students be given ample opportunities to have choice in their writing, such as in journals, as a means of engaging in authentic writing: “all language—whether written or spoken—is interactive in the abstract sense that its use involves an exchange of meaning, and the text is the means of exchange” (Nystrand & Himley, 1984, p. 198). However, one must acknowledge that a relationship of mutual expectation does exist between the writer and the reader which will shape the degree to which understanding is shaped.

To help build this relationship in the classroom, teachers must be active readers and writers (Woodard, 2015). By taking part in the very activities that students are engaging in, teachers not only model learning and thinking, but can actively explore and share their passion for learning which can work as a contagion in a community of learners. The vulnerability expressed by teachers when they share their thinking about and their struggles with writing will only work to create a safe environment for students to share (Kittle, 2008). Furthermore, writing can also provide students with an opportunity to explore thinking safely without having to expose their vulnerabilities to others. Given the diverse socio-political experiences of students, writing can provide students with an avenue to partake in safe dialogue with their teacher. As Middendorf (1991) states, “Good writing provokes rather than limits thought” (p. 39) and “all written discourse [is] unfinished social dialogue” (p. 41). When we engage dialogically with students through their written work, we can explore their thinking in a more intimate manner than we can when engaging in group discourse. Middendorf puts it best when she says:

Good writing is good dialogue—always mixing, changing, incorporating, answering, anticipating—merging the writer and the reader in the construction of meaning. Good writing speaks with the playful double-voicedness with which we, as living, breathing individuals, approach the reality of our lives, the uncertainty of our existence. (p. 46)

Our students need to engage in dialogue in all its forms as frequently as possible so that they may fully explore and evolve their thinking.

In exploring dialogic instruction, much work has been done by looking at different reading pedagogies such as the Shared Evaluation Pedagogy (SHEP) (Aukerman, Belfatii, & Santori, 2008), the Fostering Communities of Learners (FLC), and Reading to Learn and Writing to Communicate (RWLC) (Alfassi, 2009). Each of these models sought to move students beyond

the traditional approach of reading comprehension and question and answer toward developing and exploring their own inquiry. While there are disadvantages to the models such as erroneous conclusions, these can be corrected through carefully selected moments of monologic instruction and redirection. Consequently, the overall growth of inquiry skills and collaborative learning are worth any risk they might pose (Alfassi, 2009). One of the more common ways that educators can utilize dialogic instruction and hermeneutic pedagogy is through the use of Socratic Seminars or Socratic Circles. The Socratic Seminar is a pedagogical tool derived from the Socratic Method but differs in that it promotes and encourages original thinking. In this model, questions that are asked aren't seeking specific answers, rather they are asked with no potential answer in mind and are mainly used to encourage critical thinking and individual conclusions among the conversants (Shields & Edwards, 2005; Mitchell, 2006). Furthermore, within this model the teacher is an active participant in the seminar by questioning and sharing ideas, all with the intent of furthering student inquiry. While the discourse that takes place during a Socratic Seminar in the ELA classroom generally relates to a text being studied, this method is also useful in integrating differing ideologies, current events, or other topics that challenge perception. Much of the literature agrees that students must be given opportunities to discuss those events that are central to their lives. Students must be given opportunities to delve into difficult issues that they deem as pertinent in their own lives and grapple with conflicting and contrary ideas if they are to truly engage in learning and evolve their thinking (Perry, 2000).

## **Conclusion**

While the general consensus among educators may be that conversation is conducive to learning, the type of conversations that take place in the classroom must be more effective if they are to be meaningful in exploring and challenging student thinking. Educators will be more

successful in their efforts to create anti-oppressive and inclusive classrooms that allow students to fully express and understand their identities if they integrate dialogic instruction and hermeneutic pedagogy. The voice of the ‘other’ must be incorporated into the everyday practices of educators so that students become familiar with varying perspectives within the classroom and out in broader society. As today’s socio-political framework continues to evolve, so too do the texts studied and the conversations had. To honour the world all of our students inhabit, we need to move away from archaic teaching practices that uphold oppressive ideologies and begin to honour all voices and perspectives. This can be done through the incorporation of hermeneutic pedagogy and dialogic instruction.

### **Chapter 3: Methodology**

The goal of this research project was to investigate how the strategic use of dialogic instruction and hermeneutic pedagogy could support my efforts to create a culturally responsive English Language Arts classroom. In this, students were encouraged to examine self and the Other through a variety of pedagogical tools utilized by me, the teacher. While student learning was the goal of these classroom practices, the research was focused on the educator's response to and reflections on the impact of pedagogical tools. This research took the shape of modified action research as it looked at improving practices already in place in the classroom. While action research is traditionally a methodology that seeks to study and improve the community or organization, a modified approach does blend well with self study which seeks to improve the self through a critical analysis of one's own practice. This melding of action research and self-study is further expressed by Feldman, Paugh, and Mills (2004) who state that, "those who engage in self-study are critical of themselves and their roles as researchers and teacher educators. We believe that this self-reflexive form of inquiry can lead to fundamental changes in our selves" (p.971). They further state that while self study is a critique of one's own pedagogy, it is not completed in isolation: the work of the educator and any improvement made by the educator will have an impact on the community. For my research, the main goal was to determine the impact of dialogic and hermeneutic strategies on designing and delivering content and the impact these strategies would have on my teaching. Therefore, my perception of the validity of these strategies and my own personal growth as an educator were the key focus. As the research was centered on the teacher and the teacher's reflections using different strategies, intimate scholarship and the Self Study of Teaching and Teacher Education Practice (S-STTEP) (Pinnegar, Cardinal, Murphy, & Huber, in press) method was adopted. Through this self study, I

hoped to learn more about how the strategic use of dialogic instruction and hermeneutic pedagogy could support a culturally responsive high school English Language Arts classroom where students are encouraged to understand the self and the other.

Hamilton and Pinnegar (2015) tell us that “Intimate scholarship embraces subjectivity and vulnerability...Knowledge in intimate scholarship is developed in dialogue with ourselves, with the research literature, and with our past experiences...Since intimate scholarship is conducted in an uncertain space and is fundamentally relational it is oriented to ontology” (p. 185). Furthermore, Petroelje Stolle, et al. (2018) tell us that the purpose of self study is “to grow the individual while growing the field” (p. 2). The teaching strategies being explored in this research are those that look at dialogue in its various forms and the importance of story in understanding self and the other. As LaBoskey and Hamilton (2010) state, “Self-study is the thoughtful, systemic, critical exploration of the complexity of one’s own learning and teaching practice. Autobiographical and bound in a particular history, culture, and political structure, teacher educators bring their personal practical knowledge, their personal stories, and their voice to self-study” (p. 334). With that in mind, a methodology that was designed for examining story and experience was best suited for the research. I wanted to know how the strategies effected my classroom and, therefore, I was best suited as the focus. In collecting data, I maintain a constant dialogue with myself in my writing, and with my colleagues and students as I explored ideas related to the strategies and the content.

As a self study, it was also important for me to utilize the Critical Friend (CF) which Costas and Kallick (1993) define as “a trusted person who asks provocative questions, provides data to be examined through another lens, and offers critique of a person’s work as a friend” (p.50). Having a critical friend during my self study was important as it helped me to maintain

focus and accountability, and more so, provided a safe space for me to be vulnerable as I explored my pedagogy and my praxis all while defining and re-defining my identity as an educator. Petroelje Stolle, Frambaugh-Kritzer, Freese, and Persson (2018) reflect on the importance of vulnerability in self study as being characterized by “uncertainty, risk and emotional exposure” (p.4) and the need for a CF who encourages the researcher to safely explore these feelings. It is important to find a CF that will ask the difficult questions required for true reflection and honest assessment of practice. Fortunately, I was able to find a critical friend in a colleague and in my advisor. Both of these individuals are available for me to talk through my difficulties with, but more importantly to further challenge my thinking and learning. While each of these women took on various roles of the CF as outlined by Kember, et al (2006), each also played a significant role in specific categories. My colleague has long played the part of the Mirror: “someone objective to advise them on the reflection process” (p. 470). I have seen her as my mentor and have throughout my career turned to her for advice and guidance. In this research, I utilized our relationship as an honest place to share my vulnerabilities and seek objective advice, face harsh realities, and share successes. My advisor provided necessary guidance in terms of research, resources, and writing guidance. The journey of self study is not a solitary one, and I value the opportunity I had to explore my learning with these women.

Data collection was undertaken through personal journaling, lesson reflection, and anecdotal records throughout the scholarship and practical stages of the work. Personal writing fits within intimate scholarship and is also a tool that I use in exploring dialogism. Further to that, “A characteristic of intimate scholarship is that we come to know through dialogue and our writing characterizes that coming to know” (Pinnegar, Cardinal, Murphy, & Huber, 2021). Writing allows us to track our thinking at the time and provides a basis for further reflection. In

the moment, our emotions may interfere with our ability to be objective forcing us to be vulnerable in our assessment of practice. However, on approaching the writing at a later date, we are able to analyze both the text and the experience within which it was written allowing for a more layered understanding of the data. This aligns with reflexivity, which is defined by Kovach (2009) as “the researchers’ own self-reflection in the meaning-making process” (p. 32). Analysis of the successes and struggles of various teaching strategies allowed me to assess the validity and the value of different hermeneutic and dialogic pedagogies in building a culturally responsive classroom. Hamilton, Hutchinson, and Pinnegar (2020) tell us that when conducting S-STTEP research, we assess our trustworthiness in ways that differ from other qualitative research. Rather than relying solely on credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability to establish trustworthiness, S-STTEP also acknowledges that “trustworthiness represents in part an obligation to the unseen children we serve along with the colleagues and teachers who will read our work and learn from our experience” (p. 302).

It was important to me that, while student engagement and growth were the focus of the learning as it was happening, that there be no external motivator for student involvement in discussions other than learning and personal growth. For this reason, I decided to exclude student data from the research and to focus on my own anecdotal findings and reflections from my months employing various dialogic and hermeneutic strategies. While grades were impacted as instructional and assessment strategies changed, this was only as a result of the teacher’s shifting paradigms and student growth and were not used as a data set outside of teacher reflections and validation of teaching strategies.

As this is a modified action research endeavor, I utilized several dialogic and hermeneutic pedagogical practices that were already commonplace in my classroom as well as implemented



new strategies to assess their impact and worth as I worked toward creating a more culturally responsive ELA program. One of the main pedagogical tools I used in the past and sought to improve was that of the Socratic Seminar. This is a learning tool I have used in the past to encourage dialogue among students as they explore full length literature. In using this method in the research process, I was looking at its impact on student engagement, learning, and teacher ability to facilitate outcomes achievement. I also examined the use of writer's and reader's notebooks as a way for students to interact with the written word—their own and other's. This instructional method was modeled largely from the work of Kittle and Gallagher (2018). It was the goal of this research to find instructional strategies that best allowed me to encourage my students to independently interact with texts, have dialogic encounters with texts, and come to better understand themselves as readers, writers, thinkers, and individuals. Finally, it was the goal of this research to develop and adjust pedagogical practices that encourage a safe space for students to challenge their thinking, their perspectives, and their sense of self in a way that further promotes their understanding of the self and the other while taking part in the teacher guided novel study.

## **Chapter 4: Analysis of Hermeneutic Pedagogy and Dialogic Instruction in Teacher Guided Novel Study**

### **Reflective Inquiry**

The proceeding chapter is a reflection on the work completed in my classroom during the study of Frederick Backman's *Beartown*. As such, it follows the format of reflective inquiry, a form of inquiry that takes its roots in the work of John Dewey and sees teachers approach their practice with the intention to promote person and collective growth (Kelley, Grey, Reid, & Craig, 2010). Furthermore, reflective inquiry is a practice that is inherent in our efforts as teachers to teach social justice and to promote culturally responsive classrooms (Lyons, 2010) and it aids in us in our efforts to better understand the work we do in the classroom and the impact that this work has on our students and on our profession. According to Lyons (2010), "Reflective inquiry, then, can reveal important valued benefits at the core of professional education and learning: uncovering needed perspectives; identifying critical moral and ethical dimensions of practice; encouraging collaborative inquiries; deliberating about underlying professional purposes and possibilities" (p.8). Finally, reflective inquiry is also a practice that cannot be completed in isolation. Rather, it is a practice that occurs within a community and is reliant on the use of critical friends for "it is in communication with others that our own thoughts take definable shape and become more objectively visible to ourselves, and therefore open to revision and refinement" (Rodgers, 2010, p. 48).

My intention through this chapter was to explore my experience throughout the delivery of the teacher guided novel study to better understand my practice, especially my use of hermeneutic pedagogy and dialogic instruction in that delivery. For my reflection to be effective and meaningful, it needed to honour the attitudes of "open-mindedness, whole-heartedness,

directness, and responsibility” (Rodgers, 2010, p. 47). As regards open-mindedness, I needed to be willing to entertain different perspectives, even those that might negate my own, a process also inherent in my choice of methodologies. This meant that in presenting the novel—its characters, and its themes—I had to invite and accept other potential interpretations. In terms of whole-heartedness, I needed to look at my practice and the work being done with genuine and complete commitment to understanding the right action that needed to be taken and then committing to my responsibility to take that action: in knowing better we must commit to doing better. Finally, reflective inquiry requires directness, a confidence in the validity of the work and its importance to the field. This is what I have endeavored to do in the reflection on and expression of my experience.

### **Novel Selection: Listening to Student Voice and Relevancy**

Our students live in a world of #MeToo and #BlackLivesMatter, and our classrooms need to recognize these and other cultural movements. The conversations are happening outside of our classroom walls, and if we want our students to take part in these conversations with minds open to listening to and learning from others rather than as opponents needing desperately to defend their positions, then we need to make space for these conversations in our classrooms. And I had not been...not really. It was back in the fall of 2019, and I was having a conversation about rape culture and the #MeToo movement with a student when she said to me, “Ms. Braun, it happens more often than you think.” While this phrase did cut me to the quick, it was not because I had just become aware that our girls are frequently experiencing sexual harassment and/or assault, it was because this student felt that I was not aware of it. The truth is, as a woman I am very aware of rape culture and the threat to girls and women in our society. But I had not made space for my students to know this or to talk about it as a societal issue. We frequently talk about racism, but

are we honestly and openly talking about sexism? Even more importantly, is not the fact that we have not been talking about rape culture just one more example of the perpetuation of the problem? This moment and these questions are what led me to select Fredrik Backman’s novel *Beartown* as the text for our full-length novel study in ELA 20. In choosing texts to study, I want to ensure that my students will be able to see themselves and others in the text, but I also want them to have their thinking challenged. Backman’s novel seemed like an excellent fit as it examines the themes of toxic masculinity, rape culture, homophobia, and racism in a small hockey town in Sweden. As Rosenblatt (1982) states, “We teachers know, however, that one cannot predict which text will give rise to the better evocation—the better lived-through poem—without knowing the other part of the transaction, the reader” (p. 269). In listening to my students, their concerns, and what was relevant and important to their lives, I decided that *Beartown* was a timely and necessary read for my classroom. I had originally planned on using the novel as a selection for class book clubs, but before any planning and purchasing took place, the COVID-19 pandemic shut down the schools. During this time, I re-read the novel and decided that it was better suited for a teacher-guided full class novel study and began to plan.

### **Importance of the Teacher-Guided Novel Study**

The Saskatchewan Curriculum (2012) continues to recommend that one teacher-guided novel study be taught in each of the five high school English Language Arts courses (p. 28). According to the curriculum, “A teacher-guided study (TGS) refers to a selection that is studied in some detail for a specific purpose and involves explicit instruction” (p. 28). In the past, this type of explicit instruction often resulted in lecture style lessons where the teacher explained what particular passages meant, or students worked through worksheets and comprehension questions often repeating what had been said to them with little thought of their own, all of

which culminated in a five-paragraph essay responding to questions designed by the teacher. A more modern classroom sees explicit instruction taking the shape of the teacher acting as a facilitator of the work; a tour guide of the novel who can direct students to particular parts or point out some key features, but who will allow for and hopefully inspire independent thinking. Through a hermeneutic and dialogic approach, my goal was to be able to put student thinking at the forefront of planning and teaching. While I would still act as a guide through the literature, students would have input on what we do in class, how they are assessed, and more importantly on what the text means to them as unique readers with unique experiences. The Saskatchewan Curriculum (2012) states that “An effective ELA program teaches students how to use critical and powerful learning strategies” and I believed that in employing hermeneutic pedagogy and dialogic instruction to the planning and implementation of the TGS, I would better be able to support my students in this area.

One of the aspects of the TGS that I have always valued is the sense of community that can be built in the classroom when we are all engaging in a full-length text. The way that learning and knowledge are built over an extended period of time allows for more opportunities to challenge perspectives and attain knowledge. Kittle and Gallagher (2018), discuss the importance of core texts when they state that, “it is important to find some space in our curriculum to deepen [relationships] through occasional shared, whole-class reading of core texts. We want our students to compare their thoughts and theories and feelings to those of others because doing so gives them insight into themselves and into the world” (p. 63). In coming together as a class, students interact with more experiences, voices, and thoughts than can be done through independent reading or in small book clubs. Furthermore, the TGS also allows for students to engage in more opportunities to explore both efferent and aesthetic reading as

discussed in Rosenblatt's Transactional Theory: students are able to analyze texts to further their understanding of literary features while also engaging in reading for pleasure.

When considering the importance of the TGS from a dialogic standpoint, I became inspired by and motivated by the work of Bakhtin (2017). Bakhtin recognizes that the novel cannot be exemplified by a set of defining parameters, but that it is a constant exception to any rule one might apply to it: "the novel is a multi-layered genre (although there also exist magnificent single layered novels); the novel is a precisely plotted and dynamic genre (although there also exist novels that push to its literary limits the art of pure description)..." (p. 8-9). From an educational standpoint, the diversity of the novel makes it a necessity in any classroom as students will continuously be able to extend their critical thinking in their examination of a genre that refuses to conform to expectation. Equally important are the characters present in novels for they are evolving, open-ended, and have the potential to change even after the reader finishes reading. This capacity for change allows readers – especially students – to apply their own understanding to the text allowing for variance in relatability. As Bakhtin states, "The novel...is determined by experience, knowledge, and practice...When the novel becomes the dominant genre, epistemology becomes the dominant discipline" (p. 15). Each reader brings their own experiences to the novel and make meaning as such. Understanding is not only made clear in the author's intent but in the reader's interpretation which will be based on their personal context, which is ever changing and thus so will interpretation: a novel read in high school may have a completely different meaning for the reader when read later in life: "Through contact with the present, an object is attracted to the incomplete process of a world-in-the-making, and is stamped with the seal of incompleteness. No matter how distant this object is from us in time, it is connected to our incomplete, present-day, continuing temporal transitions, it develops a

relationship with our unpreparedness, with our present” (p. 30). For Bakhtin, it is the reader’s experience that shape our understanding of and develop our relationship with the text and its characters. This idea is also explored in Rosenblatt’s (1982) Transaction Theory of Reading in which she says, “Reading is a transaction, a two-way process, involving a reader and text at a particular time under particular circumstances...The reader, bringing past experience of language and of the world to the task, sets up tentative notions of a subject, of some framework into which to fit the ideas as the words unfurl” (p. 268). By integrating the novel as an important feature of my ELA classroom, I believed that I would be better able to engage students in learning by allowing them to use their own experiences to make meaning and by challenging their perspectives through the diverse experiences of others.

## **Representation**

For several years now, there has been much talk throughout the ELA community of the need for better representation in our classrooms. Our classrooms libraries need to better serve as mirrors, windows, and doors, and while we may think of separate pieces of literature acting as one of these elements, it is best when a text can act as all three: an opportunity to see oneself, to see others, and to broaden or change one’s perspective. When considering how I would utilize hermeneutics and dialogism in the classroom I needed to find a novel that would speak to and challenge each of my students and their understanding of society for as Bakhtin (2017) states, “the novel must represent all the social and ideological voices of its era, that is all the era’s languages that have any claim to being significant; the novel must be a microcosm of heteroglossia” (p. 411). For me and my classroom, Backman’s *Beartown* was able to do so. I teach in a town in rural Saskatchewan, and like much of rural Saskatchewan, it is a town that is consumed by hockey, a town where if you do not play hockey, then you go and watch it. Hockey

drafts are used as a teaching tool in math class; the local rink is utilized for Phys. Ed. and everyone has their own pair of skates; teachers and students banter back and forth over whose favourite NHL team is the best; championship jackets are worn with pride and prestige. It is a truth universally acknowledged that if you grow up in Saskatchewan, then you grow up loving hockey, and if you do not, you are on the outside. This is the culture of hockey, and it is the culture of hockey represented in *Beartown*. While the novel is set in rural Sweden, it was easy for my students to see the similarities between the town of Beartown and their community. Furthermore, it was easy for them to see themselves in the earlier chapters of the novel as they came to know the various characters. This was important for me as one of my goals was to challenge their thinking and perspectives. Much like any hockey community and the people who inhabit it, the culture and the people in the town of Beartown are not as they first appear, and as I and my students dug into the novel and its message, we were challenged not only by the text, but by the way the text challenged the way we saw our community, our relationship with hockey, and the way we see ourselves. This makes the novel a perfect selection in exploring hermeneutics and dialogism for as Palmer (1969) states, “A literary work furnishes a context for its own understanding; a fundamental problem in hermeneutics is that of how an individual’s horizon can be accommodated to that of the work. A certain preunderstanding of the subject is necessary or no communication will happen, yet that understanding must be altered in the act of understanding” (p. 445). While I could see that my students would be able to bring plenty of preunderstanding to the text, I needed to challenge myself to the task of building an environment where their understanding of themselves and of the other would be challenged.

“[E]verybody has had a life of some sort or other, *everybody* has a story or two or more, *everybody* hides and lies, distorts and exposes and blends and nurtures and taints, all in a jumble



of intent and no intent at all” (Jardine, 2021, p.3). In considering representation, I needed to do more than find a novel that would speak to the cultural experiences of students, but to find one that would also speak to their individual experiences. In order to practice a hermeneutic pedagogy, I needed a text that would inspire students to delve into their story alongside the story in the pages. This meant that they needed to see stories in the characters that they could relate to and possibly empathize with, while also having their perspectives challenged. Each of the characters in the novel presents a voice in different societal issues that are at the forefront of local, national, and international conversations. However, characters are not diluted to a single story (Ngozi Adichie, 2009) and come to show that they are more than one characteristic or theme allowing the reader to access different meaning based on their own experiences. In selecting the novel, my expectation was that Maya would bring forth conversations about rape, trauma, and healing; Kevin would result in discussion of toxic masculinity, hockey culture, and the pressure to excel at all costs; Benji would encourage talk around problems of heteronormativity and the need for more LGBTQ representation in sport; and Amat would present students with a differing perspective than their own as the voice of an immigrant struggling against racism. However, while these were my expectations, I needed to be sure that I allowed my students to interact with the characters and their stories in their own ways; to provide space for them to connect with and be challenged by the stories in the novel in a way that would help them further their understanding of self and the other. In presenting students with these challenging, complex, and often controversial topics, I also needed to be cognizant of and sympathetic to the fact that for some of my students the mirror the novel was holding up to them could be triggering. As Rosenblatt (1991) states, “All readers must draw on past experiences to make the new meanings produced in the transaction with the text” (p. 445). Given the content of

the novel, the past experiences students could be drawing on could be painful and traumatic. As such, I needed to ensure that there would be supports in place to protect students and their mental health.

### **Community Involvement**

Having taught in the same community for eleven years, I have the privilege of having gained the trust and support of the community for the work I do and the texts I teach in the classroom. In my entire career thus far, I have only been directly challenged by a parent once regarding the literature I teach and am unaware of any other complaints that administration may have received. However, I knew that teaching *Beartown* and its controversial themes could result in some backlash, especially given that I was planning for, and hoping for, some heated and challenging conversations in the classroom. Furthermore, I needed funding to purchase a class set of the novels. In trying to keep my classroom library relevant and well stocked, it does not take long for me to spend my textbook budget and in order to purchase a class set of novels. Therefore, I was going to need to look elsewhere for funds. Our School Community Council (SCC) was the logical solution as for years they have been involved in various literacy programs at the school. Also, I had previously presented the novel to the SCC as one of several potential choices for an in-class book club that they would sponsor. During this proposal process, I outlined the benefits of the novel including its social relevance on a broad scale and as it applied to our school and community. As my previous proposal had been cut short by the pandemic, I submitted another proposal to the SCC, this time for a full set of novels to teach. As several of the members had read the novel since my first proposal, they were unanimously agreed to provide the novel for my ELA 20 class as a part of their literacy commitment. The support of the

SCC bolstered my conviction in teaching the novel, and I now had to consider what other connections needed to be made before implementation.

The first time I read *Beartown* I switched between print and audio versions of the text. I have a forty-minute commute to work everyday and was so engrossed in the novel that I did not want to give up any time that could be spent engaging with the text. One day, on my way home from work, I was so emotionally impacted by the reading that I had to pull over in order to collect myself. This is an emotionally heavy novel. Its content is real, it is raw, and it is triggering. While we may know our students, we do not know everything about them. We do not know the full extent of their stories and how they will be impacted by what they read. Had I been a student in the classroom hearing those words for the first time I may not have had the same physical response to the reading, but I would have likely had the same emotional response. This was something I needed to be cognizant of potentially happening in my classroom. And whether the response was empathy—which was my case—or a trigger of some traumatic experience, I wanted to know that supports were lined up for students to take advantage of. Having taught ELA 20 for ten years, I have become aware that it can often cause students to confront their pasts in ways that can be emotionally difficult. As such, I make a point of connecting with our school counselor prior to teaching content that I know has the potential to arouse strong emotions. I also make sure students know that the counselor is aware of what we are studying and is available to discuss with them any issues that may arise. With *Beartown*, I wanted to make sure that the counselor was once again on board and aware of the themes we would be discussing. We had originally hoped that she would be able to partake in some of the discussions with us, especially those around dealing with traumatic experiences and supporting those going through difficult times, but by the time we began the novel study, COVID-19 restrictions meant that she could not

be a part of the classroom environment. I still think there is great benefit to having different members of the school community involved in the classroom, and I would continue to make an effort to involve the counselor in future novel studies.

While I wanted community trust and support in what I was teaching, I did make the choice not to send home permission slips for the reading. I debated this choice internally and with colleagues and administration trying to determine what the right choice, and the ethical choice, was in this situation. I want parents to be engaged in the learning of their children, but I was concerned that the message we would be sending to students would be that in needing the permission of their parents I was also saying that I did not trust them or think them mature enough to delve into the content of their own volition. Hermeneutically, how would this moment be perceived by and interpreted by a group of seventeen-year-old students who are dealing with these issues everyday. While the trust and support of the community is important, in this scenario it was the trust of my students that was most relevant in the decision making. However, I do regret not sending home materials to help parents engage in the learning process with their students. While I wanted to create a sense of agency for my students, I had not provided parents with the necessary tools to engage in the learning as well. In the future, I would still choose to forgo a permission slip, but I would send home an information package that outlines the novel, the themes being discussed, and ways to connect with the school should the need arise.

### **Introducing the Novel**

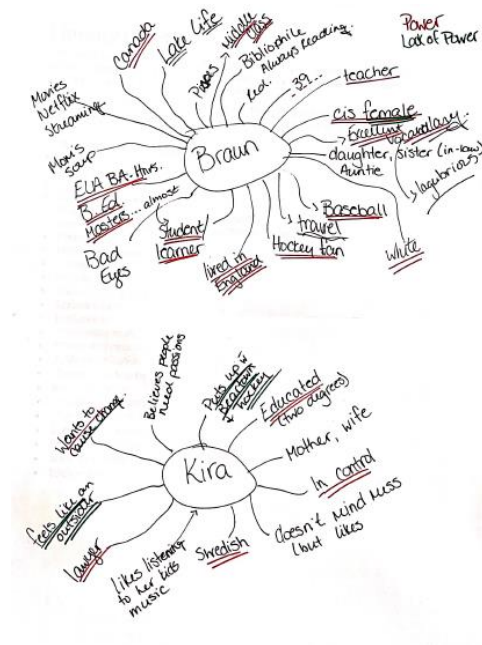
I need to recognize that as a white middle-class teacher, I am a symbol of the oppressor. I stand before them as a gate keeper to knowledge, as the warden of final assessments, and then I ask them to be vulnerable for me and share their thinking – share themselves. The only way that I can fairly ask this of them is if I am willing to share my own

vulnerabilities, to discuss my privilege, to strip away my oppressor's garb and reveal that I don't know but am willing to learn. We need to ensure that students see us as safe and open to new learning experiences that they can bring to us. (personal journal, 2020)

As a part of the hermeneutic process, I wanted students to come to understand their own positionality and the how this shapes the way we connect to and read texts. To do so, one of the first tasks I had students perform was an investigation of their own identity and understanding of self. Using the identity chart resource from the Western Justice Center (see Appendix A), we designed identity webs and then highlighted those aspects of our identity that provided us with power in society and those that limited our access to power. As students worked on their charts, I worked on my own (Figure 1) under the document camera<sup>2</sup>, a common practice that allows for modelling.

**Figure 1**

*Identity chart of teacher and of the character of Kira Andersson in the novel Beartown.*



<sup>2</sup> A document camera projects the work I am doing on the Smart Board allowing students to see note-taking as it is happening so that they can follow along.

Students frequently commented on some of the language I was using to describe myself—such as cis-gendered—and why I highlighted some labels as power attributes and some as weakening attributes. This allowed for me and my students to have a conversation about identity and language and how the two are interconnected, and how the way I define myself and the language I use to do so can be empowering and limiting. We talked about how my label as teacher gave me power in the classroom while their role as student may leave them feeling as though their power was limited. We then discussed how this power dynamic often resulted in them not sharing their ideas or shaping their thinking in accordance with what I, their teacher and the assessor of their work, would want them to say. We also talked about the words we do not add, the words we are ashamed of as our identifiers. I admitted that there were labels that I did not want to add to my chart because I did not want other people to know that I thought of myself this way, especially my students. This became a conversation starter on how we self-identify in public and private domains and how social constructions and expectations will limit the power we have in certain situations. The activity required a great deal of vulnerability on my part and on the part of my students, but after sharing some of our identifiers and our reasons for hiding others, what surprised me was how students wanted to share their charts with me and with each other. In giving students the opportunity to explore themselves and to interpret what the words they use to describe themselves mean, I was able to give them an opportunity to see themselves and each other in new ways.

After reading the first eight chapters of Fredrik Backman's *Beartown*, I alongside my students completed an identity chart for the character we connected with most and tried to gain an understanding of their positionality. As we progressed through the novel, we continued to add identifiers to the chart to gain a more complete understanding of the characters. What I saw

happening was that as students came to understand the diverse aspects of individual characters, they also began to see the continuing similarities between themselves and the characters, but more importantly, the differences between themselves and the characters they initially connected with. I found that by incorporating positionality into my teaching, I was able to help students access their understanding of power dynamics, privilege, and normativity and how that shapes who we are and how we see ourselves, but it also helped me show them how society sees us and how we might hide certain aspects of ourselves to better fit into societal expectations. One of the characters I had anticipated would be a favourite among the students was that of Benji Ovid; however, in addressing his character I needed to be sure that the dialogue that emerged around his character was spontaneous and based purely on their own thinking. In exploring the character of Benji, many of my male students related to his rebellious, tough, and loyal characteristics while my female students were drawn to his mysterious and sensitive sides. I was able to discuss with students what it was that we found admirable in his character and why we deemed these admirable. As I noticed that male and female students were holding different attributes in esteem, I directed the conversation toward whether our genders lead us to value different attributes. As an active participant in the dialogue and in the role of what Smith (2009) calls an interpreter of culture, I made the decision to move the discussion toward a dissection of cultural norms based on gender: Why were the boys drawn to Benji's rebellious nature and why were girls drawn to his aloofness? I knew that eventually I would want to discuss rape culture and that the conversation would lead to a discussion on how different genders viewed and experienced rape culture and so I wanted to take the opportunity to introduce the idea of gender socialization and the impact it can have on the way we make meaning of our experiences and our roles in society: "Pedagogically, the highest priority is in having children and young people gain precisely a sense

of the human world as being a construction that can be entered and engaged creatively; to have a sense that received understanding can be interpreted or re-interpreted and that human responsibility is fulfilled in precisely a taking up of this task” (Smith, 1999, p. 42). In taking a hermeneutic approach, I was able to direct the conversation toward a larger social commentary that we were making in the classroom – an unexpected and worthwhile conversation.

### **Reading the Novel**

When beginning a novel study, I usually give students the choice to read independently, or for me to read to them. The class will then split itself into these groups and the independent readers go into the hallway or into an empty classroom across the hall and the remaining students stay back with me. Throughout the years, I have come to realize that students will stay back to be read to for a variety of reasons: some are struggling readers and need the adaptation in order to get through the book; some are capable readers, but they struggle to focus and to keep up with the pace of reading if done independently; others simply enjoy having a story read to them. For our study of *Beartown*, however, I did not initially give students the option to read independently as I wanted them all to be present and together as I read the book to them. My thinking here was that I wanted to see them reacting to certain moments in the novel so that those reactions might become a part of the conversation. As Rosenblatt (1982) states, “Children enthralled by hearing or reading a story or a poem often give various nonverbal signs of such immediacy of experience. They delightedly sway to the sound and rhythm of words; their facial expressions reveal sensitivity to tone; their postural responses and gestures imitate the actions being described” (p. 272). I wanted to be able to read these responses as we read the novel. I wanted to be able to hear the awkward laughter at the inappropriate jokes, the sighs and gasps at shocking moments, and to feel the tension in the room as the tension in the novel built. I wanted the



reading of the novel to be as much a group experience as the discussion of it would be. However, one of the things that I had to be aware of in making this choice was that in choosing to read aloud I was also choosing to include my interpretation of the novel for “Oral interpretation is not a passive response to the signs on the paper like a phonograph playing a record; it is a creative matter, a performance, like that of pianist interpreting a piece of music” (Palmer, 1969, p. 16). I had to be aware that the choices I made as a reader were choices that might impact the way my students would be interpreting the text. I also had to acknowledge that I was deliberately denying students an opportunity to interact with and interpret the novel on their own. This meant that I was potentially going to force students to come face to face with triggering content in the presence of their peers, a vulnerable situation that I had to take into consideration. If my goal was to use the reading to create an anti-oppressive and culturally responsive classroom, was I doing so if I was forcing students to encounter difficult and possibly triggering content in the presence of their peers and their teacher? Or, was it my responsibility to provide space for students to explore their own experiences and their interpretation of this sensitive content on their own. After conferring with my colleague and critical friend, and with administration, I decided that I would read the bulk of the novel to the class but would provide an option for students to read independently chapters 20-31 which contain the rape scene and its immediate aftermath.

One of the benefits of reading the novel as a whole class was in my ability to utilize immediate and reflexive reactions to the reading to spur on dialogue. One such instance of this occurred in chapter 17 of the novel when the author explores themes of locker-room talk. During the scene, players and coaches exchange jokes that are homophobic and support rape culture. In reading the passage aloud, I was able to hear the laughter of several students and use the

response as a part of our discussion in the next seminar. Instead of simply talking about the passage as a part of the novel and what the author's message was, I was able to include our own reactions to the passage. Why do we laugh at jokes that are obviously homophobic and promote rape? What does that say about our understanding of ourselves and our society and what we are willing to find acceptable? In approaching the conversation with this real response, I was able to help students explore their own social conditioning and their understanding of the world, something I would have been unable to do had we been reading independently. When homophobic slurs are used later in the novel, I noticed that students responded in a much different way than they had previously; their gasps, head shaking, and audible groans...there was not laughter. Rosenblatt's (1991) work states that "Teachers need constantly to remind themselves that reading is always a particular event involving a particular reader at a particular time under particular circumstances. Hence, we may make different meanings when transacting with the same text at different times. And different readers may make different defensible interpretations of the same text" (p. 445). By approaching the novel hermeneutically and allowing students to analyze their experience of the text, followed by an opportunity to take part in a dialogic conversation, students' perceptions were changed over the course of several chapters.

### **Reader's Notebook**

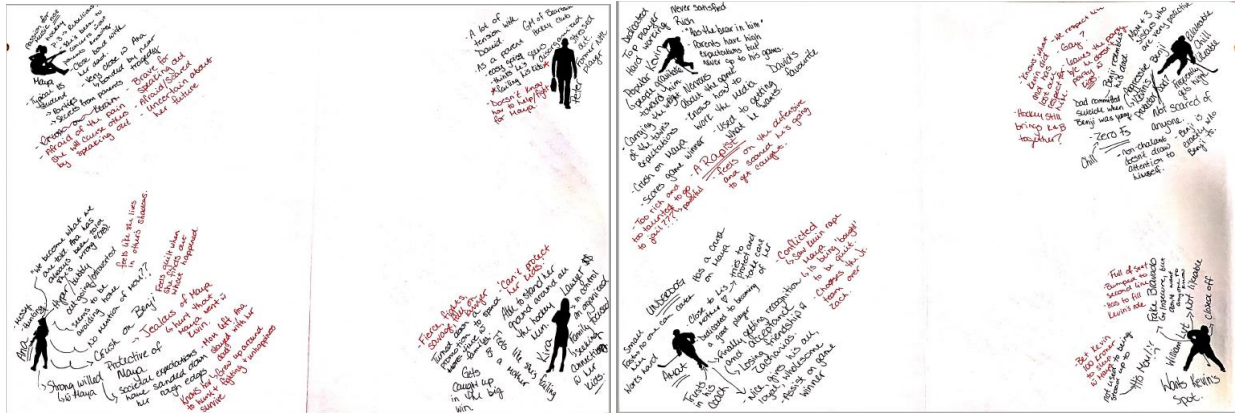
In my journey to eradicate uniform answers and encourage more independent thought from students, I made the choice to get rid of the traditional chapter question method of assessment. However, I still needed to be able to assess student reading and meet the comprehend and respond requirements of the curriculum. I spent hours on Pinterest looking at different ideas for Interactive Notebooks; I tried various note-taking strategies, flip charts,

graphic organizers, and doodle notes. No matter which strategy I tried, they all seemed to lead me back to one common idea: students need to be able to analyze the text in accordance with what they deem to be important. With this in mind, and inline with the My Prairie Spirit Classroom (Jeschke, Olson, & Bayles, 2018), a vision of my school division which encourages the read like a writer, write for a reader model—a model that has students work toward understanding the choices authors make in writing to express thought and then utilizing that learning to enhance their own writing—I began to work on a Reader’s Notebook that would work for my classroom and in accordance with hermeneutic pedagogy and dialogic instruction. This meant that I needed to provide students with a place where they could analyze and interpret the text, their connections to the text, and hold a sort of dialogue with the author in order to construct their own meaning: they needed a space where they could explore their vulnerabilities and confront the challenges they were facing as they read and discussed the novel. I decided to structure our reader’s notebook into three sections: group notes, annotations, and reader’s response.

Building from our work on identity charts and positionality, I wanted to include a section in our Reader’s Notebooks for the analysis of other characters at different times in the novel (Figure 2).

Figure 2

Class notes on characters from the novel Beartown<sup>3</sup>.



In previous years I have had students do character work in a similar fashion to Peter Llijedahl's Thinking Classroom as they construct meaning, but due to the mobility restrictions in place due to COVID-19, this was not an option. Instead, as a large class we discussed characters, debated their characteristics, and came to an understanding of who they were at different times in the novel. I decided to put our initial understanding of the characters in black ink and additional knowledge was added in red so that we could see how characters were evolving. While I would return to the small group interaction of the Thinking Classroom to complete this activity so that students could co-create their learning in a different way from teacher guided discussion, the activity did help me in engaging students with further conversations about positionality and power dynamics.

The second section of the Reader's Notebook was designated for annotative work. I wanted this to be a space where students could explore their own hermeneutic encounter with texts. In her work on the transactional theory of reading, Rosenblatt (1982) recognizes two types

<sup>3</sup> All names in these notes are the names of characters in the novel.

of reading: efferent and aesthetic. In efferent reading, the reader “focuses on accumulating what is to be carried away at the end of the reading”, whereas in aesthetic reading the reader focuses on “what is being created during the *actual* reading” (p. 269). Reader’s notebooks and the use of annotations allows for readers to explore both the ‘aesthetic’—connecting to personal feelings about the text—and ‘efferent’—analytical and factual understandings—as they come to develop meaning and understanding. For each section of reading, I asked students to complete four to six annotations. These annotations were opportunities for students to analyze quotes from the text, interpret and/or pass judgment on characters and their behaviours, and a place where they could connect to and respond personally to the novel. This section of the Reader’s Notebook allowed me to check in with students on an individual basis and gain an understanding of their interpretation of the novel. It was also a way for me to hold private dialogue with students as I was able to respond to their annotations through written feedback. In my effort to foster their own interpretations and discourage ‘right answers’, I have found that the best feedback is that which asks questions to further or challenge thinking and connects to a shared experience which sometimes results in the student writing back. However, to provide this kind of feedback and hold this written dialogue with students, notebooks need to be read and responded to frequently which can be time consuming and burdensome. As a result, I have often struggled to complete this for every section of reading and am continually looking for ways to engage in written dialogue with students in more effective yet equally meaningful ways.

The third section of the Reader’s Notebook was the Reader’s Response (see Appendix B), an opportunity for students to explore hermeneutics and dialogism independently while also meeting the writing outcomes for the ELA 20 course: “CC 20.4 Create a variety of written informational (including an essay of explanation of a process, an application letter and résumé,

and an argumentative or persuasive essay) and literary (including a reflective or personal essay and an analysis of a literary text) communications” (Saskatchewan Curriculum, p.20). As aforementioned, this response was done in concert with an independent reading of the novel as it dealt with the rape scene, and I wanted students to encounter this moment in comfort and security without undue stress of reacting emotionally in front of their peers. In constructing the response options, I wanted to be sure that I was providing students with an opportunity not to only analyze and interpret the text but to connect with the themes of the novel.

Overall, I found that by utilizing the Reader’s Notebook and providing a space for students to interact with and interpret the novel independently, I was able to better engage those students who were uncomfortable contributing to the larger group discussions. Likewise, those students who were less inclined to do notebook work, were more likely to engage in the discussions.

## **Seminar**

For several years now, I have been using the Socratic Seminar as a part of my pedagogy. After my initial use of it, I have tweaked and adapted it several times over to try and perfect my use of it. Over the years, I have found that the majority of students appreciate and enjoy the opportunity to engage in academic discourse and that even those who may not be comfortable sharing, enjoy hearing the thoughts of others as they come to make meaning from the various thoughts and perspectives. One of the challenges I faced in using the Socratic Seminar came in my first master’s class when I came face-to-face with the critique of the method as seeking a specific answer to the teacher’s questions. I immediately began to ask myself if I was guilty of this. In trying to move away from the standard comprehension questions and inevitable right answer, was I still encouraging students to get to the answers I wanted them to in our

discussions? This has become the backdrop to one of the key questions I ask myself before contributing to the dialogue during the seminar sessions: “Whose knowledge am I honouring in asking this question or in contributing to the conversation?” While I was still seeing engagement in the students during our conversations, I wanted to work toward a system that was more dialogic and less Socratic. In Mitchell’s (2006) work on the Socratic Seminar, he sees the teacher as acting as a participant in the learning, a contributor to the conversation, and an expert questioner. However, what I needed to be sure of in my role was that I was challenging perspectives or offering different points of view rather than pushing my beliefs. I needed to be sure that the questions I was asking could elicit multiple responses, all of which could be right: “The questions that are asked in seminar consequently have double function of both developing an understanding with a given subject area and developing an aptitude for a particular form of intellectual engagement and discussion” (p. 193). One of the other issues I had to take into consideration came from Rosenblatt (1982) who warns against the hazard of verbal responses as they can be perceived by students as having a “testing motive”. This results in students moving to a more “efferent or analytic stance” (274) in their attempt to provide what the teacher thinks is the right answer. I had to ask myself, if students are being graded will they be willing to be vulnerable and honest in the discussions, or will they continue to be looking for right answers? If they are not being graded, will they disengage and wait to share their thinking when it is time for assessment? Many of us have heard the refrain, “Am I being graded on this?” and when the answer is no, “Then why am I doing it?” I was concerned that if students were not being assessed they would not feel the need to partake in the conversation, especially in the early seminars when they were still learning the process. But I also did not want them only speaking because grades were involved as I felt that this would run the risk of having students respond with supposed

right answers instead of engaging in critical thinking. Furthermore, when considering the curriculum, seminars were an obvious way for me to assess students on the compose and create speaking outcome: “Speak to present ideas and information appropriately in informal... and formal... situations” (Saskatchewan Curriculum, 2012, p. 41). I quickly realized that the question was not would I assess students but how could I assess students in a way that allowed for and encouraged independent and critical thinking. To ensure that the aesthetic stance and student experience was still the focus of discussion, I needed to be sure that my questions were open-ended and allowed for diverse responses and that assessment was based on the extent of student contribution and what it showed about how they were interpreting the text and constructing knowledge rather than on some notion of the answer being right.

During the seminar, students were required to take on different roles (see Appendix C). For one section of the novel, they are responsible for being experts on their section and for facilitating conversation based on their interpretation of the text. However, most students require more guidance than “facilitate a conversation” and I have found that seminars run more successfully when they are given a structure to follow and questions to respond to. This is shaped on Nystrand’s (1997) work in which he states that, “Ultimately the effectiveness of instructional discourse is a matter of the quality of teacher-student interactions and the extent to which students are assigned challenging and serious epistemic roles requiring them to think, interpret, and generate new understanding” (p. 7). Students know what their responsibilities are, but they also know that I am there to support, challenge, and engage in the discourse in ways that are meant to push their learning. By providing students with questions ahead of time, I have also found that it removes a lot of undue pressure. For those that are nervous to speak in front of the class, they can prepare their response ahead of time. Often, once they begin talking, they can



expound on their thinking and partake in spontaneous dialogue when they may otherwise be too uncomfortable. In designing the questions, I have usually prepared the entirety of each seminar in advance of the unit of study. However, this time I chose to only prepare the first seminar, one during which I would act as facilitator as a means of modelling the procedure and would prepare the others after previous seminars and section readings so that I could construct questions based on student responses to the reading and areas of interest in previous conversations. While this proved to put a lot of pressure on me to get the materials completed for students, what transpired were questions that led to rich conversations. Seminars often lasted more than one class period as students wanted to dig into the material and conversations diverted into other areas of interest as they arose. This kind of learning cannot happen when students are only asked to write their answers down, nor can it happen if I were unwilling to allow for diversions or refuse to follow tangents for the sake of sticking to the lesson plan. What I came to understand was that by keeping the ideas of hermeneutics and dialogism at the forefront of my teaching and planning, I could not anticipate or plan for all of the learning potential. What I was realizing was that I needed to allow students to direct the course of their learning in a way that allowed them to construct meaning for themselves.

One of the challenges that came with the seminar was knowing when to partake in the conversation and when to withhold my own thoughts. Relinquishing control over the course of the lesson and the conversation has been something that has concerned me at multiple times in my career as I often equated this with relinquishing or risking control of classroom management. However, to engage with the dialogic process alongside the students as a learner and a collaborator, I needed to relinquish my control and take on a more vulnerable role in the classroom. In doing so, I was more able to allow myself to fully engage in the conversation with

the students. I allowed myself to be challenged by their thinking, which was new for all of us: “When one is engaged in good conversation, there is a certain quality of self-forgetfulness as one gives oneself over to the conversation itself, so that the truth that is realized in the conversation is never the possession of any one of the speakers or camps, but rather is something that all concerned realize they share in together” (Smith, 1999, p. 38). As I collaborated with my students on making meaning from the novel, I was able to relinquish much of the rigid confines I had previously held as my teacher self and become more and more a learner and co-creator of learning.

However, not all learning was easy going. In taking part in a hermeneutic and dialogic approach to understanding and making meaning of controversial topics, there is potential for the conversation to get heated and for students to shut down and not partake in the conversation at all:

Outrage, defiance, indifference. The full gambit of emotions in discussing Fredrik Backman’s *Beartown*. While there were many successes in the conversation, I am left wondering how to break through the indifference. It’s hard to know if the indifference is in response to the novel and the conversation, or if there is a deeper component at play here. How can I know if a student has tapped out because of the literature and the way we’re studying it or because of other matters weighing them down? (personal journal, 2020)

Disrupting student comfort was not something I would have willingly done in my early career, but as I have explored seminars, dialogism, and hermeneutics, I have come to understand that it is often through disruption that some of the best learning happens. These moments allow me to ask students what their emotional responses can teach them about the content, to question how our

positionality is shaping our knowledge and impacting our ability to respond and understand, as Nystrand (1997) states, “discourse is dialogic not because the speakers take turns, but because it is continually structured by tension, even conflict, between the conversants, between self and other, as one voice “refracts” another” (p. 8). While our goal should not be to disrupt students to the point that they are left feeling ostracized or attacked leading them to close themselves off to the learning, I have found that by encouraging disruption of thought and perspective in the safe space of a classroom, students are better able to understand themselves and each other: “It may be that the familiar only becomes visible and speakable in its truth once it is disrupted and, thereby, only once our sheer living in its embrace becomes sometimes-suddenly estranged in a rush-by of cold air under the wings of the everyday” (Jardine, 2021, p. 1).

In creating a safe place for discourse to occur, one of the choices I made early on in the planning process was that I did not want to be the only adult voice in the classroom and that I wanted the other adult voice to be male. My foremost reason for this was that I wanted my male students to know that their voices had just as much validity as the female voices in the classroom and that any challenge to the opinions they held could not be dismissed as an inability to understand the male experience and perspective. When discussing the issue of toxic masculinity and rape culture, I was keenly aware that male students would potentially feel as though they were being attacked and would feel the need to defend their thinking/perspective rather than allow for it to be challenged. By inviting in a male perspective, my goal was to have male students challenged by someone who had similar experiences to them and could share their own learning from those experiences. What I came to realize through the incorporation of this male voice was that the female students in the classroom also felt validated, that their voices were being heard, their concerns were being honored, and that changes were being made.

## **Recognizing the Importance of Language**

“I want people to stop saying, ‘You’re a good athlete for a girl’ and start saying, ‘You’re a good athlete!’” There are times when conversations that happen in the classroom cut to the quick and I become just human and forget that I am also teacher. Sometimes the refusal of a seventeen-year-old male to recognize that he has more power in society than I, a forty-year-old, educated woman, has is more than I can handle. And I think of the seventeen-year-old girl I was who was frequently told she was athletic/good/smart/funny for a girl, and I decide to stand up for her. I look around the room at all the girls who have been made to feel lesser than in being told they’re good enough for... I decided in that moment to share a more truthful, raw version of myself than I often do and hopefully stand-up for every girl that has felt she should just sit down. (personal journal, 2020)

In making the choice to adopt a hermeneutic pedagogy and use dialogic instruction, I also had to recognize that I need to do more to help students understand the power of language in terms of social conditioning and identity building. We had already discussed how we used language as identifiers in our identity charts, but I really needed to explore the significance of that language. Furthermore, I needed to help students understand how we often use language habitually without considering its underlying messages; as Bingham (2000) states, “The speaker is not in control of his or her language because there are social factors at work determining what a given utterance means” (p. 21). The language we use in the classroom to interpret, discuss, and make meaning from the text is influenced by our experiences and by our socio-political frameworks and I needed to help my students see this if they were to come to better understand themselves and the other. If I was working toward building an anti-oppressive classroom, then I needed to show them that, “our perception of the world and our thought depends on an intricate

linguistic web of words and concepts that develop historically over time. Words and terms we inherit through our upbringing provide guiding concepts for our recognition of meaningful human experiences” (Zimmerman, 2015, p.15). One of the explorations of language that we looked at was regarding toxic masculinity and rape culture. While the lesson started by examining how we often use passive voice when discussing rape—she was raped rather than he raped her—the conversation quickly turned to discussions of the way girls are held responsible for their own actions as well as the actions of males. We discussed how girls are often targeted in dress codes and the idea of “she was asking for it”; how boys’ behaviour is excused with the phrase “boys will be boys”; and more. While these conversations are important in challenging perspectives, they are controversial and can leave many in the classroom feeling threatened, and I could see it on the faces of several of my male students. This is the risk of dialogism: in choosing vulnerability and unplanned discourse I was creating an atmosphere where a large majority of the class was beginning to feel threatened rather than challenged. In holding these discussions about the way language encourages toxic masculinity and rape culture, I had to remember that I was still in a position of power as their teacher, even if I was feeling vulnerable as a female who had grown up in a world where this language was the norm and went unchallenged:

While I understood that language is socially generated, I saw that it is always individually internalized in transactions with the environment at particular times under particular circumstances. Each individual, whether speaker, listener, writer, or reader, brings to the transaction a personal linguistic-experiential reservoir, the residue of past transactions in life and language. (Rosenblatt, 1993, p. 381)

I realized that if change were going to take place, that I needed to remove those feelings of being threatened that those male students were exhibiting and invite them back into the conversation. We began discussing the frustrations they felt when hearing the phrases “white male privilege” and “toxic masculinity” and what might be at the core of their frustrations. This led to further investigations of power dynamics in society; how in certain situations, regardless of intent, the perception of power will always be vested in the dominant culture. While some were still unwilling to challenge their perspectives and held to their frustrations and annoyances, the conversation that transpired did show that shifting perceptions were possible if not happening. If anything, what I learned from the experience is that work needs to be done in this area, but that it needs to be done in a way that invites all voices into the conversation. If we push too hard, we only end in pushing students away. The frustrations being felt in the room – regardless of their right or wrong in society – need space to be aired out and sorted through if any challenge to perspective is going to happen. I do believe that only through these difficult conversations about language usage can we challenge perspectives and come to better understand positions of power and privilege; however, I also think that such controversial topics may be better dealt with in more formal lessons so as to protect the emotional needs of all students. Regardless of the right and wrong of language, all students in a hermeneutic and dialogic classroom need their opportunity to shape their knowledge in a safe environment.

## Chapter 5: Reflections

I want them to be more than readers and writers; I want them to be thinkers. I want them to analyze a piece of poetry and think about theme and the syntax of things, but more than that, I want them to think about the beauty of language and how words shape our identity. I want them to connect to the language in front of them and then I want them to talk about why it matters. More so, why it matters to them and how it can better allow them to know themselves, each other, the world. And then I want them to think about the ways they use language to express their own thinking. Do they choose the best words, beautiful words, words that cut to the heart of what it means to be them...to be human? (personal journal, 2020).

### Continued Relevance

As I write this, society is once again being forced to face up to its continual sexualization of females. Prior to the Olympics, the Norwegian handball team was fined for wearing shorts instead of the required bikini bottoms. Social media has been in an uproar as people question the double standard that undoubtedly exists in sport. Men are allowed to cover up while women are barely dressed. The German gymnastics team chose to wear full bodysuits rather than the usual leotard, a statement against female sexualization in their sport, a sport that in recent years has had to face the trauma of sexual abuse. We often hear the phrase, “She was asking for it” when women wear revealing clothing, yet one cannot help but wonder who is asking for it when that clothing is mandated by an athletic association or federation? What message are we sending women in sport and the young girls who watch when we dress female athletes in bikinis and fine them when they do not comply? And as these women stand up for their right to cover themselves, the Montreal Canadiens drafted a player who was charged and fined for distributing a photo of himself and a female engaging in a sexual act. The team’s reason for this, “He is a

promising young player.” The message being sent here is that if you are male and talented enough, you can do whatever you want. Our schools need to send a different message. We need to empower our young male, female, and non-binary students to have agency and voice, to see each other as human beings with unique experiences and stories, to feel compassion and empathy for those whose lives are made difficult by the social constructs that leave people oppressed and maligned, and to work toward tearing down power structures that have left us with unequal footholds. We need to create classrooms where conversations are honest and minds are open to being changed. Through hermeneutic pedagogy and dialogic instruction, we can help give our students the voices needed to perceive of and create a better world for themselves and each other. By spending time in our classrooms talking about the socio-political implications of the language we use, we can start to change the way we view and treat each other. The shift in perspectives that needs to happen needs to start in our schools, and the way that we can do this is in honouring all the voices inside and outside of our classroom walls.

### **A Year Unlike Any Other**

COVID-19: Sometimes the teacher we neither expected nor wanted is the one we learn from most. As I think on this, I realize that COVID may be our Mary Poppins only I am sure that when it is time for it to leave, none of us will grieve the loss. Much like Mary Poppins, COVID has taught me to see things from a new perspective in my personal and professional life. I have learned the importance of slowing down. Students who did not meet all the curriculum requirements in the spring of 2020 are doing well now. We are filling in gaps where we need to, and we are making time for students to meet their own needs first. In our school we have been surviving teaching through a pandemic using the motto Maslow before Bloom...and I think Mary Poppins would have been really into that. We have also learned to have fun. As a school,



we began to focus on play-based learning and outdoor education to meet the educational needs of students and families during the shutdown. This has translated back into the classroom as we try to find ways to bring joy into the classroom. In my room this means that I happily allow conversations to veer off the path of my lesson plan. This is the beauty of hermeneutics and dialogism...while the learning may not have been what I intended, following the conversation allows for students to talk about and explore issues and experiences that are important to them and for unexpected learning to occur. While we will all be glad to see COVID leave, I hope the lessons it taught us stay with us long after the masks come off.

### **Present Thoughts and Future Considerations**

#metoo, BlackLivesMatter, Stop Asian Hate, Idle No More, and the list goes on. Our students live in a world where social activism is a constant and divisive rhetoric a norm. People are taking sides and if you are not with me, then you are against me has become the status quo. If we are going to expect people to hold civil discourse with one another over these issues, then we have to teach our students how to do so in our classrooms. Through my research and personal experiences with the use of hermeneutic pedagogy and dialogic instruction to teach the novel study, I have come to realize that these two instructional strategies can provide educators with the tools needed to address controversial topics in a safe space. However, I have also been left with several considerations to push my pedagogy further:

1. **Novel selection needs to incorporate more student voice and agency.** While I continue to find value in the whole class novel study, teacher selected novels can leave the class disengaged with the literature as they feel forced into the reading. This may also result in disengaging from the conversation as they only see it as ‘schoolwork’ and not an opportunity to take part in culturally responsive discourse. By providing more choice in

novel selection, we may be able to achieve the same results as the whole class study with regard to introducing and discussing controversial topics while also honouring student agency. Further work in this area may look at small group novel studies where the teacher acts as a curator of literature for students to choose from. The role of the teacher in these smaller groups would act in much the same way as the larger group study.

2. **Students can become expert questioners.** If our objective as educators is for students to develop critical thinking skills, then the goal of the hermeneutic and dialogic teacher should be to develop students who are expert questioners. While teachers can continue to model the act of questioning to promote conversation, students should be given more opportunities to construct their own questions and to ask follow-up questions to further drive conversation. If the teacher is the only one actively asking questions, then our students will only leave our classrooms with the skill of answering not of questioning. Seminars can be scaffolded in such a way that students take on the role of leadership several times throughout the novel. In their first experience, they would take on the role of leader using teacher constructed questions to drive the conversation. In their second experience, they would be responsible for constructing their own questions. The teacher would continue to act as a support here, but the onus would be on the students to promote deeper level thinking among their peers. This would not only provide students with an opportunity to explore their own curiosities but would likely promote further engagement among their peers as questions would highlight ideas and issues that are relevant to them rather than to the teacher.
3. **The weight of language.** One of the lasting impressions I have been left with through this research is the power of the spoken and written word. One of the rewards of this

pedagogical exploration has been the moments where discourse led to a deeper examination of the language we use and the impact it has on us. In my past practice, I often approached language instructions as understanding English grammar, spelling, and punctuation. I considered word choice in terms of what is the best word to use here, rather than what is the full weight of this word in the social world. Connotative language had more to do with symbols and metaphors than it did with rape culture, toxic masculinity, or other malignant usages. Hermeneutics and dialogism have changed that for me. Now, my students and I spend a great deal of time talking about the words we use and why we use them. Passive voice is no longer just a grammar lesson, it is a conversation on how we delegate or negate responsibility. Word choice is no longer just about the best and most expressive word, but about the words that truly express identity and who we are. We normalize transgender, homosexual, cis-gendered, pan-sexual, through discussions of language. We talk about the weight of racial slurs and the history of hate that echoes in their usage. Language is not just what we say, but how we say and how others interpret it. What I have come to understand is that the ELA classroom has the potential to evolve into a space for students to examine their socio-political world through a variety of textual interpretations.

#### **4. Incorporating hermeneutics and dialogism with traditional elements of ELA class.**

As a part of my attempt to incorporate more dialogism into my practice, I conduct exit interviews with students as a part of their final assessment. During this year's interviews, one of the common themes that came up was that students wanted to learn more about the structure and form of literature. While they enjoyed the opportunity to make meaning through dialogue, they wanted to have more opportunities to explore the techniques of

English literature in its various genres. What I had come to understand was that I may have been relying too heavily on hermeneutics and dialogism without realizing that I hadn't done enough to provide them with the background knowledge they needed to access all levels of literary interpretation. One cannot be expected to discuss the impact of a metaphor when one does not understand metaphor. Nor can one discuss all the possible meanings of the author's use of a symbol without some understanding of the literary tradition of the device. They wanted to talk about the texts and how those texts help us understand who we are as humans, but they want to be able to do it in such a way that their analysis is rich and thorough. They understand that there is more to interpretation than just, "The text made me feel..." Through these conversations, I have learned that there needs to be an amalgamation of old and new strategies, lessons, and traditions. There is a continued value in teaching the technical aspects of ELA, but through further work in hermeneutics and dialogism, I believe that this can be done without falling back on traditional methods of instruction that left out student agency.

Hermeneutics and dialogism demand that we question and interpret the world around us. By adopting these pedagogies, I have become an educator who is willing to challenge my own perspectives as I work to develop my work as an anti-oppressive and culturally responsive educator. Likewise, I am dedicated to challenging the perspectives of my students so that they can interact with their world in anti-oppressive and culturally responsive ways. Furthermore, this pedagogical approach also asks us to honour that perception is dependent on experience and as such, we cannot guarantee that interpretation will ever be the same. With this understanding, we can honour student voice and agency by acknowledging that their unique experiences are relevant, are valid, and are meaningful in the construction of knowledge. There is more work to

be done in determining the impact of these methodologies on student understanding and achievement, but for now, I will continue to place high value on the talk that comes from opportunities to interpret the world around us in the texts we read and the lives we lead.

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## Appendices

### Appendix A – Identity Chart

#### Identity Chart

Write your name in the middle of the page. Then, write details (both obvious and unexpected) around your name that make you, YOU! Be sure to leave space around the outer edges of the page.

Below, you will find a partial list to get you thinking. You may choose not to include of these things. Also, you may choose to add details not reflected below.

- Activities/ Interests/ Hobbies
- Age
- Ability/disability
- Career goals
- Community activities
- Favorites (e.g., color, food, movie, quote)
- Family connections/roles (e.g., godfather, oldest son)
- Gender
- Health concerns
- Hometown
- Hopes/ Fears
- Important experiences
- School Major
- Nationality
- Personality traits
- Physical characteristics
- Political affiliation
- Quotes you live by
- Race/Ethnicity
- Religion/Spirituality
- Role models/Heroes
- School(s) attended
- Sexual orientation
- Socioeconomic class
- Zodiac sign

## Appendix B – Reader’s Response

### Reader’s Response: Chapters 20-31

Focus for Reading:

- Choices and Accountability
- Silence and Complicity
- Culture
- Relationships

Write a paragraph (approximately 250-300 words) in response to one of the following questions. While your interpretation of the text and its meaning should be the focus of your writing, your response must include direct reference to the novel and explanations/analysis of your interpretation to support your thinking.

Citations must be MLA formatted. Ex. “Amat slides into the conversation, at first reluctantly, then with a wonderful warm feeling of being allowed to belong to something. Because that’s much easier” (217).

#### Option 1

“Culture is as much about what we encourage as what we permit” (66). Discuss the culture that has been encouraged and the culture that has been permitted throughout the early chapters. In what ways can this be seen as foreshadowing Kevin raping Maya in chapter 21? In what ways is the culture of *Beartown* contributing to the immediate reactions of characters after the rape?

#### Option 2

Discuss the ways that friendships are tested in this section of reading. In order to do this, you must first establish the extent of the friendship(s) prior to the events of chapters 20-31, and then look at the way they are tested. Conclude with a statement on what you think the future of these friendships will be and your reasons for this prediction.

#### Option 3

“Maya finally decided to tell the truth about Kevin, not because she wanted to protect herself, but because she wanted to protect others. And that she already knew, as she stood there at the window that morning, what the town would do to her” (228). Discuss the significance of this quote in helping us better understand Maya, her relationship with her parents, and her understanding of *Beartown*. What do you think she means by the last sentence? What do you anticipate will happen?

## Appendix C – Seminar Handouts

### Seminars

For our study of Fredrik Backman’s *Beartown*, you will be required to run a seminar based on a section of reading from the novel. Although you will be responsible for leading the seminar, you do not have to take on sole responsibility of the teaching and learning: the purpose of the seminar is to explore the meaning in the novel by encouraging dialogue.

**The objective:** The goal of the seminar is to discuss, with your peers, themes from *Beartown* in a safe environment. Through this discussion, you will use your skills of interpretation, discourse, critical thinking, and imagination. It is through these discussions that you infuse the text with meaning.

**Your role:** You are the creator of meaning and facilitator of learning: for a successful seminar, you will need to prepare. Before your seminar, you will be provided with some questions to help you in your interpretation and analysis of the text. Remember, every reader brings their own experiences to a piece of literature and will create different meanings for the text; for true understanding to take place, we must open ourselves up to be challenged by the interpretations that others will bring to the text and the contributions others add to the conversation.

**Preparation:** Outline an answer for the critical reading/thinking questions. For a successful outline you will want to provide at least three concrete ideas you have concerning each question and be able to refer to direct and indirect evidence to support your ideas. Using support from outside texts (including television, music, social media, personal experience, etc.) may also help. When you find a quote, be sure that you provide the page number it can be found on and that you have a clear understanding of the context of the quote – avoid taking quotes out of context!

Seminar	Chapters	Members
1	1-8 (1-58)	Ms. Braun
2	9-13 (59-101)	•
3	14-19 (102-158)	•
4	32-38 (250-301)	•
5	39-43 (302-356)	•
6	44-50 (357-415)	•



**The Seminar Process** - This is the structure that you should follow for every seminar. Note that the question/analysis component is only one part of the seminar.

**Step 1: Discuss the Reading – 5 minutes**

- Provide the group with a summary of the events of the reading. This should cover key plot points and provide some, albeit limited, analysis where necessary. This is also great place to discuss some of the personal connections you make to the novel.

**Step 2: Analysis – 35 minutes**

- Address your chapter questions. Be sure that in your discussion you allow for and encourage discussion.
- Discuss each of the following in your question response or separately:
  - Characterization
  - Major themes (Culture, Gender Roles and Expectations, Peer Pressure, Community, Belonging, Relationships, Social Justice/Activism)
  - Writer’s Craft – Backman has a specific style of writing, how does it impact our reading?
- Present significant quotes and discuss their importance to the novel with your group.

**Step 3: Closure – 15 minutes**

- Finish your discussion with an overall interpretation of the chapter and a response to the following:
  - What commentary is Backman making about society, culture, and social conditioning?
  - To what extent do you agree with what Backman is saying?
  - How does the novel and the issues faced by different characters relate to the world you live in?

**Session 1: Chapters 1-8**

**Step 1: Review the Reading – 5 minutes**

**Step 2: Analysis – 35 minutes**

**Section Questions:**

1. Setting contributes more to the novel than just a sense of place. Discuss how the author able to use setting to help us better understand the circumstances of the town and its people. In what ways do we relate with the town of Beartown? In what ways do we find it difficult to comprehend the town?

2. Hockey is more than a game or a form of entertainment for the people of the town of Beartown. Discuss the significance of hockey to the town and how it has come to shape the behaviours of people in positive and negative ways.
3. The word survival is mentioned several times in the reading, most notably when Kira states, “You can’t live in this town, Maya, you can only survive it” (13). What do you make of this statement from Kira? Do you think it applies to our own lives?
4. “‘Culture’ is an odd word to use about hockey; everyone says it, but no one can explain what it means” (43). How would you define hockey culture in Canada? How does the novel develop our understanding of hockey culture? Consider the explicit and implicit detail when coming up with a response.
5. The author asks us an important question in the novel: “Why does anyone care about hockey?” (25/36). Well...?

**Also for consideration:**

Discuss other relevant or important literary elements, questions you have about the novel, and character development.

**Step 3: Closure – 15 minutes**

**Session 2: Chapters 9-13**

**Step 1: Discuss the Reading – 5 minutes**

**Step 2: Analysis – 35 minutes**

**Section Questions:**

1. Relationship development is a central part of the narrative in this section. Discuss each of the following pairings and how the relationship between the characters helps us to better understand the individuals:
  - a. Maya and Ana
  - b. Kevin and Benji
  - c. Amat and Zacharias

In what ways can these relationships be interpreted as parallels to each other? That is, what similarities and differences do we see?

What overall commentary is Backman making about friendship? Do you agree with him?

2. The other relationships that continue to develop are those of family. Discuss each of the following families and their dynamics:
  - a. The Anderssons – Pay special attention to the author’s discussion of Kira, tragedy, and motherhood.
  - b. Amat and Fatima
  - c. The Erdahls
  - d. The Oviches

How do we see family shaping character?

3. Discuss the various ways the author has begun to address gender roles and expectations in society. Is this similar to your own experiences? In what ways do we see privilege at work in the society of *Beartown*?
4. What similarities between Peter and Kevin are drawn out in this section of the novel? What is the author’s intent in developing this parallel between characters?
5. Discuss the internal conflict Peter Andersson is dealing with in this section of reading. What do you think is the right decision?

“The wall behind the president is decorated with pictures and pennants, on one of them – ancient and faded – reads “Culture, Values, Community.” Peter feels like asking the president what he thinks that means now that they’re about to fire the man who built everything surrounding them. But he stays quiet” (61). Discuss the significance of this quote in terms of symbolism and character.

6. Discuss the meaning – explicit and implicit – of Sune’s words to Peter: “Culture is as much about what we encourage as what we permit” (66).

Looking at the book so far, what is being encouraged among the players that impacts hockey culture? What is being permitted that impacts hockey culture?

7. In this section we see sexualized talk used – by Lars and by Kira’s colleague – to demean and ridicule. Is this an acceptable part of ‘Locker Room’ culture? What are the broader implications for using and condoning the use of this type of language?

8. At the end of the section of reading, Amat returns to the locker room to find his belongings shredded and thrown into the showers. Discuss his reaction to this and whether your reaction would be the same.

**Also for consideration:**

Discuss other relevant or important literary elements, questions you have about the novel, and character development.

**Step 3: Closure – 15 minutes**

**Session 3: Chapters 14-19**

**Step 1: Discuss the Reading – 5 minutes**

**Step 2: Analysis – 35 minutes**

**Section Questions:**

1. “A game of hockey is a game of hockey, but tomorrow this family will have to get up and earn a living again” (104). In what ways do we see the meaning of this quote expressed throughout the reading? Do you agree with the statement?
2. “In the end even David smiles, and he’ll think back to that moment many times afterward: whether a joke is always only a joke, whether that particular one went too far, whether there are different rules inside and outside a locker room, whether it’s acceptable to cross the line in order to defuse tension and get rid of nerves before a game, or if he should have stopped Lars and intervened by saying something to the guys. But he does nothing. Just lets them all laugh. He’ll think about that when he gets home and looks his girlfriend in the eye” (135).

Discuss.

3. Provide a character analysis of Ramona as we know her so far. In what ways is she a perpetuation of stereotypes? In what ways does she break stereotypes?

Discuss the role that Ramona and the Bearskin play in the novel and in the community of Beartown.

4. The novel establishes multiple hierarchies: in the community, in school, and in hockey. Elaborate on each of these and the impact (external and internal) impact that this has on

individual characters. Is this an accurate representation of the hierarchies you see in your own lives?

5. Discuss how the novel characterizes parents and fans by paying special attention to Maggan Lyt and Tails. Do you think this is an accurate portrayal? What impact does this have on the mental state of characters/players?

**Also for consideration:**

Discuss other relevant or important literary elements, questions you have about the novel, and character development.

**Step 3: Closure – 15 minutes**

**Session 4: Chapters 32-38**

**Step 1: Discuss the Reading – 5 minutes**

**Step 2: Analysis – 35 minutes**

**Section Questions:**

1. In Chapter 32 David contemplates leadership. Discuss the various examples of leadership in this section of the novel. Which are positive and which are negative examples?
2. Filip and his mother are introduced in this section of the novel. How does their relationship contrast with that of William Lyt and his mother, Maggyn? What symbolic significance does the character of Filip have in the story and how does it help us understand the positive and negative ramifications of hockey/ “bear” culture?
3. “Bubble” thinking is based on the belief that everyone around you is thinking the same thing: ‘I’m just saying what everyone else is thinking’. How is “bubble thinking” exhibited in these chapters? What are the dangers of this way of thinking? Consider the use of homophobic slurs and victim blaming throughout the chapters.
4. On page 271, Backman lists the three things that happen in a conflict. Summarize these three things and discuss how they are played out in the reading.

What is confirmation bias? How is confirmation bias used by the community in this section of the reading?

5. Silence and conformity are two of themes that come to fruition in these chapters. What commentary is Backman making about those who chose to stay silent and conform to the status quo? Why do you think the community is so quick to take Kevin's side and not Maya's?

**Also for consideration:**

Discuss other relevant or important literary elements, questions you have about the novel, and character development.

**Step 3: Closure – 15 minutes**

**Session 5: Chapters 39-50**

**Step 1: Discuss the Reading – 5 minutes**

**Step 2: Analysis – 35 minutes**

**Section Questions:**

1. Throughout the novel there are several examples of characters lacking agency or voice. However, as the story progresses, these characters come to stand up for themselves and gain agency over their own lives. Discuss how this is done for each of the following:
  - a. Maya
  - b. Benji
  - c. Amat
2. "In that case, you're right. In that case, I do blame hockey. Because if it had kept hold of you for another couple of years, you might have learned to lose like a man. You might have learned that your son can make mistakes, and when he does you ought to stand up like a man and take responsibility for that. Not come here and dump all the blame on a fifteen-year-old girl and her father" (340).

While at first the author seems to be attacking hockey and hockey culture for the flaws in society, in what ways do we – with the help of Ramona in the quote above – see hockey as a tool of redemption and hope for the people and the community of Beartown?

3. In a male dominated society, we see several examples of strong females asserting themselves. Discuss the characters of Kira and Ramona as role models not just for young women, but for males as well. What do we make of characters like Maggan Lyt?

4. One of the themes in the novel is that people aren't always what they seem. Discuss how characters reveal themselves to be other than we imagine, paying special attention to:
  - a. Bobo
  - b. Kevin's mother
  - c. Tails
  - d. David
  
5. Is justice served at the end of the book? Do characters get what they deserve? Are we, as readers, satisfied with the ending and the commentary Backman appears to be making about toxic cultural norms?

**Also for consideration:**

Discuss other relevant or important literary elements, questions you have about the novel, and character development.

**Step 3: Closure – 15 minutes**