

# Communities of practice for the empowerment of future French second language teachers: A critical complexity-informed perspective

Adam Kaszuba, Ph.D

## Problematization

In Canada, there is an increasing concern about the rise of neoliberal priorities in initial teacher education (ITE) education policy and practices (Grimmett, 2018; Rigas & Kuchapski, 2018). In the case of Ontario, educational reforms based on such priorities have contributed to the Ministry of Education's increasing control over ITE (Campbell, 2023). At the same time, the Policy and Program Memorandum (PPM) 159 of "collaborative professionalism" (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2016) called for more relational approaches to initial teacher education (ITE) governance. This policy promoted the importance of shared responsibility and ideas, the centrality of trust, and creating opportunities for collaboration between stakeholders (Campbell, 2021). Moreover, following the adoption of this term as a professional competence of teachers (e.g. Hargreaves & O'Connor, 2018), shifts in ITE have aimed to create the conditions for teacher candidates to develop their collaborative professionalism by allowing them to assume more autonomy through learning communities (Kitchen & Petrarca, 2022). To study the extent to which learning communities allow for candidates to have more control over their learning (i.e. feel empowered), this thesis examined the practices of first-year candidates in one Ontario ITE as they participated in communities of practice (CoP).

## Theoretical Framework

This thesis draws from principles of critical complexity (Cochran-Smith et al., 2014) and resilience governance (Chandler, 2014). To move beyond a neoliberal framing, Chandler (2014) suggests that resilience governance ontologizes complexity: the government recognizes that they are part of the governed subject, and policy-making becomes an ongoing process of relational understanding between stakeholders. As a form of resilience governance, collaborative professionalism prioritizes relational approaches between the political, professional, and institutional as a way of conceptualizing governance over ITE (Morales Perlaza & Tardif, 2016).

Within this framework, actors' social practices take a central role (Chandler, 2014). When resilience-based governance facilitates the conditions for actors to be autonomous, active and responsible, these actors develop practices which will allow them to empower themselves and emancipate themselves from the throes of neoliberalism (i.e. empowerment of local agency). In the context of ITE, collaborative professionalism calls on educational actors to collectively produce their professional learning practices by self-organizing into the complex systems of learning communities (Strom & Viesca, 2021). By studying these practices and connecting them to broader policy processes, it possible to make interpretations about the mechanisms which enabled and constrained practice emergence (Cochran-Smith et al., 2014).

## Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative inquiry framework, follows the logic of case study, and is informed by the principles of action-research (Kemmis et al., 2014; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Data is drawn from an eight-month project, where three groups of language-focused teacher candidates (n=18) were recruited to participate in four emergent CoPs which met monthly to discuss and plan professional learning experiences on a theme related to their interests. In addition to video recordings of these meetings, artefacts, field notes, researcher observations, and individual interviews offer insights into the types of practices which candidates developed during the CoPs. To conduct the data analysis, I determined key episodes in the data which were characteristic of the sayings, doings, and relatings of the participants' practices (Kemmis et al., 2014), used these episodes to reconstruct the narratives for each of the CoPs, and contextualized them into a case study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Then, I examined the candidates' practices through three CoP lenses (Nicolini et al., 2022).

## Results & Discussion

	<i>Empowerment of local agency</i>	<i>Reproduction of neoliberal frameworks</i>
<b>Lens 1: Mentoring (Kaszuba, forthcoming)</b>	Candidates try out and adopt mentoring identities/develop a mentoring practice	<b>AND</b> implied hierarchies over concept of "mentor" limit candidates willingness to acknowledge their complicity
<b>Lens 2: Collaborative Inquiry (Kaszuba, in press)</b>	Candidates develop a practice of collaborative inquiry and their own unique professional trajectory	<b>AND</b> they faced contestations to the legitimacy of these CoPs; collaborative inquiry as instrumental tool rather than stance
<b>Lens 3: Subjectivity &amp; Resistance (Kaszuba, 2025)</b>	CoPs create spaces in which candidates can challenge the discourses of professionalism	<b>AND</b> candidates generally reproduced neoliberal discourses in their practices

Through the first lens, I examined candidates' practices through the notion of mentoring (Kaszuba, forthcoming). The results demonstrated that first-year candidates were able to self-organize in CoPs by assuming mentoring roles. However, despite salient performances of mentorship, candidates mostly did not feel empowered to recognize themselves as mentors, citing a lack of experience. This disconnect between candidates' performances and recognition of mentorship demonstrated the challenge of breaking hierarchical models of mentoring in the ITE program.

Through the second lens, I examined the practices of candidates through the notion of collaborative inquiry (Kaszuba, in press). In this analysis, I compared the professional trajectories of each CoP to ascertain differences in their inquiry processes. Differences were produced because candidates were able to assert their autonomy, interests, and values by selecting themes and interacting with each other in ways which they thought were professionally appropriate. Nevertheless, candidates reported that they struggled to attribute value to this form of collaborative inquiry. As candidates became familiar with what was considered valuable knowledge outputs in ITE, the type of professionalism generated by collaborative inquiry was delegitimized, so candidates did not feel empowered to prioritize their own practices.

Through the third lens, I examined the practices of candidates through the notions of subjectivity and resistance (Kaszuba, 2025). In this lens, I pinpointed key moments where candidates were able to recognize, question, and resist some of the framings of professionalism which the program offered to them. Nevertheless, candidates mostly replicated dominant discourses in their discussions and practices. In other words, although candidates may have felt autonomous, their conceptualizations of teacher work and concomitant actions were based on notions of self-sacrifice and deference to authority.

## Conclusion

To move beyond neoliberalism, resilience governance is intended to work through the social practices of actors (Chandler, 2014). In the context of ITE, policies like collaborative professionalism work to devolve responsibility for professional learning down to the candidates by facilitating the creation of conditions for them to assert their autonomy and values. Equipped with such autonomy, candidates should feel empowered to resist against neoliberal discourses by developing their own practices in CoPs. Yet, the analysis of data through the three lenses added nuance to how the mechanism of resilience governance – empowerment of local agency – functioned in the ITE program. While these CoP offered some opportunities for candidates to exert control over the processes and outcomes of their learning, they also created spaces in which techniques of neoliberal governance reproduced themselves, which in turn limited the candidates' sense of empowerment (Joseph, 2018). While collaborative professionalism may have originally started as a form of resilience governance, I conclude that the shift of this term into ITE policy and teacher knowledge frameworks has resulted in practice spaces which uphold the neoliberal project.

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