

Research as a Reciprocal Act: How Rural Grade 5 and 6 Co-Researchers Transformed their Adult Research Mentors

Bonnie Stelmach¹, Leah Peters¹, and Rae Ann Van Beers²

¹University of Alberta, Edmonton, Canada

²New Humble Community School, Alberta, Canada

Including children and youth in research contributes to their academic and life skills development, but how do co-researching experiences transform adult mentors? Walkerdine (1997) stated that research “provides not only ways of seeing others, but ways of understanding ourselves” (p. 15). In this spirit, we report on our experiences to share how co-researching with eight Grade 5 and 6 students in a rural K-9 school in Alberta, Canada, which gave us insights into research and teaching assumptions and practices. Data were collected from observations of the students co-conducting interviews with K-6 research participants, students’ self-assessments of their co-researching experiences, transcripts of the interviews they conducted, and a focus group with them. Themes of (adult) researcher control, research impact, spaces of care, and the value and capabilities of rural students came through via the narratives of insight that each adult researcher developed based on their experiences working with the student researchers. Skelton’s (2008) notion of research as a reciprocal act was employed as a sensitizing concept that led us to articulate a new understanding of research as a space for care and joy, as an endeavor that can (re)shape relationships between researchers, teachers and those researched and taught, and as a service-oriented undertaking that can expand the meaning of research impact. Since urban, older students are the focus of child-led or co-researching, our paper may be a helpful complement.

Keywords: student co-researchers, qualitative research, educational research, reciprocal act, rural education research

Introduction

In writing this article, we join scholars who have blazed the trail regarding the inclusion of children and youth in research (Kellett, 2005; Skelton, 2008). The United Nations (1989) was a watershed for the development of this field of study; most published work has been motivated by the Convention’s endorsement of children’s rights to participate in matters that affect them (Bakhtiar et al., 2023). There is evidence that including young people as co-researchers builds their capacities for inquiry, problem-solving, and agency (Ferguson et al., 2023; McPartlan, 2024). These outcomes are motivating, but our experiences working with a team of Grade 5 and 6 co-researchers awakened us to how the process also led to our growth as adult researchers and educators. To articulate the mutual benefits of collaboration, here we shine the light on ourselves as a qualitative researcher (Bonnie, she/her), research assistant and undergraduate student in a teacher education program (Leah, she/her), and a teacher (Rae Ann, she/her) who co-led the student research team as part of a larger ongoing study that we were conducting at her school.

In this paper, we share individual narratives in which we reflect on how co-researching with the students prompted new ways of thinking and being as researchers and educators. Our narratives are grounded in Skelton's (2008) notion that research involving adults and children is a reciprocal act. We were moved by Skelton's (2008) story of being interviewed for a research study on children's use of bad language by their elementary school teacher, Mr. Manchester. Skelton described their younger self as feeling the research outcome itself was less important than feeling useful and helpful for their teacher who had made their schooling "one of the most enjoyable [they] remember[ed]" (p. 25). Expressing the value of the experience in terms of giving back to their teacher, Skelton said, "The interview felt like a reciprocal act" (p. 25). This idea of a reciprocal act gave us language to express how, in offering Grade 5 and 6 students a chance to learn and grow through research, we grew, too. We think it is important to share this because with few exceptions in this genre (e.g., Maynard et al., 2020; Pinter & Zandian, 2015), adult researchers' transformations have been underreported. The assumption that only student researchers are positioned to learn and be changed smacks of the "adultist society" Skelton (2008, p. 24) described, and which others have critiqued (Bradbury-Jones & Taylor, 2015; Cuevas-Parra & Tisdall, 2019; Fielding, 2001; Graham et al., 2013; Kellett, 2005; Punch, 2002; Skaug et al., 2021).

We three occupy various career stages in the teaching profession, which also affords a unique perspective. While schools have played a functional role in child-led research, as pre- and practicing teachers and an educational scholar with a teaching certificate, we are all bound by our province's professional code of ethics and teaching standards. The school context, therefore, is more than a material entity; it is an epistemological, ontological, and axiological site where teaching and learning are mutually reinforcing in terms of our knowing, being, and valuing. When the students joined us to co-conduct interviews with their K-6 peers, we imagined their questions could alter the data for our study, but we did not anticipate how their involvement could alter us. While the context of a rural elementary school in Alberta, Canada, may be specific, the insight into how the adult-child research relationship can be fostered in mutually beneficial ways is universal, and may be instructive to those seeking to transform their research practices.

Our research collaboration with Grade 5 and 6 students emerged from a larger study exploring how their rural school's unique K-6 agriculture program shaped students' learning and life skills development. The school's pedagogical focus on experiential learning through agriculture meant that giving the students an emic experience with research was a logical extension of the way these students were accustomed to learning. It aligned with the school's motto, "It's okay to not know, but it's not okay to not try." Indeed, this message motivated us to be more risk-oriented than we were perhaps used to.

The remainder of this article will unfold as follows:

- We describe the study context from which the student research team and our article focus emerged.
- We synthesize literature regarding the inclusion of and benefits to student co-researchers.
- We summarize the sensitizing concept—reciprocal act (Skelton, 2008)—which framed our reflections.
- We articulate our learning vis-à-vis our researcher positionalities through what we call our individual "narratives of insight."
- We discuss implications that may advance qualitative research and teaching-learning conversations regarding the involvement of students as co-researchers.

Before proceeding, it is important to acknowledge that various terms have been employed to refer to minority age co-researchers, including students (Fielding, 2001), children (Kellett, 2005), young people (Fleming, 2013), young researchers (Cuevas-Parra & Tisdall, 2019), child and youth advisors (Collins et al., 2020), and allies (Maynard et al., 2020). In writing on the topic of naming (or not naming) research participants, Guenther (2009) stated, “The act of naming is an act of power” (p. 412). Extending this to our young co-researchers, we were conscious of the potential relational implications determined by the referent we used. Our students were between 10 and 12 years of age, who Cuevas-Parra and Tisdall (2019) defined as children; however, we chose to use the term students following the example of others situated within the discipline of education (e.g., Fielding, 2001; Otrell-Cass & Mayr, 2022; Sandoval & Messiou, 2022). The term student connotes our positioning within a teaching-learning dynamic as opposed to a community or youth organization in which the teaching and learning exchange is peripheral to the problem being explored. Further, we felt the term child in the context of adult-initiated research had adultist overtones, potentially reinforcing an unequal relationship. Since our aim is in part, like Kinash and Hoffman’s (2008), to inspire educational researchers and teachers to actively engage students in research in ways that interrogates hierarchy, we felt it appropriate to use the term students.

Further, there is a range of terminology used to describe research involving children and youth based on their level of agency in the research (Bakhtiar et al., 2023). Because our research design and questions were determined prior to our students’ involvement in the study, the term co-research, rather than child-led, best captures our story.

Literature Review

Since the introduction of the UNCRC there has been a growing corpus of philosophical, methodological, and ethical writing about children’s participation in research (Bradbury-Jones & Taylor, 2015; Cuevas-Parra, 2020; Kellett, 2005; Messiou, 2014; O’Reilly et al., 2023; Punch, 2002; Sandoval & Messiou, 2022; Skelton, 2008; Tisdall et al., 2024). Scholarship in this domain is inherently advocacy-oriented attending to principles of inclusion, the subject of power, and the practical and ethical tensions between the desire to advance inclusive research and institutional requirements that oftentimes run contrary to their decolonization aspirations. We begin in these areas and punctuate the review with reports of positive outcomes of research collaborations for both children and adult researchers.

Advocacy: The Driving Force of Research Involving Children

Despite decades of research, the term child-led research lacks an agreed-upon operational definition (Fleming, 2013; Skauge et al., 2021; Tisdall et al., 2024), resulting in a range of inclusionary practices. Fielding’s (2001) typology of levels include low student agency in which students are active respondents in research, to higher student agency in which students are co-enquirers serving the goals of the academic institution or knowledge creators. World Vision’s classification includes children as mobilizers in social movements, as leaders of their own inquiries, as policy monitors, and as an international network focused on social accountability (Mateos-Blanco et al., 2022). Regardless of the conceptual variation, participatory methods have been key (Darbyshire et al., 2005) for opening doors for children and youth to provide insights into decision-making about real-world problems that affect their own lives (Cuevas-Parra & Tisdall, 2019; Sandoval & Messiou, 2022). Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) has become a popular methodology for empowering youth to disrupt dominant discourses, challenge normative views of children and youth, and inspire change (Williams, 2024). YPAR studies have involved youth in a range of topics such as schooling

(Albright, 2023; Khawaja et al., 2024), school climate and belonging (Renick & Reich, 2024), mental health (Branquinho et al., 2020; Smith et al., 2024), bullying (Wójcik & Mondry, 2020), racism and gender (Angod, 2024), and climate change (Trajber et al., 2019). These studies emphasize children's right to express their ideas about topics that directly concern them.

Philosophical explorations of children's rights have led scholars like Lundy (2007) to caution against a "cosiness" of assuming children's voice is "an unquestionable good to be endorsed by all" (p. 931). Lundy and McEvoy (2012) further argued:

The implementation of [UNCRC] Article 12 should be interpreted and applied in line with children's other rights, including the right to be supported and guided by adults (Article 5) and the right to seek, receive and impart information under Articles 13 and 17. (p. 132)

This quote address children's freedom of expression and their access to information respectively. They emphasize implementing Article 12 in isolation overlooks the reality that children live on a spectrum of incompetence and full competence.

A further question related to rights is who gets to participate and who decides. Messiou (2014) suggested that in school-based research, teachers' biases may lead to the selection of higher-achieving youth. Along this vein, O'Brien and Doyle (2023) noted how the practice of selecting youth already involved in school or social justice groups may lead to other youth perspectives being missed. Increased social justice sensitivities has perhaps addressed this concern; recent research reports the inclusion of marginalized youth. Groups that have received attention more recently include Black, Latinx, and Indigenous youth (Melro et al., 2025; Palmer et al., 2024), disabled youth (Andersen et al., 2023; Liddiard et al., 2019), neurodiverse youth (Newson et al., 2023), and gender-diverse and trans youth (Asakura et al., 2020; Wernick et al., 2014). While most studies focus on localized youth issues, Cuevas-Parra and Tisdall (2019) also emphasized self-advocacy in the international sphere through analysis of child-led research involving World Vision, including refugee youth exploring the experiences of Syrian youth refugees and undocumented Bangladeshi youth. Organization-based research such as the Child and Youth Advisory Committees of the International and Canadian Child Rights Partnership investigated youth participation in advisory committees (Collins et al., 2020).

Studies that have engaged rural youth have similarly focused on vulnerable populations (Clark et al., 2010; Thompson & Crockett, 2022; Walker et al., 2020) around localized issues such as risk behaviour (Heslop et al., 2017) and post-secondary transitions (Means et al., 2020). Rural students not considered academically high achieving have been included as co-researchers to provide new learning opportunities (Kellett, 2005; Kinash & Hoffman, 2008; Messiou, 2014).

While there is merit in the above research foci, most YPAR studies report on older urban youth and take place "outside of structured school settings" (Buckley-Marudas & Soltis, 2020, p. 332). Studies with younger children are uncommon (Tisdall et al., 2024) as are those conducted in rural contexts. Most problematic for us is the assumption that YPAR research is an outlet for non-academic rural youth, as this reifies the urbanormative (Fulkerson & Thomas, 2019) assumptions that dominate educational discourse (Pfrenger, 2024).

Questions of Power and Ethics when Students are Co-Researchers

Within the conceptualization of participation, there are concerns with youth-adult power differentials. Fleming (2013) warned, "A danger of the popularity of participation is the potential for tokenism," (p. 486) when the incorporation of child researchers meets institutional needs without allowance for the active voice of children or altering social dynamics. Children's

participation can still be othered and treated differently than general adult participation (Skauge et al., 2021), if it is a matter of the “powerful inviting the less powerful” (Fleming, 2013, p. 486). This may be exacerbated by entrenched role expectations within the education system. For example, citing Tobin’s (2007) study, Otrell-Cass and Mayr (2022) argued that teachers may be unwilling to relinquish power even when they support the idea of research collaboration with students. Further, the fact that assessing students is central to a teachers’ role may reinforce classroom power structures. A case in point: one child researcher assisting with Cuevas-Parra (2020)’s study reflected on how they felt nervous about sharing ideas because they wanted to appear highly knowledgeable to adult facilitators. This shows children’s assumptions of a hierarchy in which adults are most competent.

Hierarchy is also perpetuated in academic spheres where the validity of empirical data is scrutinized and defined by those in power (Cuevas-Parra & Tisdall, 2019). Kanyal and Gibbs (2014) noted a tension between children’s rights to participate and the need to protect them from harm, a paradox that plays out in university research ethics board requirements. For example, the requirement for parental permission alongside child assent (Skelton, 2008) means that children’s choices to participate may be limited by parental refusal. Adultist assumptions, Skelton argued, pit the recognition of children as competent social actors against institutional ethics board’s “insistence on written consent from parents and guardians” (p. 32). Skelton (2008) further identified university ethics requirements as ethnocentric. Parental consent assumes a particular family structure where it is “possible to identify the adult with responsibility for children” (p. 28). Further, in their study of rural Vietnamese children’s learning, Graham et al. (2014) found that cultural values impact children’s participation. Children’s desire to participate in research were overshadowed by a cultural bias that deprived children’s knowledge.

With privacy a leading concern in youth-led research, there is debate on how information collected by children is published. A key question is whether and/or how children or youth’s efforts can be acknowledged without putting them at risk. Many studies, for example, omit children’s names and identifying school information, opting for the use of pseudonyms (Graham et al., 2016; Messiou & Lowe, 2023). Kellett et al. (2004) presented an exception in which the students’ names and ages followed the lead author. In their case, the children analyzed their own data and submitted their conclusions, which were then incorporated into Kellett’s overall analysis of the research experience. Another exemplar is Kinash, who wrote entirely alongside the child researcher, Hoffman (Kinash & Hoffman, 2008). Hoffman’s statement, “I don’t see how I’m any more vulnerable than you [Kinash] are for having your name identified as author” (p. 86) signals how protective ethics may themselves be adultist. Hoffman acted as a self-advocate, arguing children should have a say in when, or when not, to publish their name. The practice of how co-researchers are recognized in publication, however, continues to be contingent on youth and parental consent, and perspectives of the lead adult academic.

Smith et al. (2002) suggested youth may want to be active in information dissemination, as it allows connection with the broader community. Leaving children out of the final output has practical and ethical consequences. Cuevas-Parra and Tisdall (2019) reported co-researchers on a World Vision Project were disappointed that their quotes were not broadly shared and that the research had been presented at conferences without their knowledge. This not only raises an ethical question of ownership, but discredits children’s roles in the generation of knowledge. Adult researchers’ lack of consultation with youth about the data they provided reinforces a hierarchy and teaches students they are in servitude to adults. While our research intention was not focused on advancing students’ rights, collaborating with students in research may underscore how rights are integral to the teaching-learning dynamic in a broader, more nuanced way.

The Outcomes of Collaboration for Student and Adult Researchers

Despite ethical complexities, there are important benefits when students and adults collaborate in research. Students gain technical and communication skills such as using recording devices or software (Kirshner et al., 2005), guiding discussions, listening, and generating follow-up questions (Ferguson et al., 2023; Kirshner et al., 2005). The social skills they develop prepare them for adulthood, including concepts like respect, equity, and rights (Kjørholt, 2004; Wyness, 2018). Learning the stages of and developing a curiosity about the research process itself was an important outcome reported by Pinter and Zandian (2015). As a 10-year-old, for example, Kellett (2005) reflected on how learning words like “analyse” helped with writing English essays.

Skill development increases students’ confidence. By interviewing others, discussing work with other researchers, and presenting their findings, co-researchers are reported as becoming more comfortable with public speaking (e.g., Ferguson et al., 2023; Kellett et al., 2004; Messiou & Lowe, 2023). Based on children’s weekly reflections, Graham et al. (2016) noted students at first felt nervous, focusing instead on the social elements of research such as group meals as their favourite activity. Over time, joy in the research process and excitement about sharing their thoughts increased.

Drawing on the social justice theme in youth-led research, empowerment to act is also frequently reported as a benefit (Graham et al., 2014; McPartlan, 2024). Students experience agency when they can make meaningful change within and beyond the immediate community. Part of their empowerment comes from increasing their knowledge about issues (Anselma et al., 2019). With increased confidence and self-esteem, participating in research can influence children’s perceptions of themselves as capable beings which enhances their well-being (Graham et al., 2014).

Benefits to adult researchers include broadening their understanding of issues and increasing their knowledge so that they can achieve their research objectives (Anselma et al., 2019). Understanding children’s capabilities also results in deeper respect for their views (Anselma et al., 2019; Leat & Reid, 2012). Kumpulainen et al. (2013) reported researchers saw the potential for teachers and students to initiate their own research. By comparison, impacts on researchers has been less reported, and have not been the focus of the studies themselves. Further, most attention has been paid to epistemological outcomes related to the knowledge seeking mission of research. Our contribution to the field lies in highlighting adult outcomes, in particular, the way research collaborations with children may expand our understanding of research as a dynamic teaching-learning enterprise that not only benefits children and improves knowledge but also cultivates a teacher-scholar mindset. Doing so might help to counter traditional adultist perceptions in educational research of adults as teachers and children as learners. By showcasing the unique insights and knowledge that children can bring to research, rather than simply viewing them as a source of data, children can be seen as active teachers within research relationships.

Study Context and Student Researcher Mentorship

Our research is kindred with Pope’s (2020) in that involving co-researchers from the research site was not initially planned. Unlike Pope, however, who explored interfaith dialogue among Jewish, Christian, and Muslim adults, our research site’s pedagogical focus on experiential learning played a role in our offering students hands-on research opportunities. In this section we describe the school, the larger study from which this article was born, and highlight how we mentored the students.

New Prairie Agriculture School: An Intrinsic Case Study

New Prairie Agriculture School (pseudonym, “New Prairie” hereafter) is Alberta’s only rural K-9 (100+ students) school which facilitates the provincial curriculum through the lens of agriculture. Since neither Alberta nor Canada has a framework for this, New Prairie uses the National Agricultural Literacy Outcomes (Spielmaker et al., 2014) developed in the American context. Their comprehensive approach sets them apart from other schools in Alberta that include agriculture episodically in subject-specific ways, or as an extra-curricular option. Given that New Prairie teaches through agriculture in all grades, rather than only about agriculture in older grades, the school itself represents a departure from conventional elementary school programming. New Prairie is what Stake (1995) would call an intrinsic case, one that is not representative, but one that warrants research attention because of what can be learned from its uniqueness. While that larger study is not the focus of this article, a brief overview of the research design will situate the student co-researchers’ participation.

The larger study from which our current project emerged employed intrinsic case study methodology (Stake, 1995) to explore the benefits of agriculture immersion on K-6 students’ learning and life skills development. As Mabie and Baker (1996) argued, “Agriculture is, by nature, a hands-on discipline” (p. 2). As such, New Prairie embraced experiential learning (Kolb, 1984), a Dewey (1938) philosophy that assumes students are capable of inquiry and exploration based on their unique concrete experiences. Including students as co-researchers was a natural fit because it afforded unique experiential learning alongside their agricultural literacy goals. Further, because the agriculture program was the brainchild of parents and community members, the study was oriented towards community-based research principles to continue honoring local stakeholders’ knowledge and to integrate capacity building (Ochocka & Janzen, 2014). Including students as co-researchers aligned with a community-based philosophy.

Data collection included individual interviews with K-6 students, teachers, staff, parents, and community members, but was augmented with a web-based parent survey, teacher focus groups, and observations of lessons, recess/lunch activities, assemblies, special agriculture days, field trips, and guest speakers. Including students in conducting interviews with other K-6 students seemed most fruitful for their learning and appropriate for their skill level. By the time we formed the student research group, Bonnie had interviewed 18 K-6 students. In hindsight it was beneficial that we had already interviewed some students as it afforded us the opportunity to revise technical aspects (e.g., scheduling, location), so that we could develop an appropriate mentorship plan for the student co-researchers, which we discuss next.

Student Co-Researcher Mentorship

In recruiting and mentoring students, we heeded Lundy’s (2007) four-part framework of space, voice, audience, and influence. We were guided by those who have written specifically on training child and youth researchers (Cuevas-Parra, 2020; Kellett, 2005; Kirshner et al., 2005; Messiou, 2014; Punch, 2002); therefore, our description of the student training is limited to what may complement existing scholarship.

Rae Ann, who has conducted doctoral research with middle grades students (Van Beers, 2022), and her colleague initiated an application and interview process with Grade 5 and 6 students (ages 10-12 years) interested in being researchers. This mirrored how students secured chore jobs on the school farm. A familiar process ensured students felt invited into the research space in a fair and equitable way (Lundy, 2007). Lundy’s notion of voice was extended to students through this process as it afforded them a chance to advocate for their strengths.

Conscious of Lundy's emphasis on inclusion, we accepted all eight who applied, giving them choices to co-conduct interviews and/or learn to use a GoPro for walking interviews (Evans & Jones, 2011) or video production.

Cuevas-Parra (2020) and Kirshner et al. (2005) reported on the importance of student researchers' sense of ownership for the research. Thus, at the first research team meeting, each student received a University of Alberta embossed notebook to use as a researcher journal. In this space students created additional interview questions and self-assessment criteria to reflect on their learning. The journals reinforced qualitative research as a reflective process and served as a springboard for dialogue with Bonnie and Leah throughout the interviews, formalizing what Lundy (2007) called audience. The students named themselves Prairie Researchers and laminated individual name badges to mirror how "Dr. Bonnie" and "Miss Peters" wore badges to identify themselves in the school. Students received a copy of the interview steps and roles (e.g., obtaining assent, recording the interview) as we felt having a checklist would contribute to their confidence. Each Prairie Researcher also signed a confidentiality agreement we adapted from the university ethics template designed for research assistants. These touches formalized the importance of the Prairie Researchers vis-à-vis the overall study, contributing to their voice and influence.

Using the GoPro to create videos as a form of knowledge mobilization was another way the Prairie Researchers could have a voice. To capitalize on the potential technology and language arts skills the students could develop through the research, we used research funds to support the travel costs for a media expert from Bonnie's university to spend an afternoon teaching the Prairie Researchers GoPro basics, camera shots and angles, and digital storyboarding. By working with the media expert, we hoped the students would develop an understanding of the university network that supports academic research, while also feeling validated by the fact that another adult was committed to supporting their success as researchers. When Leah joined the study, she led the students' continued learning by facilitating lessons and creating age-appropriate resources on computer basics, downloading videos from the GoPro, and iMovie production.

Co-Conducting Interviews with the Prairie Researchers

Over five months in the second year of data collection, the six student researchers who chose to, participated in co-conducting 28 individual interviews with K-6 students. We alternated student co-researchers depending on their availability, and whether they had expressed preferences for younger or older grades. By the end, each student co-researcher co-conducted between three and six interviews. We appreciated teachers' flexibility in permitting both student co-researchers and student interviewees to leave class for 15-30 minutes. Overall, the study included 53 interviews with K-6 students.

The Prairie Researchers made decisions at several junctures in the interview process itself. For example, we paired the student co-researchers with interview participants in an age group they felt they engaged with best. They led the interviews by setting up the interview materials including choosing which questions to include escorting interviewees to and from the interview room; explaining the process and assuring confidentiality and ongoing assent; managing the Zoom recording; and leading the questioning. After the interview, they chose a self-assessment from their list to either write about or discuss with Bonnie.

In heeding the Prairie Researchers' opinions throughout the process and by assigning them lead roles, they were shown to be necessary and equal.

Our Narratives of Insight in Collaborating with the Prairie Researchers: A Reciprocal Act

As Otrell-Cass and Mayr (2022) and Pinter and Zandian (2015) observed, when students are empowered through active roles in research, the experience changes them. But how, we wondered, does the experience change the adult researchers? As noted in the introduction of this article, we framed our co-researching experience with the Prairie Researchers through Skelton's (2008) idea of a reciprocal act. We were inspired in this direction from her statement:

This notion of reciprocity or generosity is not discussed much in the literature about research with children and young people. Children often have few formal opportunities to give something back to adults, to people they respect and care about who are not related to them. (p. 25)

Our experiences may address this oversight by showing how the insights of student researchers can reshape the practices of adult researchers, revealing how adults can learn and grow with help from their younger colleagues.

Reciprocal act served as a sensitizing concept, which Blumer (1954) defined as a concept that provides a "general sense of reference and guidance in approaching empirical instances" (p. 7). As the term reciprocity suggests, working with the Prairie Researchers felt to us like a process of giving and receiving. Acknowledging our individual vantage points as qualitative researchers and collaborators, research assistant, and/or pre-service and certified teachers, the use of a sensitizing concept "suggest[ed] possible lines of inquiry" (Bowen, 2019, p. 2) without theoretically foreclosing on a contemplative path for any of us. Exploring our experiences through this lens afforded us an opportunity to demonstrate that student co-researchers can contribute to research beyond participant recruitment and data generation and can enhance the research enterprise for academics and teacher-scholars. Because our research was positioned within a schooling context, educators interested in students as part of, rather than subject of or incidental to, a school's data culture (Lasater et al., 2020) may find our interpretations helpful.

In using reciprocity as a lens for our narratives, we hope to continue to expand how it is currently being taken up in fields such as childhood studies, but also in the qualitative domain in general. In their recent editorial in the journal *Childhood*, Spyrou (2023) argued for "mutuality in childhood research" (p. 9) based on reciprocity that is "not a mere transactional affair" (p. 8). Noting the neoliberal regime that has become naturalized in the academy, Spyrou lamented that pressure to meet colonial metrics by publishing in high-ranking journals, for example, may render researchers working with children complicit in "epistemic extractivism" (p. 3). Getting data still trumps "a deeper engagement" (p. 9) because of neoliberalism's valuing of efficiency and production. Scholars in other fields have also called for reciprocity, articulating it through the notion of gifting, as in Gosovic's (2020) work in organizational studies. Their concept of gift, however, is interpreted through a capitalist lens in terms of the money, time, and access that research participants give researchers. Gosovic (2020) calls relationships "entanglements," which disorients aims to see research with student co-researchers in non-capitalist terms. In contrast, however, Kimmerer's (2024) decolonizing perspective on gifts held sway for us: "To name the world as gift is to feel your membership in the web of reciprocity" (p. 22). As part of such a web, we were able to "open our awareness" (p. 38) to appreciate the shifts in our researcher and teacher gazes as a contribution worth sharing.

Our Narratives of Insight

We each came to this research experience with professional and personal motivations and expectations for the research, and different relationships with the Prairie Researchers themselves. It makes sense, then, that the path forks here. Below we write from first-person perspectives to maintain authenticity of our learning, and to emphasize the unique ways in which research shapes those involved. We constructed our narratives from observation field notes during Prairie Researcher recruitment, training, and meetings, transcripts from interviews they co-facilitated, and a focus group conducted with them at the end of the school year.

Bonnie's Narrative of Insights

When I started my academic journey, I was drawn to qualitative research for how it enriches insights into the complexity of social phenomena. As a doctoral student, however, I found myself sharing my peers' uneasiness with the ambiguity and open structure that are intrinsic to this approach (Hein, 2004). Almost 20 years later, mentoring and co-interviewing with the Prairie Researchers awakened me to the beauty of qualitative's messy terrain. I also observed research as an interconnection with teaching and service, rather than as a separate element in the traditional tripartite structure of research, teaching, and service. I elaborate through two themes: control and impact.

Control: Letting Go of It

Adopting a community-based approach to the study at New Prairie was the beginning of inviting others into a research space that I was accustomed to controlling. This felt risky. What if, in releasing control, I jeopardized the data? How could I publish? How would I ensure the student co-researchers would maintain focus so that the interviews would be successful? Such queries suggest that despite my background as a qualitative researcher, I was pulled toward the neutral ground of a rationalistic paradigm in which control and predictability are valued (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). I wanted the students to genuinely feel like they mattered to the process, and were not simply tokens serving adult intentions, but this was in tension with an academic mandate to mobilize knowledge in institutionally entrenched ways such as publications.

The first interview I conducted with a Prairie Researcher emphasized my dilemma. They asked off-topic questions and created what felt to me like a disjointed interview experience. At that point I doubted scholarship that reported value in students playing an active research role. To me that interview was a disaster, producing useless data. "Should we be able to fire a student researcher?" I asked Rae Ann in an email. Oh, how I wanted to take back control!

In their book, *Range: Why Generalists Triumph in a Specialized World*, Epstein (2019) demonstrated that the best solutions and inventions, and deep, lasting learning does not rely on past, proven practices. I recalled Epstein's point: "A mind kept open will take something from every new experience" (p. 153). I reflected on that Prairie Researcher's meandering questions: perhaps it was a signal that my straightforward interview questions were unengaging. Perhaps the interview itself could benefit from more age-appropriate activities. This led me to discover interview strategies in unexpected places. For example, an Amazon shopping spree for a young family member resulted in designing interview questions like open-ended conversation starters, mimicking the family conversation cards I had come across. Accompanying one of my parents to a medical appointment led to interviewees listening to a farm animal's heartbeat to generate discussion about the value of learning through animal interactions.

As interviews progressed with the Prairie Researchers, I paid attention not only to the interviewees' responses, but to the nature of the questions the student co-researchers asked. I noted, for instance, their focus on opposites, such as, "What would school be like for you if there were no agriculture, or there were *no* animals?" Thus, when I saw a two-sided white board at a Dollarama (a store), we incorporated a drawing activity requiring student participants to articulate learning through comparisons, such as learning inside versus learning outdoors. Interviewing with the Prairie Researchers prompted me to decelerate the research process, adopt a revisionist stance—perhaps even digressive (Thiel & Hofsess, 2020)—and reimagine the research interview as a dynamic space for unstructured, inventive, and spontaneous play.

Related to the above, the Prairie Researchers taught me a deeper meaning of the relationality of qualitative research. Owing to the constructivist nature of qualitative research, I understood the imperative of building rapport with interview participants. But rapport suggests civility, a necessary politeness that sets the stage for an interview; whereas I learned that a research relationship is an emotional force that makes possible trust, care, and commitment so that a conversation can emerge. Going into schools to conduct research, I had always felt like an interloper, a bit of a nuisance. I stayed out of the way rather than attempting to be in community with students or teachers. At the end of interviews, some Prairie Researchers asked their interview participant if they would do the interview again, a question I never imagined would be fruitful. But in asking this, they were asking what the experience was, it was a posturing toward the other, of caring for the other, to signal that we are in a relationship, not completing a transaction. Tethered to intellectual capture as my solitary aim precluded my ability to see the authentically relational requirement of qualitative research. Questions of ownership arose. Who is the research for? Who owns it? Moving beyond the idea that research is an individual pursuit serving the researcher, I could see beyond data to appreciate the importance of creating space for the process research to be beneficial, rewarding, and engaging for those I invite to participate.

Impact: Going Beyond the Research Question

Conducting interviews with the Prairie Researchers expanded my thinking about impact beyond knowledge generation. Rae Ann shared with me that after a weekly meeting, a Prairie Researcher remarked, "I feel like I have a purpose" and added, "it feels good to be part of something." Similarly, a parent shared with me that their child, talking about one day attending university, wondered if I would still be there so they could conduct research with me. These stories were joyful moments for me, as it helped me re-imagine impact in terms of how the research experience could shape identity. It led me to rethink impact, and ask: how could I create more learning opportunities and support the mandate of the school? Never had I thought of including elementary students, undergraduate students, or teachers from the research site in knowledge mobilization, for example, but we have recently involved four of the Prairie Researchers in a panel at an academic conference, and Rae Ann and Leah presented this paper at a national academic conference. While I once assumed my published articles were the gold standard of research, I now see my role in giving back to my research site and empowering others as equally significant.

Leah's Narrative of Insights

As an undergraduate student, rarely had I encountered published articles discussing the positive social-emotional side of conducting research. The works of Pope (2020) and Skelton (2008) demonstrated these aspects of working with participant researchers, the reciprocity involved, and relationship building. Inspired by these papers, I have chosen to focus my

narrative on the topic of care in student research, a theme tied to Skelton (2008)'s underreported concept of reciprocal act. Our work at New Prairie Community School shows how research teams care for each other, their participants, and their accomplishments through small gestures of kindness, and how this encourages connection and joy in research spaces.

Student Research as Space for Care

Joining the study when it was already underway, I was unsure how the Prairie Researchers would react to me. Would they feel comfortable fully participating in their interview roles as I observed them and noted their work? As a student in a teacher education program, my mindset is focused on "Fostering Effective Relationships" to create positive classroom experiences, as described in the *Teaching Quality Standard* (Government of Alberta, 2023, p. 3).

On my first day at the school, a few Prairie Researchers toured me through the barnyard and immediately began asking questions: Was research my job? Where was I from? It felt as though they read my mind; the students knew learning more about one another was important! I shared that I was a rural learner, raised by a farming family, teaching in a rural school was my "why" for accepting the research assistant position. In turn, they shared their dreams of becoming lawyers, vets, and even researchers. Engaging with the students through connective dialogue demonstrated the indicators related to fostering relationships, including empathy, care, capacity building, and the creation of safe learning spaces as outlined in the *Teaching Quality Standard* competencies. These best practices foster community and are a platform to engage in reciprocity with students. Learning more about the Prairie Researchers allowed me to personalize them, and their questioning helped them to know me in return, creating professional and comfortable bonds across the research team.

In the interview space, the Prairie Researchers demonstrated care for our participants. I observed the Prairie Researchers adapted their tone of voice to the age of the interviewees. For younger participants, they naturally spoke higher and more cheerfully, using simple explanations of interview games; for older students, they kept the same level of engagement, however, were slightly calmer and asked longer, more reflective questions. These simple actions demonstrated high levels of professionalism. They assessed participants' feelings based on body language (e.g., Were participants spinning the chair? Making eye contact?). These levels of care were carried throughout the interviews, and when Bonnie thanked the participants and sent them back to class, the Prairie Researchers would immediately ask if they wanted to walk down the hall together. The comfort of their peers was top priority. The Prairie Researchers embodied "positive and productive relationships" (Government of Alberta, 2023, p. 4) through their actions. Watching the Prairie Researchers work in this way reinforced how small gestures can provide comfort to interviewees and perhaps enhance the quality of the data. Ayata et al. (2019) propose that we see interviews as "situated affective encounters" (p. 65), where researchers and participants are continually impacted by emotional exchanges and unseen hierarchies such as knowledge construction. By recording and reflecting on unspoken behaviours, analysis includes more robust data (Ayata et al., 2019). Taking time to demonstrate care can encourage full and truthful responses from participants and elevate a question-and-answer scenario to a conversation.

Inter-researcher care was demonstrated by the Prairie Researchers most clearly through the end-of-year focus group and wrap-up celebration. During the team meeting, I sought feedback on scaffolding of the technology lessons and how it met their learning preferences. The researchers took turns raising their hands, building off each other's responses by acknowledging each other by name. As well, a few recognized a disparity in responsibilities between some students. They felt the GoPro-focused students did not have as many tasks when

walking interviews were not being conducted, and some interviewers had more time scheduled than others. Students who conducted the most interviews agreed and provided feedback on how to balance roles for future research groups. Recognizing these experiences highlights the justice-minded approaches of student-led research; as experts in their social dynamics (Bradbury-Jones & Taylor, 2015) creating a trusting, research setting can serve to elicit their true feelings, which ultimately can inform adult researchers for the future.

Like Bonnie shared, some instances with the Prairie Researchers stood out for me. A sense of care came in the form of a star-shaped sticker and a simple question: “Will you be coming back in the fall?” While working with the focus group, one researcher sat beside me and watched as I typed notes. They were fidgeting with a textured star sticker. Eventually, they stuck it on my hand and left it there. After a few minutes, I asked if they wanted the sticker back, and they replied, “No, it’s for you!” The small gift of the sticker made me feel connected to the student, who then shared how much they enjoyed working as a researcher with the group. As we left the meeting, a different student asked if I would be coming back to collect data with Bonnie after the summer break. I had only spent a month with the team, yet they immediately considered me an important member worthy of returning to the project. These moments underline their recognition of the team and respect for non-familial adults as described by Skelton (2008).

By working with the Prairie Researchers, I learned how care brought great joy to our study team. As part of the celebratory meeting, I created certificates of recognition for each student as a token of thanks and a demonstration of my care for the group; these certificates also represented our remuneration for the research team as emphasized by Bradbury-Jones and Taylor (2015). Without prompting, the students stood and clapped as each team member claimed their certificate. They were genuinely excited for one another and proud of their accomplishments. We had a joint goal for the research team to create video chore tutorials for their school, however, due to time constraints the students were unable to complete final editing. What mattered was the students had novel experiences, learning computer skills and interviewing alongside myself, an aspiring educator. I was able to plan and implement two lessons with minimal guidance, and the students gained practice with a new form of technology they can use in the classroom and beyond. The experience emphasized Skaug et al. (2021) view of research as a process where learning occurs. The Prairie Researchers learned professional skills from Bonnie, Rae Ann and her colleague, and me. In turn, the Prairie Researchers taught me how academic research provides a space for caring relationships between intergenerational co-researchers and participants, and an opportunity to connect and learn together. These feelings built new knowledge and a sense of meaningful accomplishment, the greatest outcome in the mind of a teacher-scholar.

I was surprised at the end of the school year how much I missed being with the student researchers; I savoured the time spent observing their peers with Bonnie and working on computer skills with the student research team. Akin to Rae Ann, I grew up in a rural community and at the time of the study was struggling to transition to city life after transferring between university campuses. I missed the feeling of being in a school where I knew everyone by name and could connect with students beyond a single course or semester. New Prairie’s student researchers always gave us adults a warm welcome and asked about our weekends, when I would be going back to school, and suggested I complete my student teaching experiences in their classroom. They even attended a party hosted by Bonnie for my birthday. All educators can relate to the experience of letting students go. Whether they transfer schools or reach graduation, watching them go out into the world can be both inspiring and a loss. Before working with the student research team, I had not considered how I would react when it was my turn to be the teacher. Hearing how the students found meaning and purpose in our project pushes me to view these goodbyes in terms of growth. We watched their

professionalism in interviews flourish, their joy grows, and now all of us on the research team are moving forward in more caring ways.

Rae Ann's Narrative of Insights

My insights connect to Leah's and Bonnie's in terms of shifting my ideas about control in research and making connections with the student researchers. I begin, however, by focusing on how the Prairie Researcher collaboration confirmed for me a view of rural individuals and schools in terms of strength and possibility, rather than the deficit view which has dominated perceptions about K-12 rural schools (Corbett, 2020), and made researchers like me with rural and working-class roots question their belonging in academic spaces (Dews & Law, 1995; Thiel, 2015).

Confessions of a Former Rural Kid

Because of this project, I was able to see students I had known for over a year in a different way. Students who struggled with peer interactions were given a space to belong and found new ways of expressing themselves. Watching their participation also helped to settle the rural kid still in me who had felt slightly out of place in the world she grew up in. As it turned out, rural life and academics could co-exist in powerful ways. Whereas I almost had to "escape" my hometown to succeed in the world in the way I envisioned, these students may not have to flee their upbringing. Rather, they have already had an experience of how to conduct meaningful research right where they go to school, showing the value of rural education.

Kids as Capable Researchers

Watching the research project unfold over the last school year reinforced my belief that elementary-aged students are fully capable of engaging in educational research in ways that are meaningful for them. Having previously done doctoral research with middle school students (Van Beers, 2022), I was excited to see how these rural kids, who were growing up in a way quite like me, would respond to the research process. The Prairie Researchers were invested in the project and seemed to feel that they were an essential part of something larger than themselves. Their learning was enhanced as they gained interview, note-taking, and relationship-building skills. Not only were they able to connect with fellow students from other grades, but they were also able to form relationships with the university-based researchers, with whom they were able to both learn from and provide their own insights to about the research. The high retention of Prairie Researchers throughout this project, and their stated desire to return to the role next year, indicated that this was an important growth opportunity for the students involved. Part of the joy of being an educator is helping students find and follow their passions, which seemed to happen for at least one, if not more, of the Prairie Researchers.

My teaching practice has been impacted by this project in at least one aspect so far. While it was almost an add-on or bonus for the Grade 5 and 6 students' participation in the study, giving the Prairie Researchers their own journals seemed to further ignite their buy-in to the research process. Seeing the students standing at their lockers after a research meeting, scribbling notes in their journals before their next class highlighted how meaningful that simple aspect of the research process was for them. Witnessing that prompted me, as their future teacher, to utilize journals as a learning tool. I hoped to use their experience with their journals as a catalyst for the next school year, giving them the same sense of empowerment over their learning that they had during their participation in the research project. Connecting to their understanding of "field journals" might give these students the opportunity to model for their

peers that journaling one's ideas, questions, and responses can be an empowering learning and data gathering resource.

Learning from Relinquishing Control

Like Bonnie, I also needed to learn to let go, but in a slightly different way. My role in this project was that of an arms-length facilitator, which contrasted with my previous graduate student research where I designed and executed entire research projects myself. With the Prairie Researchers my function was as a coordinator pairing researchers with interviewees and acting as a liaison between Bonnie and the school. As a result, I could not see the learning in action in the same way as Bonnie and Leah. I had to trust that important things were happening and that the Prairie Researchers were engaging in memorable lessons that I might never know about or see. This has been a recurring lesson for me in my career as an educator. While I may not see the impacts of learning in the moment, or even during the school year, I need to have faith that impact is happening in meaningful ways. Fortunately, through the writing of this paper I can witness the insights and understandings that students walked away with, reinforcing for me the importance of involving students in as many aspects of the research process as possible.

My facilitator role also gave me a deeper respect and appreciation for the unnamed contributors to research work, especially within academic articles. So often the labour of others goes unacknowledged in research reporting, from the school secretary answering questions that only they know the answer to, to administrators and teachers allowing us into their schools and classrooms, to guardians providing consent for their children to take part in research studies. It takes many people saying yes for research to occur. Opening space for students to engage in this research placed me in a supporting role and now I feel more motivated to provide credit to those who play a vital role in research relationship building. Witnessing the Prairie Researchers' kind treatment of their interview participants reminded me that we are all part of the research process and deserving of care regardless of whether our contribution makes it into a journal article.

The Reciprocal Acts of Research: Care, Joy, and Mattering

Case study methodology has been critiqued for lacking rigor and having weak potential to develop scientific knowledge because of its narrow scope (Baškarada, 2014; Starman, 2013). Tracy (2025) reminds us, however, that qualitative researchers seek naturalistic or analytical, rather than statistical, generalizability. Thus, our aim was for readers to find resonance with our narratives considering their own realities and be able to apply what we learned by collaborating with the Prairie Researchers specifically with respect to care and joy in research and how research impact might be reconceptualized. In this section, we discuss two key findings. First, in synthesizing our narratives, we see the importance of approaching relationships with students in the research process not as an instrumental means to an end, but rather, as an ethically significant posturing characterized by care and joy for both students and researchers. Second, an emphasis on care and joy in research establishes a counterpoint to neoliberal logics which asks, "what is the impact of the research we do?" by inviting a new question: "what matters in the research we do?"

Care and Joy

It is unsurprising that relationships featured in some way in all three of our narratives because qualitative research, like teaching, is ultimately governed by personal interactions. The

relational imperative is often discussed in terms of access to research sites and participants, and researcher positionality and self-reflexivity vis-à-vis those researched (Tracy, 2025). Bennion and Rutter (2024) observed that in articulating what good participatory research with children is, more attention is paid to the “practical requirements and implications, rather than emotional, spiritual, and relational connections that can be built” (p. 868). Why are these latter elements penumbral?

Scholars have critiqued the “driving logic[s]” (Braun & Clarke, 2021) of efficiency and “hypercapitalism” (Thiel & Hofsess, 2020) that characterize the academy and leads researchers into what Chamberlain (2000) called “methodolatry.” A neoliberal agenda commodifies academics according to their productivity (Spooner, 2017). In this depersonalized environment qualitative research can be reduced to a similar calculus in which “‘people’ give us ‘data’ and ‘data’ give us answers” (Braun & Clarke, 2021, p. 31). In this linear formula, researchers restrain instincts to drift, betray the generative power of meandering, and anchor themselves to the “idealised academic subject...who *controls* their data to *efficiently* produce the analytic goods” (Braun & Clarke, 2021, p. 32, emphasis in original).

In our analysis of Bonnie’s and Rae Ann’s narratives, the above helps us appreciate the impulse to “take back control” or the uncertainty one may feel when de-centered from research processes. Yet, as Thiel and Hofsess (2020) have argued, researchers need to look for such unsettling and untethering moments as they can “[disrupt] the quest of the individual researcher...and individualist competition” (p. 495). This is where care and joy found their way into our research. Creating space for the student co-researchers to explore their curiosities with their interview subjects, and to demonstrate their capacity to value others’ perspectives is a form of caring. Through a lens of care, we appreciated the research interview, for example, as more than a detached data-gathering exercise, but as a profoundly human encounter. Over time, when Prairie Researchers led the interview in a different direction, Bonnie was not only more open to the possibilities for the data but saw the value in the student co-researchers’ autonomy. The students’ desire to invite more students to be part of the group to create their own projects, as Rae Ann described, is a result of their feeling empowered.

In practical terms, we suggest that an important step in research involves being intentional about creating space for care and joy in a manner that treats them as imperative inclusions in the research process, rather than soft outcomes. This kind of re-personalization of research renders research akin to teaching, where the student-teacher relationship is at the heart of the learning process. As teachers, we know learning is not simply a cognitive activity but also an emotional one, shaped by connecting with teachers and peers, and mutual trust and growth. Our narratives inherently articulated what Lortie (1975) called the psychic rewards of teaching, the affective dimensions that involve “reaching” (Hargreaves, 1999) students and helping them succeed. Rae Ann described the joy that came from seeing student co-researchers challenge themselves in an unfamiliar context, witnessing their eagerness to learn new things, and watching them identify new passions and find their purpose. Similarly, it was heartwarming for Bonnie to hear the research experience inspired a Prairie Researcher to see themselves as a future researcher. Further, Leah’s observation of the students celebrating each other as they received certificates for participating reinforced that research collaborations can be sites where mutual respect and care are strengthened. These heartwarming moments taught us that joy and care are core principles of qualitative research design that are not fully captured through ethics protocol, in which the avoidance of harm rather than the creation of joy and care is emphasized.

Based on our experiences with the Prairie Researchers, we prompt others to continue to challenge neoliberal demands for detachment and neutrality, and we suggest that foregrounding the affective dimensions when working with all co-researchers and research participants may re-personalize the research enterprise. Just as the psychic rewards of teaching

help sustain the profession, the psychic rewards of research can enhance the joy in the research process. We applaud journals like *The Qualitative Report* for making space for scholars to write about this aspect of conducting research because it legitimates emerging conversations that are needed to shift the culture of educational research and qualitative research in general.

In arguing for heightened attention to joy in research, Kravchenko (2023) noted that “Traditional research methodologies often put the spotlight on data collection and statistical significance, sometimes overlooking the experience of the participants themselves” (para. 6). We relate to this within our context of the Prairie Researchers because they acted in caring ways to ensure their interview participants enjoyed being interviewed. But also, judging from the positive comments in the year-end focus group, the Prairie Researchers, as participants in a research process, also experienced joy. In turn, we felt joy. Importantly, Kravchenko (2023) argued that joy plays a dual role as “metric and intervention tool” (para. 10) which can redefine what success looks like in a study setting. This is our remaining point.

Research that Matters

Granting institutions like the Social Sciences and Humanities Council (2025) prioritize impact as the *raison d’être* of research. The President’s message in the University of Alberta’s vision document, “Shape: The University Strategic Plan 2023 – 2033” (University of Alberta, 2024), impact is identified as “our north star” (no pagination). Although discussions about decolonizing the academy have gained prominence (e.g., Dei, 2016; Grafton et al., 2024; Lavalée, 2020), traditional indicators of impact such as citation index, journal rankings, and number of academic publications persist as measures. Our narratives collectively emphasize that a shift from measurement to mattering opens possibilities for how researchers think about impact.

Kravchenko’s (2023) argument for joy as a means and end to research, inspired new questions about impact. Instead of, “What did this research achieve?” we propose this question: “What *matters* in this research?” Impact connotes a unidirectional causal mechanism: a research study becomes an input that causes one or many external outputs. By contrast, by asking what matters in this research, we attend to caring and joyful outcomes, such as how the research shaped connections, created meaning, and nurtured growth for all involved. As researchers and teachers entering an unknown and uncomfortable space of community-based and child-led research, we developed “reflexivities of discomfort” (Supski & Maher, 2023, p. 729). Releasing control and trusting a process to unfold is not something researchers or teachers are trained to do. Reflecting on the discomforts, however, ultimately led us to see elements of the experience that might have gone unnoticed if we only thought of impact in a traditional sense. Rae Ann, for example, saw how the researcher journals became important spaces for the Prairie Researchers’ meaning making, a tool she deems could be effective for all her students. Bonnie experimented with new ideas for the data collection. A Prairie Researcher who did not see purpose in school before, felt like they mattered.

Braun and Clarke (2021) described research as having “trajectories.” Though they were referring to how participating in a study can transform research participants, we can see a parallel with our experiences with the student co-researchers. Whereas Bonnie previously felt like an intruder at her research sites, collaborating with students inspired her to think of ways the research could matter beyond her own goals. This led to her facilitating professional development for the teachers and staff, writing research summaries for the school’s annual report, collaborating with a teacher to present at teachers’ convention, and even serving as science fair judge at the school. Research became an act of service to the school community. Based on our insights, it may be worthwhile for researchers to incorporate self-reflexive questions at the outset of research, and to include them as part of the overall research aim. In

the future, for example, researchers mentoring student researchers might ask: How will this research contribute to the school community beyond the specific research focus? How will we embrace student researchers as co-teachers helping us see our research and ourselves as researchers in novel and perhaps unexpected ways? How will we ensure that student researchers have a chance to give back in ways that matter beyond what we can share through knowledge mobilization?

Part of our initial motivation for researching New Prairie School stemmed from our concern that rural schools were unfairly judged as inferior because of what Fulkerson and Thomas (2019) coined “urbanormativity.” Urbanormativity refers to the assumed “superiority of urban life” (p. 3), which is subtly reified and reproduced in schools and educational policy and research (Corbett & Gereluk, 2020; John & Ford, 2017). In writing about eastern Canada, rural educational scholar, Michael Corbett (2020), claimed that rural schools promote a “mobility imperative” by defining success for rural students as getting out of rural spaces to pursue professional goals in urban places. Rae Ann’s narrative captured this sentiment, particularly her description of “escaping” her roots to pursue a doctorate. Unlike what Rae Ann internalized, the Prairie Researchers may have confirmed that rural matters. That their rural school was the focus of a research study, and that they contributed to it, may elevate the status of rural schools in their minds and normalize research activity in rural spaces. Confirming their rural identity as one that matters would be a hallmark of success as we see it. Following this, it matters that the Prairie Researchers play a lead role in knowledge mobilization. For instance, the Prairie Researchers led a panel at an academic conference, demonstrating to the broader research community that rural schools nurture capable students. Like others who have engaged student researchers in publishing (e.g., Kellett, 2005; Kinash & Hoffman, 2008), a continuing collaborating with the Prairie Researchers may advance inclusion in the research arena.

Writing about the impact of research on participants, Braun and Clarke (2021) wrote: “We leave, and perhaps imagine our participants fixed in time, but they are not” (p. 26). We know we have already left a mark on the Prairie Researchers. The student who struggled with social interactions but was a positive member of the Prairie Researchers, for example, may have new confidence in building relationships. Perhaps another student, like Skelton (2008), will become a researcher. Further, though it may be lofty for us to think so, by focusing on what matters to the New Prairie school community we might have contributed to reducing the polarity of university and society and demonstrated a shift out of the “ivory tower” to the idea of an “engaged” university (Chantler, 2016). As researchers, pre-service and certified teachers who acknowledge research with children as a reciprocal act, we endorse Boyer’s (1990) call for “a more inclusive view of what it means to be a scholar [and] a recognition that knowledge is acquired through research, through synthesis, through practice, and through teaching” (p. 24).

As we three move forward in our careers, the things that may matter from our experience with the students might be symbolized by a sticker on a hand, seeing rural students immersed in writing in research journals, or a student’s statement of how nice it felt to be part of something. The concept of *matte*ring challenges us to move beyond a singular “north star.” When we see research as intricately related to teaching and service, there is a constellation of what matters.

Implications and Compelling Questions

Walkerdine (1997) argued that social science research “provides not only ways of seeing others, but ways of understanding ourselves” (p. 15). One critical implication of the work we have presented here is a call to understand research not simply as data extraction but as a form of relational pedagogy as part of teaching and academic citizenship. Importantly, we

see value in researchers being open to and reflecting more fully on how their research can not only lead to positive outcomes for those they research, but that those they research can positively influence them. As qualitative researchers, we embrace subjectivity as a virtue, and yet, little attention is paid to how the act of researching can lead to differences in those conducting it. What would it mean for researchers to prioritize mutual growth as research goal? How can researchers intentionally structure their studies to foster reciprocal learning?

In arguing for care and joy to have a seat at the research table, we propose there are psychic rewards of research in the same way that there are psychic rewards of teaching. It is the psychic rewards such as making connections with those researched, rather than institutional metrics which make research satisfying (Braun & Clarke, 2021). What would a research agenda around the psychic rewards of research entail? How can the psychic rewards of teaching inform a research agenda around the psychic rewards of research?

To end, we return to where we began. At the heart of researching with children is the concept of rights. While a rights discourse has been instrumental in developing a research agenda around children and youth, we might ask, does the focus on rights as a legal doctrine endorsed by the UNCRC overshadow important dimensions of research? Does it limit how researchers develop research studies to engage with children? Given that schools are already bound by legal parameters, what possibilities for researching with children might exist if care and joy were the central concern? Bennion and Rutter (2024) proposed “friendship as method” which privileges “rich emotionality and shared lived experiences” (p. 870). To what extent can this philosophical approach support the idea of research with children as a reciprocal act?

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Author Note

Dr. Bonnie Stelmach is a Professor in the Studies in Educational Leadership Program in the Faculty of Education at the University of Alberta in Edmonton, Canada. Please direct correspondence to bonnies@ualberta.ca

Leah Peters is a fourth-year pre-service teacher in the Faculty of Education at the University of Alberta in Edmonton, Canada.

Dr. Rae Ann Van Beers is an elementary school teacher at New Humble Community School, a rural public charter school in central Alberta, Canada.

Author Contribution: Bonnie Stelmach is the Principal Investigator of the larger study from which this research emerged. Bonnie led the data collection and participated in mentoring the grade 5 and 6 co-researchers. Bonnie drafted an introduction, discussion and compelling questions, wrote her “narrative of insights,” and revised the literature review. Leah is an undergraduate research assistant who participated in conducting interviews that included the grade 5 and 6 co-researchers. Leah led aspects of the student researcher mentoring. Leah drafted the literature review and wrote her individual “narrative of insights.” Rae Ann is a co-investigator of the larger study. Rae Ann wrote her “narrative of insight” and provided editorial comments of the paper.

Artificial Intelligence (AI) Usage: AI was not used to generate this manuscript.

Acknowledgements: This research is supported by the Alberta Education Researcher Partnerships Program.

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Article Citation

Stelmach, B., Peters, L., & Van Beers, R. A. (2026). Research as a reciprocal act: How rural grade 5 and 6 co-researchers transformed their adult research mentors. *The Qualitative Report*, 31(2), 5170-5196. <https://doi.org/10.46743/2160-3715/2026.7968>

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