Teachers’ Work: Communicating on Difficult Knowledge in Ontario Schools

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Master of Arts degree in Anthropology
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Abstract

This thesis examines how K-12 teachers in Ontario navigate the complexities of teaching "difficult knowledge"—topics such as racial and ethnic injustices, Indigenous perspectives, immigration experiences, and gender issues—within the parameters of the school and the curriculum. Utilizing an institutional ethnography approach, the study examines the curriculum as an institutional text that coordinates and shapes teachers’ practices. Working with and against the curriculum, teachers find innovative ways to engage their students on difficult knowledge topics. Based on interviews with 12 K-12 teachers, this research explores teachers’ work and pedagogical approaches. They employ diverse teaching methods like storytelling, open dialogues, and collaborative exercises to explore sensitive subjects. Despite facing challenges such as time limitations and emotional labour, teachers make creative efforts to foster dynamic, open, and inclusive classrooms. The study enriches our understanding of the complex landscape within which teachers operate, influenced by multiple discourses, texts, pedagogies, and lived experiences.

Keywords

Difficult knowledge, institutional ethnography, education, Ontario, teachers' work, pedagogy, teaching and learning.
Summary for Lay Audience

This master's thesis explores the experiences of teachers in Ontario in their pedagogical process engaging with “difficult knowledge” within the parameters of the school and the curriculum. In the study, difficult knowledge pertains to the teaching and discussion of painful histories and experiences rooted in historical and social injustices and traumas. Based on interviews with 12 K-12 teachers, predominantly from the elementary level (Grades 1-8), these include topics related to the broader categories of race and ethnicity, Indigenous perspectives and knowledge, immigration experiences, and gender identity and sexual orientation. Using institutional ethnography as a combined theoretical and methodological approach, the study offers an examination of the discursive complexity of the curriculum as an institutional text that coordinates, shapes, and informs teachers’ work. The research concentrates on three primary areas: the types of difficult knowledge discussed, the resources and methodologies employed by teachers, and the institutional tensions they encounter. The study finds that teachers often go beyond the parameters set by the official curriculum to creatively adapt and foster collaborative educational spaces that are inclusive and equitable. They use a variety of teaching methods – from storytelling to open dialogues and varied collaboration – to address difficult knowledge topics within the parameters of the school and the curriculum. The thesis further explores how teachers navigate institutional tensions to address difficult knowledge topics, including time constraints, work dynamics and emotional labour, and the politicization of the school environment. Despite the limitations imposed by institutional processes, the study concludes that teachers engage in creative and collaborative efforts to foster inclusive, open, and dynamic classrooms to confront and integrate difficult knowledge topics. This research contributes to our understanding of teachers’ work experiences as a complex landscape shaped by intersecting pedagogies, discourses, texts, and lived experiences.
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Chapter 1 Introduction

1.1 Research Orientations

In the multifaceted landscape of Ontario’s educational system, teachers occupy a vital role in addressing the complexities of “difficult knowledge”, encompassing social and historical trauma, both within and beyond the boundaries of the school environment. Within these dynamic spaces of learning, a convergence of social, cultural, and political forces intertwines, weaving webs of relationships among teachers, students, the community, and a range of educational institutional actors. This research study focuses on the experiences of Kindergarten to Grade 12 (K-12) teachers, with a specific emphasis on the elementary level encompassing Grades 1 to 8. The primary objective of this research is to explore how teachers navigate and negotiate institutional processes to address difficult knowledge topics in the boundaries of the Social Studies, History, and Geography (SSHG) curriculum in Ontario, which dates to 2018. The theoretical frameworks underpinning the study – institutional ethnography and the exploration of difficult knowledge – enrich our understanding of teachers’ work and pedagogical approaches.

Deborah Britzman (1998) presents the term “difficult knowledge” as a framework that explores the discomfort, resistance, and emotional reactions that arise from confronting challenging subjects within the pedagogical process, affecting both teachers and students. Current research efforts delve into the critical examination of “narratives of historical traumas such as genocide, slavery, and forms of social hatred” (Pitt and Britzman 2003: 756). Navigating the terrain of addressing difficult knowledge topics presents “epistemological challenges in teaching and learning about and from social and historical trauma” (Zemblyas 2014: 2). In the school environment, difficult knowledge serves as a foundation for critically engaging with themes of equity and inclusion, human rights, and democracy (McCarthy 1993; Pitt and Britzman 2003; Simon, Rosenberg and Eppert 2000). My research centers on those topics of difficult knowledge that emerged as key areas of discussion in open-ended interviews with Ontario teachers. These topics are
race and ethnicity, Indigenous perspectives and knowledge, immigration experiences, and gender identity and sexual orientation.

In this study, the curriculum is an institutional text that serves a significant role in shaping and organizing the work of teachers within K-12 schools. The framework of institutional ethnography developed by Dorothy Smith (2005) illuminates how the provincial curriculum serves as an institutional text that shapes and coordinates the work of teachers. The curriculum coordinates teachers work and activities by the “ruling relations” from the texts’ consistent replicability across space and over time (Smith 2005).

In relation to social trauma and injustices as central difficult knowledge in education, Zemblyas (2014) points to how teaching and learning about difficult knowledge positions the teacher in a way that focuses on conveying knowledge of the historical context and narratives from a detached standpoint, relating their occurrence solely in the past. Conversely, teaching and learning from social and historical trauma prompts the teacher to forge connections between historical events and contemporary realities, adopting a more engaged position in the present. This research orientation underscores the underlying complexities that render certain kinds of knowledge as “difficult” for teachers in the pedagogical process. Further, the manner in which difficult knowledge topics are framed within the parameters of the curriculum shape why these are perceived as challenging and for whom their learning poses difficulties. These include topics that challenge beliefs, disrupt familiar narratives, or confront sensitive historical and social realities (Simon 2011; Britzman 2000; Zemblyas 2016).

Using the theoretical approaches discussed above, this research study is guided by the following general questions: How do teachers in Ontario navigate institutional tensions to address difficult knowledge topics within the boundaries of the Social Studies, History, and Geography (SSHG) curriculum? And what spaces does the curriculum provide for addressing such topics? In addition, the following research questions structure the thesis to probe further into the experiences of teachers: What kinds of difficult knowledge topics did teachers identify during the open-ended interviews? What resources
and strategies are teachers using to present and discuss knowledge within and beyond the parameters of the SSHG curriculum? What experiences have teachers had in discussing difficult topics in classrooms where students have different degrees of understanding and lived experiences with those topics?

1.1.1 Teaching in Ontario

The public education system involves numerous institutional actors, including teachers, principals, trustees, school boards, unions, the Ontario College of Teachers (OCT), the Education Quality and Accountability Office (EQAO), and the Ministry of Education. Each of these groups and institutions plays a significant role in shaping the educational landscape and will be defined below in the order listed. K-12 education is divided into three stages: early childhood education; elementary school (Grade 1 to 8); and secondary school (Grade 9 to 12). Across the province, there are 3900 elementary schools and 920 secondary schools (People for Education 2023b). The four types of provincially funded school boards in Ontario include 31 English Public, 29 English Catholic, 4 French Public, and 8 French Catholic boards. As mandated by the 1867 Constitution Act, Roman Catholics have the right to a separate publicly funded school, making Ontario the only province to fund denominational school systems (People for Education 2023b). It is important to note that there is no direct federal involvement in education in Canada, with the exception of the funding of Indigenous schools across the country and the oversight of remote schools (Ministry of Education 2022a).

In Ontario, elementary teachers teach a wide range of subjects, including math, language arts (reading and writing), science, social studies, and sometimes art, music, and physical education (PFE 2023b). Elementary teachers have long-term engagement with students throughout the year, and they often refer to themselves as “generalists” since they teach a wide range of topics across the curriculum areas, except for the few who specialize in a given area, such as history, geography, or French. In Ontario, teachers must be certified by the Ontario College of Teachers (OCT). The OCT is responsible for establishing teaching certificates, maintaining a registry of qualified teachers, and investigating complaints against teachers. The Elementary Teachers Federation of Ontario (ETFO) is the union that represents more than 83,000 members, including public
elementary teachers, occasional teachers, early childhood educators, and more across the province.

Principals are tasked with managing and supervising individual schools. Trustees are elected representatives who advocate for local school needs within the school board. School boards are governed by directors of education, appointed by trustees to enhance operational and managerial aspects of school board districts. Further, the EQAO is a government organization under the Ministry of Education who assesses student learning and development in reading, writing, and math through province-wide standardized tests administered in Grades 3, 6, 9, and 10. The Ontario Ministry of Education (OME) is responsible for overseeing K-12 public education in Ontario, encompassing tasks such as providing funding to school board districts, establishing the provincial curriculum, setting the graduation requirements, and approving educational materials and textbooks (PFE 2023b). These responsibilities are mandated under the Education Act.

1.1.2 Educational Landscape

After outlining the key actors within the educational landscape, my focus shifts to an exploration of Ontario’s social and political context. This section serves to establish the backdrop against which the implementation and revisions of the curriculum unfold in the province. This context holds significant importance, as it shapes the very essence of educators’ responsibilities and profoundly impacts their professional approaches. As I proceed, I extend my analysis to encompass the interplay between the curriculum and the broader socio-political dynamics in Ontario’s public education system. The examination of the evolving institutional policies that extend beyond the curriculum’s boundaries remain deeply intertwined with its web of implementation and delivery.

Within the context of recent traumatic events in Canada and Ontario, such as the surveys indicating possible sites of unmarked graves on the grounds of former Indian Residential Schools and incidents of anti-immigrant and prejudice-motivated violence, there have been growing demands to address reconciliation and equity efforts in the educational system (People for Education 2023). In the course of time, the public education system in Ontario has undergone several revisions of its curriculum, frequently
influenced by shifts in political power at the provincial government level. This has been the case since the Progressive Conservative (PC) government assumed office in 2018. These revisions hold significant implications for teachers, who find themselves contending with the demands of ongoing curriculum revisions.

In this study, teachers vividly emphasized how curricular revisions necessitate allocation of time for preparation and access to professional development opportunities to ensure the effective implementation of the curriculum. The revisions being made to the curriculum have sparked critical discussions regarding the representation and articulation of difficult knowledge topics, both within and beyond the curriculum. The PC provincial government has faced criticism for what is perceived as a lack of meaningful integration and implementation of anti-racism, equity, and reconciliation efforts within the educational system (People of Education 2023).

For instance, the K-12 curriculum has been revised in the subject areas of social studies, science, math, and physical health. The teachers and community advocates have pointed to instances when anti-racism statements and Indigenous knowledges and perspectives have been removed from the math and science curriculum. Likewise, the ministry cancelled writing sessions with Indigenous elders on extremely short notice, prompting criticism from Indigenous communities and the public (Matawa First Nation 2022; Jones 2021; DeClerq 2021). Furthermore, in 2018, the government reverted to the 1998 version of the health and physical education curriculum, which was one of the oldest in the country. The revised text included little discussion about the various parts of the human body, sexual orientation, consent, or interpersonal relationships (CBC 2019).

In response to the political changes discussed above, there has been a series of criticisms in relation to the support available to teachers to navigate difficult knowledge topics in schools. For instance, in 2020, the release of a report by the Ontario auditor general, Bonnie Lysyk, brought attention to the state of the education sector and underscored the outdated nature of the curriculum across various subject areas. The report also raised concerns regarding the adequacy of recommended textbooks, further emphasizing the urgent need for comprehensive updates to educational materials.
Throughout my research, numerous teachers expressed how institutional processes shape their daily work and ability to implement equity efforts. For example, the underfunding and insufficient institutional support or resources, among other challenges, hinder teachers’ ability to effectively fulfill the ever-changing curriculum objectives (Rushowy 2020). Harvey Bischof, the president of the Ontario Secondary School Teachers’ Federation, strongly echoed Lysyk’s findings, affirming that they aligned with the experiences and perspectives of teachers. Bischof emphasized, “this report confirms what teachers have long experienced when it comes to curriculum development, implementation, and delivery. The lack of clear criteria to determine which curricula get reviewed contributes to the sense that some curriculum areas are inappropriately politicized by the government” (Rushowy 2020).

Bischof’s critique raised significant concern about the politicization of specific curriculum areas. The school environment becomes a political space as the state assumes the role of legitimizing or delegitimizing particular forms of knowledge. One way to observe this is through the translation of the curriculum in the classroom, where teachers employ diverse teaching styles and pedagogical techniques, including culturally relevant pedagogy. However, there exists a tension rooted in the hidden institutional knowledge regarding which topics undergo review by the Ministry of Education, in many cases, with limited consultation with teachers and their representative groups. This politicization becomes particularly evident in the actions undertaken by the provincial government during the curriculum development process. This is especially the case for difficult knowledge topics centered in this thesis: race and ethnicity, Indigenous knowledge and perspectives, immigration experiences, and gender identity and sexual orientation.

Further, in 2021, the federal government officially designated the National Day for Truth and Reconciliation as a statutory holiday, following one of the recommendations of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC). It “builds off grassroots efforts” of Orange Shirt Day (Canadian Heritage 2021). Orange Shirt Day was created by Phyllis (Jack) Webstad, a First Nations Residential School Survivor, who as a six-year-old child experienced the traumatic confiscation of a new orange shirt given to her by her grandmother along with other belongings, when she arrived at an Indian
Residential School (Orange Shirt Day 2013). This orange shirt has become a powerful symbol representing the forced assimilation of Indigenous children across Canada. Orange Shirt Day has been commemorated on September 30th since 2013. The date was chosen as it corresponds to the time of year when Indigenous children were historically taken from their homes to residential schools (Orange Shirt Society). In response, the day calls to reflect on the concept of “Every Child Matters” to honour the Survivors of the residential schools.

Many teachers in this study refer to how it sets the foundation for the beginning of the school year. This school-wide observance shapes and informs the kinds of conversations teachers are having in the school. In 2012, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) determined that Indian Residential Schools were not accidental institutions, but rather intentional, government-endorsed initiatives aimed at dismantling Indigenous cultural practices, languages, and family systems. The IRS had devastating, long-term consequences for First Nations, Inuit, and Métis communities in Canada, resulting in ongoing intergenerational trauma, precarious living conditions, and significant loss of traditional knowledge. The TRC (2015a) labeled these efforts as a form of cultural genocide through forced assimilation. More than 150,000 First Nations, Inuit, and Métis children were forcibly removed from their families and communities to the IRS, where they were subjected to physical, psychological, emotional, and sexual abuse and neglect (TRC 2015b).

Both Orange Shirt Day and the National Day for Truth and Reconciliation serve to reflect collectively and individually on the legacy of the Residential School system. There is criticism and ongoing debate regarding the overlap of these two observances. The NCTR executive director Stephanie Scott stated that “truth is the foundation of reconciliation. Yet, for too long, the honest truth about the history of Canada’s residential schools was hidden and denied. Efforts to acknowledge this history only happened because of the tireless work of Survivors themselves” (as cited in Xie 2022).

While the recommendations of the TRC carry different legal, cultural, and social implications compared to provincial or federal legislation, they hold cultural significance
in shaping observed holidays throughout the academic year, such as Orange Shirt Day observed on September 30th. The resulting school-wide events serve as opportunities, and sometimes obligations, for teachers to engage in discussions surrounding challenging topics related to social and historical trauma that extend beyond the confines of the curriculum. The exploration of this subject matter is introduced through both formal and informal interactions among teachers and students. School-wide events and activities often take place in prominent communal spaces of the school, such as hallways, libraries, or auditoriums, where the majority of the school population gathers for assemblies or events commemorating Orange Shirt Day. In this study, teachers described how staff and students are encouraged to wear orange shirts as a symbol of solidarity and engage in craft-based group activities. Teachers may facilitate conversations with students before or after these activities. Within the classroom setting, these efforts manifest in formal lesson plans, the selection of relevant picture books, and the incorporation of relevant stories in class.

The curriculum serves as a guiding framework for teachers in their instructional methods, learning objectives, assessments, and classroom culture. As an institutional text, the curriculum plays a crucial role in shaping teaching strategies and practices. The ongoing revisions to the K-12 curriculum reveal the complexities of how the curriculum enters into and shapes the everyday work for teachers in schools. These changes require teachers to adapt their approaches and navigate the complexities of addressing sensitive and challenging subjects in the classroom. Thus, it is critical to identify these changes in Ontario’s recent history.

The educational report *Equity and Inclusive Education in Ontario Schools: Guidelines for Policy Development and Implementation* (2013) highlighted that in 2005, the Supreme Court of Canada recognized the undeniable and widely known presence of racial prejudice against visible minorities, acknowledging its status as a social fact that requires attention. In educational environments, students, families, and teachers from racially marginalized communities often experience subtle and systemic forms of racism, rather than isolated incidents of overt prejudice (Berger n.d.: 98). A review of these changes is relevant to the context of Ontario since the passing of *Bill 114: Anti-Racism*

The Anti-Racism Act (2017) focuses on shedding light on the force of systemic racism in contemporary institutions, both public and private, whose operations, despite their seemingly neutral nature, are not experienced equally by all groups in Ontario. This is specifically the case for visible minorities and racialized groups. The Act requires public sector organizations to collect personal information in an ethical manner for the purpose of developing interventions to address systemic racism and advance racial equity (IPCO). It recognizes how different racialized groups experience racism in distinct ways in institutional spaces, which places the focus on anti-racist and anti-oppressive perspectives and strategies in work processes (Anti-Racism Act 2017).

This Act was passed during the Kathleen Wynne provincial Liberal government from 2013 to 2018. With her prior experience as the Minister of Education from 2006 to 2010 under the previous Liberal administration, Wynne had a sharp focus on the public education system. She dedicated herself to several advocacy roles aimed at promoting and enhancing the structure of public education for all students across Ontario. The administrative policies reflected a move towards identifying and addressing systemic racism in public institutions.

There has been provincial political action opposing the subsequent PC government’s education initiatives. In 2021, New Democratic Party (NDP) Member of Provincial Parliament (MPP) Linda Mae Lindo proposed Bill 67, known as the Racial Equity in the Education System Act. She advanced this as a private member’s bill. This legislation aimed to introduce amendments to various Acts, including the Education Act of 1990, in order to include explicit definitions of race, racism, and anti-racism (Duhatschek 2021). Lindo identified a legislative contradiction in how the Education Act discusses equitable rights for all students in Ontario with no mention of racism (Bueckert

¹Now there are three provinces in Canada with anti-racist legislation or frameworks in place. In April 2022, Nova Scotia passed the Dismantling Racism and Hate Act. Soon after, in May 2022, British Columbia, in collaboration with Indigenous Peoples, passed the Anti-Racism Data Act (People for Education 2023).
She highlighted that “without defining terms like ‘racism’ in legislation, different school boards will end up using different language and producing data that cannot be properly compared.” She stated “my bill addresses the many gaps in existing legislation that neither the Liberals nor the Ford government cared to fix. It should never have taken this long to do the basics like clearly define the terms ‘racism,’ ‘anti-racism,’ and ‘racial equity’ in legislation” (cited in Duhatschek 2021). While this opposition member’s bill did not pass, in 2022, Bill 16: Racial Equity in the Education System Act was proposed by the PC government and is currently in the process of review. It has many similarities to Bill 67.

The ongoing revisions to the K-12 curriculum are part of the PC government move towards a “modernization” of classrooms in Ontario (OME 2019). The modernization plan involves increasing class sizes, revising curriculum to align with the “modern” economy including an emphasis on trades, and mandating online learning (OME 2023). The discourses of modernization are linked to capitalist and neoliberal concepts in language, such as “going back to basics” (which suggests that some difficult knowledge topics are not central to the education mandate) and focusses on jobs for the “modern workforce.”

Another criticism comes from the Ontario-based organization People for Education (PFE), a non-partisan non-profit dedicated to advocating for public education and supported by education experts and community partners. They published a report in January 2023 critiquing the PC government’s efforts to address racism (Crawley 2019). The report, entitled “A progress report on anti-racism policy across Canada” (2023), offers an analysis of the current state of anti-racism policy implementation. The PFE criticism points out that while all school boards are mandated or have policies in place to collect voluntary student demographic data by September 2022, there are inconsistencies in their implementation (PFE 2023). The collection of such data holds the potential to provide schools and schoolboards with a comprehensive understanding of their student population, enabling them to address systemic racism and enhance educational outcomes for all students in Ontario. Further, the report identifies significant variability in the implementation of anti-racist and equity policies among school boards across the
province (PFE 2023). In my research, teachers described to me the need for transparency in the delivery and implementation of the curriculum.

The underlying discourses that shape educational practices, curriculum revisions, and the financial structure of schooling in Ontario are reflected in the language used to describe changes in educational reform over time, under both the Liberal and Progressive Conservative governments (Christou 2019; Rodrigues 2022; Rushowy 2020). In essence, the PC government’s objective to modernize public education with a focus on technology and workforce-related skills has displaced and subordinated the goal of integrating reconciliatory and anti-racist approaches. The institutional discourse evident here is part of a broader societal debate surrounding the relationship between educational policies and the socio-cultural contexts in which they operate over time. The use of political language articulating concepts of “making progress and seeing results” contradicts a history of the PC government reducing the education budget (Christou 2019). In particular, the Elementary Teachers Federation of Ontario points out that the current budget does not fairly consider the costs of inflation and the pressures of the COVID-19 pandemic on the public education system (ETFO 2023a). Further, Bill 124, introduced in 2019, limits the compensation of public sector workers, including teachers, educators, and health care workers, to salary raises of 1 percent annually for three years. Accounting for inflation, educators’ wages have decreased on average by 2.8 per cent since the bill passed (ETFO 2023b).

In response to the language of modernization in the educational reforms, Cathy Abraham, the president of Ontario Public School Boards’ Association (OPSBA) and a longstanding school board trustee, emphasized in an interview with a local newspaper that the education system cannot solely focus on the basics. She contended that students graduate into a world filled with “complexities and intricacies,” necessitating a broader approach to education (Whitnall 2023). In the framework of education, the discourses of modernization and the discourses of equity and reconciliation are evident in the curriculum itself but also the educational landscape on which it is enacted.
The enactment of *Bill 98: The Better Schools and Student Outcomes Act*, in April 2023, constitutes a significant juncture within the modernization discourse in educational reform. This legislative measure introduces a series of amendments to the Education Act and the *Ontario College of Teachers Act* (1998), intended to propel educational reform, particularly within the domains of literacy and science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM). The OME views these skills as vital to addressing parents’ concerns (Crawley 2019). However, Annie Kidder, founder of People for Education, criticized the implementation of Bill 98. Her contention underscored the perceived absence of meaningful consultation with educators and their representative bodies (e.g., unions), thereby implicating the legislation as an instrument amplifying the provincial government’s administrative authority over the educational sector. She also points out that the bill increases the government’s control in managing school boards, including the authority to direct the sale of school properties. Note that while this bill was passed several months after my interviews, it consolidates some tendencies that Ontario teachers were already experiencing in their work.

In the context of little consultation to implement ongoing curriculum revisions, Whitnall (2023) further criticized Bill 98 in terms of how its use of discourse of modernization involves an increase in disciplinary measures and a centralization of the governance of education, removing it from its local context. The repercussions of increased disciplinary measures have been historically critiqued by school boards across the province, particularly in areas with high racial and ethnic diversity, such as in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA), in relation to the achievement of racialized students—specifically Black, Indigenous, as well as students with disabilities—compared to non-racialized students in the K-12 educational system (James and Turner 2017). James and Turner (2017) point to *Ontario Safe Schools Act* (2003) with zero tolerance policies for suspensions and expulsions, which they argue disproportionately affected Black students’ school performance and number of suspensions at the elementary level, significantly shaping their educational progress later on. The Act was revoked in 2008 under the Liberal administration, however this does not mean it was abolished from schools, and the roots of these policies are still institutionally embedded in the schooling structure (James and Turner 2017: 70). The confluence of these elements under Bill 98 evokes a
trajectory where a policy intervention has implications that may further undermine the pedagogical agency and democratic governance mechanisms that have conventionally underpinned the education system.

During a public interview debate in response to Bill 98, Cathy Abraham\(^2\) highlights the crucial role that school board trustees play in local decision-making within public education. As key members of district school boards and locally elected representatives of the public, they advocate for the needs of the community, including on behalf of school administrations, families, and community advocates (Paikin 2023; also see in AMDSB 2022). School board trustees have been part of the democratic governance of education since 1807, making them the longest-standing forms of elected government in Ontario and Canada (as cited by Abraham in the interview with Paikin, 2023). However, the democratic governance of school board trustees has evolved over time due to changes in the educational reform structure in Ontario, such as the amalgamation of school boards in 1997, which increased the number of schools per school district. Anderson and Jaafar (2006) argue that the province has gained more centralized control over funding and key elements of the education system, affecting teachers’ work in relation to factors such as teacher preparation time, length of the school year, and class size. These standards were previously defined with greater flexibility at the local level.

In summary, the social and political context highlights the complexities in how texts like the curriculum shape and coordinate the work of teachers. The organization, structure, and implementation of the curriculum within the textual landscape of education significantly influence how it is read, interpreted, and integrated into the daily work practices of teachers. Institutional ethnography offers a valuable analytical lens both theoretically and methodologically to explore how teachers navigate institutional tensions to address difficult knowledge within the parameters of the SSHG curriculum. The following section establishes the theoretical approaches of institutional ethnography and difficult knowledge that frame this study.

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\(^2\) Cathy Abraham is a school board trustee in the Kawartha Pine Ridge District School Board (KPRDSB).
1.2 Theoretical Approach

1.2.1 Institutional Ethnography

Institutional ethnography offers an important analytical framework for researchers to explore the complexities of social relations in contemporary institutions. Institutional ethnographers Dorothy Smith and Alison Griffith (2022: 24) clarify that texts can reveal different types of relations to systems of power, or “ruling relations” that govern work. Their definition characterizes texts as forms of information that are “replicable [and] can be read or seen or heard in more than one place at more than one time and by more than one person.” In studying the experiences of elementary teachers, this approach sheds light on how they actively navigate institutional tensions to address difficult knowledge topics within the parameters of the curriculum.

Within this framework, the SSHG curriculum serves as an institutional text that coordinates and governs the work of teachers across different communities in Ontario. While working within the constraints of the curriculum, teachers use collaborative and creative strategies to address difficult knowledge topics with their students. Smith (2005: 42) highlights the importance of institutional ethnography in understanding how individuals interpret and navigate institutional relationships. She explains that institutions are forms of social organization that generalize and universalize across multiple local settings, even though they may vary in specific ways within those settings. Texts, in this context, actively coordinate everyday activities and establish connections between them as ruling relations that extend across space and time (Smith 2005; Smith and Griffith 2022).

Texts assume a crucial role in understanding the organization of social relations within specific temporal and spatial contexts. Institutional discourse, according to Smith, refers to forms of specialized language usage among people in institutions to create and understand knowledge in distinct ways (Smith and Griffith 2022: 34). Further, it points to how people talk, write, read, in specific places and times. These discourses are systemically reproduced, they are repeated and controlled, and people learn how to participate in them from others (Smith and Griffith 2022: 34). Institutional ethnography
uses the concept of discourse to study how people’s work is coordinated in textually mediated environments. Drawing on Foucault’s development of the concept, discourse focuses attention on how people coordinate their actions through texts in different local settings, like classrooms or workplaces. In the context of education, the idea of textually organized spaces is useful to explain how the work of teachers is connected translocally, or in other words, across the regions in distinct local settings through ruling relations. Therefore, discourse “establishes a known in common social context constituted by particular concepts, categories, and methods of building textual representations of actualities” (Smith and Griffith 2022: 34).

When we read something, we have a conversation with the text, and this can change how we understand it. Smith refers to this as a “text-reader conversation,” where our unique way of reading, our background, and our knowledge shape how we engage with the text. When teachers read the curriculum, they interact with the discourses it contains, which shapes their understanding of teaching methods and pedagogical tools. Teachers across the province may interpret the same curriculum differently, based on their own backgrounds and lived experiences and to connect with students from different backgrounds. Smith (2005) illuminates the materialization of interindividual territories in the context of the text-reader conversation as the space that emerges between the activation of the text through the reader. Also, teachers are aware of how students engage in text-reader conversations, where their individual backgrounds and experiences frame their understanding of a text's content. The text itself is not passive; it reflects the work of many individuals who influenced its creation, categories, and concepts, thus shaping our thoughts as readers (Smith and Griffith 2022: 34). This happens because the text is the result of various work processes, like writing, publishing, and distribution, which also engage a range of individuals in the process (Smith and Griffith 2022: 34). In the following chapters I describe in more detail the processes involved in the relation between the text and the reader.

Further, institutional discourse focuses our ethnographic attention on the way discursive language serves as a key factor in organizing institutional processes (Smith and Griffith 2022: 34). Social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter are essential
sites where teachers engage with institutional discourses related to education, teaching, and pedagogy. In these platforms, people share textual content, such as posts, tweets, and comments. Although the interpretations of these texts can vary among individuals, the actual text remains unchanged as it is read by many across geographic areas and times. Teachers use social media to share resources, strategies, and ideas about how they handle institutional tensions and address challenging topics inside and outside the classroom. This connects to the concept of discursive power, where teachers, like the government, use language and activities to manage tensions within institutions. In these ways, social media and other texts play significant roles in shaping how teachers understand and navigate the educational landscape in Ontario.

Smith developed the framework of institutional ethnography from her experience in the 1970s as a woman and scholar within the field of sociology. During that time, sociological knowledge was primarily male-centered and grounded in more positivist approaches. Drawing on feminist epistemologies, Smith argued that women’s lived experiences were often excluded from objective knowledge discourse in social science, drawing inspiration from her readings of Karl Marx. It is noteworthy that the Marxist framework enabled her to articulate a distinct perspective of feminism, particularly in how “the determinations of your particular space would be seen as arising as aspects of a social and economic process, of social relations outside it” (Smith 1977: 12; also see in Campbell 2003). As a result, institutional ethnography is rooted in theoretical foundations such as standpoint theory, discourse analysis, ethnomethodology, and materialism (Campbell 2003). Smith incorporated Foucault (1984) and Bakhtin (1981; 1986) in the examination of discourse and power dynamics in language, as well as Marx (1964; 1976) in the exploration of historical materialism.

1.2.2 Difficult Knowledge

In the pedagogical process, difficult knowledge involves the politics of representation, meaning, and affect that engage both students and teachers. The curriculum provides textual representations for how to engage pedagogically with various media such as stories, narratives, images, films, and videos. When addressing social and historical trauma and injustices in education, Zemblyas (2021) emphasizes the role of the teacher in
engaging with the framework of difficult knowledge in the pedagogical process. He defines difficult knowledge as subjects that present “epistemological challenges in teaching and learning about or learning from social and historical trauma” (Zemblyas 2021: 2). This differentiation of learning was briefly discussed earlier as a critical orientation for framing discussions around difficult topics. To illustrate this, Zemblyas (2014) explains how Britzman (1998) differentiated between “learning about” and “learning from”: “whereas learning about an event or experience focuses on the acquisition of qualities, attributes, and facts, so that it presupposes a distance (or, one might say, a detachment) between the learner and what is to be learned, learning from an event or experience is of a different order, that of insight. Both of these learning moves are made fragile in difficult knowledge” (1998: 117).

In both orientations, teachers adopt varied approaches to address difficult knowledge topics within the parameters of the curriculum. While some may present historical contexts and narratives as events confined to the past, others probe teaching and learning from social and historical trauma and injustice, striving to establish connections between past events and present-day realities. In this way, some teachers embrace an engaged position in the current moment. The way teachers engage with difficult knowledge is linked to the discursive language that underlies discourses of equity and inclusion. This connection is situated within the context of democratic education. Difficult knowledge topics are often labeled (or perceived) as “difficult” in the context of education due to wider systemic influences, markedly structural racism and oppression, which become evident within the school setting.

In the school context, difficult knowledge refers to topics related to social and historical trauma and injustices that evoke challenging emotions, primarily due to their association with systems of power, inequality, violence, and hatred. In this study, teachers describe difficult knowledge topics as controversial, sensitive, challenging, and emotional topics. The difficult knowledge topics discussed in this thesis are race and ethnicity, Indigenous perspectives and knowledge, immigration experiences, and gender identity and sexual orientation. In the educational resources provided by the Ministry of
Education and the SSHG curriculum, these difficult knowledge topics fall under the category of human rights, equity, and inclusive education (OME 2023).

Teachers and students engage with these topics through formal learning activities, such as incorporating them into lesson plans, or informal learning activities, such as general interactions inside and outside the classroom. However, Britzman (2000:126) focusses on how trauma and injustices become pedagogical. For example, she inquires how the curriculum can be restructured in a way that “does not provide closure but rather the possibilities” to address difficult knowledge topics. Britzman (2000) argues that since the concept of difficult knowledge inherently contains elements of uncertainty or ambivalence, the curriculum and pedagogy should be able to contain ambivalent feelings. Further, she explores how society and political spaces define and control the symbolic, discursive, and material aspects of trauma and loss. Britzman (2000) is concerned with understanding how this inherent ambivalence or uncertainty in difficult knowledge is both recognized and legitimized as a starting point for educational work (126).

Scholars have investigated this framework using various terms, such as “taboo topics” and “closed areas” in education (Ho et al 2017). In the North American context, the teaching of difficult knowledge has historically been framed in social studies centered on specific issues, often involving perennial issues of public policy and public controversies. In more recent research, difficult knowledge emerges as an interdisciplinary term that has been further developed by scholars exploring what renders difficult knowledge as “difficult” when dealing with various forms of pedagogical engagement with social and historical trauma. For instance, Zemblyas (2013) points to work in museum exhibitions, social studies education, art education, teacher education, human rights education, and history education.

As posited by Alice Pitt and Deborah Britzman (2003), difficult knowledge challenges individuals’ understanding of themselves, others, and the world. As a result, this knowledge stimulates significant discussions surrounding challenging topics, often deeply entrenched in collective memory, while encouraging readers to contemplate the diverse values, beliefs, and perspectives surrounding these matters. Hua (2005) refers to
collective memory as the remembrance of a shared past that is retained by members of a
group, class, or nation. These memories can be observed within the written and verbal
narratives (e.g., rumours, gestures, expressions and cultural practices). While collective
memory focuses on the shared memories within a specific group or nation, social
memory is the broader lens to observe memories within a society and how they interact
and co-exist to shape the understanding of history (Hua 2005:198).

Taking inspiration from James Garrett’s (2011) perspective on difficult
knowledge as a “process of engagement,” my research examines how teachers navigate
complex institutional relationships with students, colleagues, and parents to address
difficult knowledge topics. In the context of social studies education, the focus is on
teaching and learning about difficult knowledge, which probes the affective boundaries of
pedagogy. Teachers in this study express how they continually respond to the needs of
their students, considering them both as learners and individuals reacting to the world
around them. It is within this pedagogical space that teachers and students actively
engage with the presented material and construct systems of knowledge. Garrett (2017)
examines difficult knowledge as the kind of information that emerges from the
pedagogical relationship between the teacher and student. By employing this definition, a
difficult knowledge lens sheds light on how teachers and learners grapple with the
complexities of traumatic social and historical events.

In the realm of social studies education, Garrett (2017) contextualizes difficult
knowledge through the perspectives of trauma, crisis, and vulnerability. He elaborates
how difficult knowledge identified a relation between the trauma of an historical event
and the potential for trauma in the process of comprehension itself (Pitt and Britzman
2003: 756; as cited in Garrett 2017: 36). The conceptualization of trauma in difficult
knowledge borrows greatly from trauma theory, which “provides a powerful hermeneutic
for linking events of extreme violence, structures of subjective and collective experience,
and discursive and aesthetic forms” (Rothberg 2013: xiii). Garrett (2017: 45) highlights
the link between the occurrence of atrocities, the personal experience of such events, and
how these occurrences are subsequently expressed, represented, or navigated through
various media, such as the written word, personal experience, or artistic creation.
Furthermore, Garrett also adopts the term “crisis ordinariness,” coined by Lauren Berlant in 2011, to frame the contemporary approach to comprehending socio-political events within the interplay of crisis and pedagogy. Berlant (2011) introduces a concept of crisis that portrays it as an ongoing and evolving process, where crisis serves as a fertile ground for learning. Berlant’s perspective emphasizes that moments of crisis serve as a form of pedagogy, guiding individuals to forge new ways of relating to both themselves and others. These moments necessitate a re-evaluation and re-articulation of our understanding of the world. In this context, Garrett (2017) elaborates on how this transformative process occurs not only within the confines of formal educational curricula but also extends to the spontaneous day-to-day interactions. These interactions become catalysts for interpretation and improvisation, expanding the potential for meaningful engagement beyond the boundaries of the curriculum.

Further, the notion of vulnerability in relation to difficult knowledge is in the ways vulnerability circulates within classroom encounters. Stemming from the work of Butler (2010), Garrett (2017: 41) recognizes “shared vulnerability and precariousness” as a political project. Rather than deploying narratives of closure, redemption, and comfort, vulnerability points to how individuals are intertwined with the lives of others in social and political situations that make some more vulnerable than others. Garrett (2017) emphasizes that vulnerability is a social construct that can orient pedagogical lines of questioning. He underscores Britzman’s (1998: 119) call to “explore how the learner comes to identify and dis-identify with difficult knowledge.”

Deborah Britzman coined the term “difficult knowledge” to examine the emotional dimensions of teaching and learning socio-historical trauma. In her essay “That Lonely Discovery: Anne Frank, Anna Freud, and the Question of Pedagogy” (1998), Britzman initially theorized the concept of difficult knowledge by analyzing Anne Frank’s diary as a pedagogical object. Britzman (2000) discusses the pedagogical potential of objects, including written texts like diaries or books, as well as films, photographs, paintings, tools, narratives, and sculptures. The ways in which teachers incorporate the diary within the educational setting align with Britzman’s call to consider how meaning is attributed to objects and how “the very questions of vulnerability,
despair, and profound loss must become central to our own conceptualizations of who we each are” (Britzman 2000: 29).

The diary, beyond being a historical artifact of a young Jewish girl's life during the Holocaust, serves as a bridge connecting the past to the present. Britzman (1998: 114) explored the temporal aspects of learning that occur when engaging with the diary, encompassing “the time of writing, the time of finding and publishing the diary, and our own time of pedagogical engagement.” By delving into the diary, students are confronted with the atrocities committed through state-sanctioned violence and aggression, allowing them to comprehend the Holocaust within its historical context and its engagement within pedagogy and the curriculum. In this same logic, teachers’ engagement with the curriculum can be examined through a text-reader conversation, whereby they grapple with the text as entangled in a larger web of relations across space and over time.

The diary, through its detailed accounts of daily life in the Netherlands under Nazi occupation, provides insights into Anne Frank’s desires, emotions, hopes, and fears at the age of 13. Its publication and subsequent worldwide readership transformed it into a document symbolizing the Holocaust. The public reception of the diary sparked contentious debates regarding its content and its integration into curricula for studying war, history, and government. As a text, the diary carries political and social significance, offering an avenue to discuss Nazism, genocide, racial violence, and hatred. In the pedagogical engagement between teachers and students, the diary serves as a medium through which both groups actively contribute to generating diverse knowledge and meaning that extends beyond the confines of the official curriculum (Garrett 2017: 28).

In addressing difficult historical contexts and social situations, teachers actively contend with the emotional boundaries inherent in difficult knowledge topics while addressing classroom needs. Zemblyas (2014; 2021) conducted research on social memory in Cyprus, focusing on ethnic conflicts between the Turkish and Greek populations, which often created tension and division in classrooms. Within this milieu, teachers and students of diverse backgrounds and experiences converge in a shared pedagogical space. While the curriculum mirrors state-driven discourses and ideologies,
teachers and students continually engage with the complexities of the world. Zemblyas advocates for a classroom that challenges dominant discourses, termed a “critical classroom,” where educators and learners navigate historical and contemporary influences that shape their emotional responses within and beyond the classroom (2014: 72). This concept is further developed by Sara Ahmed (2013), who highlights the interplay between emotions and difficult knowledge, illustrating how emotions contribute to shaping individual and collective experiences. Ahmed (2013) suggests that this shaping occurs through interactions with texts in the public sphere, aligning individuals with collective sentiments by attributing the “source” of our feelings to others.

In summary, the exploration of difficult knowledge in education brings to light the complex interplay of representation, affect, and engagement in the dynamic between teachers and students. Difficult knowledge prompts critical discussions on addressing challenging topics that evoke emotions and confront historical traumas. It emphasizes the active role of teachers in bridging past events with contemporary contexts, creating a dynamic and engaged pedagogical spaces. The following section demonstrates the methodological frameworks used in this study, along with key information about the teachers who participated in the research.

1.3 Methodology

1.3.1 Research Methods and Participant Information

The methodological framework employed in this study incorporates three intersecting methods: 1) online social media observations; 2) document analysis of the SSHG curriculum; and 3) open-ended interviews with K-12 teachers.

During the first phase, I conducted online observations of public social media sites to gain insights into discussions and topics relevant to Ontario teachers. The online observations took place on public Twitter accounts and public Facebook groups, which allowed me to contextualize my knowledge within these discussions. In this phase, I took an online course on Social Media Analysis through Western University’s School of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies to help prepare my framework for observing interactions in digital spaces as well as to orient the research recruitment process. During
this timeframe, the research ethics protocol was approved in June 2021. Following this, I began participant recruitment by disseminating the recruitment posters on Facebook and Twitter. I identified public groups on Facebook and public accounts on Twitter to recruit participants, using snowball sampling to broaden perspectives. The interviews were conducted via Zoom, enabling me to gather insights from teachers across the province.

The second phase involved document analysis of the SSHG curriculum, further situating my understanding of the textual landscape of the curriculum. To provide contextual background, I referred to Kimberley Seguin’s (2019) thesis, which thoroughly examined the SSHG curriculum’s content related to difficult knowledge topics such as colonialism, the residential school system, and the pass system. In my thesis, the document analysis was conducted in two phases. In phase one, my approach involved a comprehensive examination of the SSHG curriculum. This examination aimed to grasp the curriculum’s framework, overarching learning objectives in social studies, history, and geography, and the depiction of teachers and their roles within it. In phase two, following the collection and analysis of interview data, my focus shifted towards identifying the difficult knowledge topics that were prominently discussed by the teachers throughout the interviews.

In the third phase, I conducted open-ended interviews with 12 teachers from different areas in Ontario. These participants were recruited through digital posters distributed on Facebook and Twitter, as well as through some instances of snowball sampling. It is worth highlighting that the teachers involved in this study volunteered because of their willingness to share their experiences with me. They were not selected from a larger pool of potential participants. The data collection spanned from June to October 2022, while the data analysis phase took place from November 2022 to March 2023. Interviews had an average duration of 60 to 90 minutes, with some lasting up to 180 minutes. Interviews were digitally recorded using Zoom’s feature, and transcriptions

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3 In Canada, the pass system pertains to a historical policy enforced by the Canadian government during the late 1800s and early 1900s, which imposed restrictions on the movement of members of Indigenous communities living on reserves across the country (Nestor 2018).
were edited to protect participant anonymity, ensure accuracy, and enhance clarity. To protect participant anonymity, I asked each interviewee to select a pseudonym of their choice. These are the de-identified names used throughout the thesis. Although the participant pool is not representative, it offers valuable insights into the generational similarities and differences in teaching practices in Ontario over time. In sum, the participant pool is a non-representative group of teachers in Ontario who were willing to share with me their experiences and perspectives. All participants willingly permitted recording of the interviews and expressed eagerness to share their experiences for the study.

Institutional ethnography serves as a useful methodological lens, facilitating meaningful dialogue and understanding of participants' experiences. During the interviews, the framework of institutional ethnography guided my analysis as a graduate researcher, enacting a text-reader conversation through all research stages, from drafting interview questions to interpreting results. Through the utilization of the qualitative methodological software ATLAS.ti, I examined the collected interview data, including transcripts, fieldnotes, and audio recordings. I also employed the software to analyze the interview data efficiently, utilizing coding based on the initial research questions. This approach helped identify general themes related to difficult knowledge topics, strategies, and institutional tensions.

The analysis on ATLAS.ti was conducted in several steps. First, I coded the interview data based on the initial research questions, identifying general themes related to teaching in Ontario, school structure, curriculum, teachers, education, and specified difficult knowledge topics. By employing this coding approach, I focused on accounts that shed light on how teachers navigate institutional tensions to address difficult knowledge, exploring the institutional processes within the stories and experiences shared by the teachers (Nichols 2019). I applied this coding process to every document I analyzed – the interview transcript, fieldnotes, and my reflections – for each interview. After coding all the transcripts, I organized the codes into a network of related code groups to understand the relationship across three major areas defined by the research
questions: difficult knowledge topics, resources and strategies, and navigation of institutional tensions.

During the data analysis phase, I organized the difficult knowledge topics addressed in each interview into broader meta-categories, encompassing themes such as race and ethnicity, environment, war/violence, well-being, Indigenous perspectives and knowledge, socio-economic factors, and gender identity and sexual orientation. These overarching meta-categories provided a framework for the examination and contextualization of the difficult knowledge topics that emerged throughout the interviews. As the data analysis progressed, I made the decision to prioritize the most extensively discussed difficult knowledge topics among the participants. To make this selection, I established a criterion: the topic had to be deliberated on by more than half of the participants. This approach ensured that the chosen difficult knowledge topics effectively represented the most prevalent and consequential themes discussed by the teachers. It is important to recognize that these categories and topics are not comprehensive in scope. Each difficult knowledge category and its corresponding topics are deeply complex, encompassing a range of perspectives and forms of knowledge specific to each topic.

Ultimately, four primary topics came to the forefront as the main difficult knowledge subjects for the Ontario teachers who participated in my study: race and ethnicity, Indigenous perspectives and knowledge, immigration experiences, and gender identity and sexual orientation. Now, I will provide a comprehensive overview of the definitions and scopes of each of these difficult knowledge topics, with an emphasis on the four main topics.

**Race and Ethnicity:** This category encompasses topics related to race, racism, and ethnicity issues, including broader themes like ethnic identity and ethnic conflict. This was the most discussed difficult knowledge topic within the interviews. Teachers provided specific examples such as the Palestine/Israel conflict, the Holocaust, and the terrorist truck attack in London, Ontario against the Afzaal family. These discussions
shed light on the complexities and challenges surrounding racial and ethnic relations, both on a global scale and within Canadian and Ontario contexts.

**Indigenous Perspectives and Knowledge:** This category covers the treatment of Indigenous peoples in Canada and Ontario, with particular attention to the ongoing legacy of the Indian Residential School system and the systemic inequities facing Indigenous communities more broadly. This was the second most discussed difficult knowledge topic within the interviews. Teachers highlighted the significance of recognizing and understanding the historical and contemporary experiences of Indigenous communities.

**Immigration Experiences:** This category emerged as another significant difficult knowledge topic discussed by teachers, standing as the third most discussed difficult knowledge topic within the interviews. The category of immigration experiences encompasses discussions about various aspects of immigration, including the experiences of different types of immigrants such as refugees, newcomers, and migrants.

**Gender Identity and Sexual Orientation:** This category involves discussions about gender identity and sexual orientation, including the spectrum of gender expression and the appropriate usage of pronouns. This was the fourth most discussed difficult knowledge topic within the interviews. Teachers emphasized the importance of creating inclusive and supportive environments for all students, regardless of their gender identity or sexual orientation.

The following three categories were also highlighted in the interviews. First, the topic of environment and climate change includes discussions about the imminent threat of climate change and other environmental concerns resulting from the overdependence on the oil and gas industry. Teachers raised awareness about the pressing environmental issues we face today and how these issues are intricately connected to various aspects of society and human activities. Second, the category war and violence capture the outcomes and impacts of war and violence. It includes general war experiences and specific topics such as gun violence and sexual and gender-based violence. Teachers recognized that sexual and gender-based violence intersects with other difficult
knowledge topics beyond war and violence, including larger social and historical trauma perpetuated by oppression and systemic violence. Third, the topic of socioeconomic inequities highlights the social and economic factors that perpetuate structural inequities, resulting in homelessness, poverty, and unsafe living conditions. Teachers underscored the significance of comprehending and confronting the systemic structures confronting marginalized communities within society.

Participant Information

The participants in my study work(ed) at nine out of the 72 school boards in Ontario, providing some coverage across regions of the province. The participant pool consists of retired, former, and active teachers from three of the four publicly funded school systems in Ontario. Specifically, there are three retired teachers: Morrison (English Public), Nyx (English Catholic), and Jack (English Catholic); four former teachers: Anne-Henderson (English Public), Louise (English Public), Clive (French Public), and Meredith (English Public); and five active teachers: Heathrow (English Public), Angel (English Public), Valentina (English Public), Violet (English Public), and Cody (English Public). The collective teaching experience of the participants spans from 1978 to 2022, providing a range covering 44 years of experience. Former teachers are individuals who previously worked as teachers and transitioned to other roles but still contribute insights from their teaching experience. There are three participants who identify as male, and nine participants who identify as female. Two of the female participants identify as racialized women.

Many of the active teachers also hold additional roles beyond their positions as permanent, long-term occasional (LTO), or part-time teachers – some serve as librarians and educational leads. The teachers work in various major areas in Ontario, including Southwestern Ontario, Central Western Ontario, Central Eastern Ontario, and Eastern Ontario. For a comprehensive overview of the teacher participant information, including pseudonyms, teaching locations, school types, and years of teaching experience, refer to Table 1.
Table 1. Overview of teacher participants, including pseudonyms, general locations, school types, and years of teaching experience

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Teacher Pseudonym</th>
<th>Morrison</th>
<th>Heathrow</th>
<th>Angel</th>
<th>Anne-Henderson</th>
<th>Louise</th>
<th>Valentina</th>
<th>Clive</th>
<th>Nyx</th>
<th>Jack</th>
<th>Violet</th>
<th>Meredith</th>
<th>Cody</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Location in Ontario</strong></td>
<td>Middlesex County</td>
<td>Lambton County</td>
<td>Greater Toronto Area</td>
<td>Kingston</td>
<td>Lambton County</td>
<td>Greater Toronto Area</td>
<td>Greater Toronto Area</td>
<td>Greater Toronto Area</td>
<td>Greater Toronto Area</td>
<td>Durham Region</td>
<td>Greater Toronto Area</td>
<td>Middlesex County</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Teaching Experience</strong></td>
<td>Retired K-12 teacher and principal with 33 years of total experience</td>
<td>Active Grade 1/2 teacher with 17 years of teaching experience</td>
<td>Active Grade 7/8 teacher with over 10 years of teaching experience</td>
<td>Former K-12 teacher with 26 years of teaching experience and now is an adult education teacher</td>
<td>Former K-12 teacher with 15 years of teaching experience and 5 years as an educational programmer</td>
<td>Active K-6 teacher and librarian with less than 5 years of teaching experience and currently in union role</td>
<td>Former Grade 7/8 teacher with 7 years of teaching experience</td>
<td>Retired K-12 teacher with more than 30 years of teaching experience and current teacher advisor</td>
<td>Retired K-12 teacher with more than 30 years of teaching experience and current teacher advisor</td>
<td>Active Grade 6 teacher with 16 years of teaching experience and an instructional math and literacy coach</td>
<td>Former Grade 5/6 teacher with 18 years of teaching experience and current middle school literacy and pedagogy coach</td>
<td>Active Grade 5 teacher with more than 30 years of teaching experience</td>
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1.3.2 Visualizing Texts in Action: Intertextuality and Intratextuality

Visualizing texts in action informs the second phase of the research methodology: the document analysis of the SSHG curriculum. Based on the difficult knowledge topics discussed most frequently in the interviews, I wanted to understand how race and ethnicity, Indigenous knowledges and perspectives, immigration experiences, and gender identity and sexual orientation fit in the larger textual landscape of education in Ontario. For example, how are the topics are framed within and beyond the parameters of the curriculum?

The concept of textually mediated environments is particularly relevant in the context of education, helping us identify how the work of teachers is connected translocally across regions in distinct local settings through ruling relations. Smith (1990) observes the prevalence of text-mediated social organization as a dominant technology of ruling in late 20th century capitalist societies. In contemporary societies, ruling relations heavily rely on text-based discourses and forms of knowledge. Text-mediated practices of ruling often marginalize local knowledge by imposing dominant perspectives (Campbell 2003). Smith argues that specific modes of knowledge serve as the foundation for decision-making in management and government, forming the basis upon which mechanisms of power and control are constructed and upheld within societies.

Institutional discourse establishes a common social context using specific concepts, categories, and methods to construct textual representations of actualities (Smith and Griffith 2022: 34). The notion of intertextuality further strengthens the idea that texts, like discourse, do not exist in isolation but are influenced and reinforced by other texts. In other words, texts are *intertextual*. Intertextuality for Smith (2005) elucidates how higher-level “governing texts” establish regulating frames and concepts that shape lower-level texts. In this study, I adopted the concept of intertextuality from Smith's framework and also adapted it to apply what I call ‘intratextuality’ approach to examine the curriculum. I conducted an intertextual approach by identifying the governing texts that shape and inform the concepts and categories of the curriculum, a lower-level text. The language of “higher” and “lower” points to how governing texts
carry varying degrees of legislative power defined in the constitution between the two orders of government in Canada: the federal and provincial governments. The provincial governments have legislative power over the educational systems.

As referred to in Figure 1, the curriculum as a text is strengthened by other institutional texts that carry the force of law, such as the Ontario Human Rights Code (OHRC). Figure 1 further provides a visual breakdown of the conceptualization of the intertextuality and intratextuality approaches from higher to lower texts. For instance, teachers in this study cited various kinds of federal and provincial legislation that they see as forms of protective measures to address challenging topics inside and outside the classroom. An example of such a protective text is the Ontario Human Rights Code (OHRC), which supports teachers’ ability to address difficult knowledge topics. Using the framework of intertextuality, the OHRC is a governing text that legally protects teachers who are teaching about race, ethnic origin, gender identity, discrimination, and more, inside and outside the classroom. By recognizing the interconnectedness and influence of various texts, educators navigate the educational landscape, drawing from and responding to higher-level texts to shape their teaching approaches and discussions of difficult topics.

The curriculum exists in a state of flux, guided by governing texts, while also comprising distinct textual representations of concepts and categories that mold and influence the contextualization of difficult knowledge topics within its content. Looking at it from this standpoint, the curriculum can be analyzed as a network of governing relations, akin to a text composed of various interconnected texts, each holding specific intratextual relationships with the others. Focusing on the placement and frequency of difficult knowledge topics within the curriculum hierarchy sheds light on their positioning within the curriculum structure. I argue that identified difficult knowledge topics occupy subordinate categories within the curriculum. A comparative analysis is conducted between Indigenous perspectives and knowledge, and race (racism) and ethnicity, immigration experiences, and gender identity and sexual orientation. This comparison considers various institutional texts that define the regulatory frameworks and concepts for difficult knowledge topics in the SSHG curriculum.
Figure 1. Visualization of the intertextuality and intratextuality approaches within the parameters of the curriculum

Through the intertextual and intratextual approach of examining the curriculum and governing texts, this figure provides context for understanding how teachers navigate and negotiate institutional tensions in addressing difficult knowledge both inside and outside the classroom, which is analyzed in chapters three and four. Texts, like the curriculum, subordinate certain forms of knowledge in comparison to dominant narratives, ideologies, and forces in education. The interplay between the curriculum and governing texts shapes the institutional discourse and influences how teachers interpret and activate the curriculum in different times and spaces. This exchange further
contributes to the institutional discourse of the curriculum and its structure to address difficult topics.

Figure 2 illustrates the standard structure of the curriculum, using a segment of the Grade 3 social studies curriculum as an example. Through this example, I applied the intratextuality lens to gain a deeper understanding of how the curriculum is structured. The curriculum commences with the expectations in the social studies, history, and geography subjects, organized into strands A and B, which are at the center of the curriculum. For example, in the example provided, strand A is entitled “Heritage and Identity: Communities in Canada, 1780–1850.” The overall expectations outline the general knowledge and skills that students are expected to possess by the end of each grade level. These overall expectations are represented by three numbered points (A1, A2, and A3) for each strand in every grade level. Under each numbered subheading, specific expectations are provided, elaborating on aspects of the three overall expectations. For instance, specific expectations are represented by A1.1, A.1.2, A 1.3, and so on. Additionally, the curriculum includes specific concepts of disciplinary thinking that relate to both the overall and specific expectations.

Moving forward through the document, we encounter the supplementary components of the curriculum, which complement the overall and specific expectations. The supplemental components include examples, sample questions, and student talk (specified in selected grades). Examples are intended to clarify the specified expectations by illustrating the type of knowledge or skill, the specific area of learning, the depth of learning, or the level of complexity involved (SSHG 2018: 20). Sample questions serve to exemplify the types of questions that teachers may pose in relation to the specified expectations (SSHG 2018: 20). For Grades 1 and 3, the section on sample questions includes a component on student talk. It is important to note that examples and sample questions are presented as illustrative aids rather than mandatory requirements, thus assuming a subordinate position within the curriculum hierarchy in comparison to the introduction of the section and the overall expectations.
Figure 2. Standard structure of the elementary school curriculum

A. HERITAGE AND IDENTITY: COMMUNITIES IN CANADA, 1780-1850

OVERALL EXPECTATIONS

By the end of Grade 3, students will

A.1. Application: Life in Canada – Past and Present

The overall expectations describe in general terms the knowledge and skills students are expected to demonstrate by the end of each grade. Three overall expectations are provided for each strand in every grade. The number of overall expectations indicates the strand to which they belong (e.g., A1 through A3 are the overall expectations for strand A).

A.2. Heritage and Identity: Communities in Canada, 1780-1850

The specific expectations describe the expected knowledge and skills in greater detail. The expectation number identifies the strand to which the expectation belongs and the overall expectation to which it relates (e.g., A1.1, A1.2, and A1.3 refer to the first overall expectation in strand A).

A.3. Heritage and Identity: Communities in Canada, 1780-1850

SPECIFIC EXPECTATIONS

A.1. Application: Life in Canada – Past and Present

The examples help to clarify the requirement specified in the expectations and to suggest its intended depth and level of complexity. The examples are illustrations only, not requirements. They appear in parentheses and are set in italics.

Sample questions illustrate the kinds of questions that teachers might pose in relation to the requirement specified in the expectation, suggesting the intended depth and level of complexity of the expectations. They are illustrations only, not requirements. Sample questions follow the specific expectations and examples.

A number of subheadings introduces each overall expectation. An expanded subheading is used to identify each group of specific expectations and relates to one particular overall expectation (e.g., “A1. Application: Life in Canada – Then and Now” relates to overall expectation A1).

At least one concept of disciplinary thinking relevant to the overall expectation and its related specific expectations is listed following the overall expectation as well as its numbered subheading above the specific expectations.

In the upcoming chapter, the intertextuality analysis (section 2.2.1) and the intratextuality analysis (section 2.2.2) collectively place difficult knowledge topics within the parameters of the curriculum. These analyses illuminate the complex relations between difficult knowledge topics and other curriculum components, as well as their integration into the broader educational landscape.

1.3.3 Positionality

I approach this research with a range of experiences that continue to shape and inform my project. The significance of my positionality exerts influence on the perspectives and lens through which I undertake this research project. In the late 1990s, my family and I immigrated to Canada from Colombia, seeking refuge from the country’s enduring civil war. Settling in London, Ontario, I embarked on my educational journey, attending both Catholic Public and Public schools from Grade 1 to 12. Reflecting upon my experiences within the public education system throughout this thesis allows me to gain insights from the vantage point of both an immigrant to Canada and a former student.

Growing up in Canada gave me the vantage point of participating in the process of seeking refuge while simultaneously affording me the opportunity to experience the Ontario public education system. This dual perspective enabled me to develop an appreciation for the opportunities Canada provides to newcomers and immigrants, while also prompting me to critically examine the unequal and racist treatment that marginalized groups experience in social institutions.

In many ways, my methodological and theoretical approach is oriented towards unraveling the complexities of social institutions, particularly education, and how different groups of individuals navigate and experience them. During my undergraduate studies, I focused my academic pursuits on anthropology and museum and curatorial studies, which further shaped the trajectory of my work. It is important to acknowledge that although my positionality grants me a unique perspective, it also imposes inherent limitations. As an outsider to the work of teachers in the Ontario education system, I am acutely aware that my understanding of the sector has been significantly enriched through engaging in interviews with teachers in Ontario. Embracing a collaborative approach
ensures that my research remains firmly rooted in reciprocity and respect. I remain committed to actively listening to and engaging in dialogue with teachers, valuing their expertise and knowledge as we collectively shape the outcomes and implications of my research.

1.4 Overview of Thesis Chapters

Chapter 2: Texts in Action posits that understanding how K-12 teachers in Ontario address difficult knowledge topics requires examining the curriculum's role as a coordinating and guiding institutional text. While the curriculum sets authoritative parameters, it is not monolithic; it allows for "heteroglossia," or multiple voices and perspectives. This flexibility is particularly significant for addressing sensitive topics like social injustices and historical traumas. The chapter employs both intertextual and intratextual analyses to examine how these difficult topics are framed within and beyond the curriculum, revealing it as a complex structure influenced by both internal and external factors. Teachers, despite institutional constraints, leverage this complexity to create dynamic, inclusive classrooms. The chapter thus underscores the curriculum as a key node in a multi-layered pedagogical landscape where teachers and students engage in meaningful discourse on challenging subjects. While teachers’ voices are foregrounded primarily in Chapters 3 and 4, the areas of the curriculum highlighted in Chapter 2 were shaped by what I learned from teacher participants.

Chapter 3: Teacher Strategies for Addressing Difficult Knowledge examines the strategies employed by teachers to address difficult knowledge topics in the classroom. It begins by exploring teachers' perspectives on difficult knowledge topics, shedding light on their understanding and experiences with this conceptual framework. One key aspect examined in this chapter is the use of pedagogical strategies to navigate difficult knowledge. Specifically, it explores the utilization of picture books and storytelling as powerful tools to foster student understanding and empathy. By incorporating these narrative-based methods, teachers aim to create safe spaces for dialogue and reflection, enabling students to engage with difficult knowledge in meaningful ways. Further, chapter 3 explores dialogic approaches and community engagement in addressing difficult knowledge. It highlights how conversations and dialogue within the classroom
foster critical thinking and inclusive learning environments. Also, this section examines how teachers incorporate land-based and community learning to connect classroom experiences with real-life contexts. Collaboration among teachers, both within and outside the school, is investigated to enhance pedagogical practices. The role of social media platforms, such as Twitter and Facebook, in facilitating teacher collaboration and idea-sharing is also explored.

Chapter 4: Navigating tensions unveils the web of tensions that teachers grapple with when addressing difficult knowledge topics both within and beyond the school and the curriculum. The dimensions of time, work dynamics, and politicization converge to shape teachers’ pedagogical approaches and their interactions with difficult knowledge topics. Through the vivid narratives of educators, this chapter explores the nuanced manifestations of these institutional tensions, shedding light on the constraints they encounter, the emotional labour they invest, and the intricate interplay among these multifaceted dimensions. The manner in which these discussions are addressed, and the outcomes achieved, are deeply influenced by these complex dynamics, with divergent implications for educators of different racial backgrounds, lived experiences, and perspectives. Further, social media plays an instrumental role in amplifying and shaping the institutional tensions.

Chapter 5 provides an overview of the difficult knowledge topics discussed in this thesis, as well as the teachers’ pedagogical strategies and the imposed institutional tensions in this space. Notably, the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic adds another layer of complexity, affecting pedagogical strategies and teacher-student dynamics. Despite curriculum guidelines and institutional pressures, teachers exercise agency, making the curriculum a "living text" adaptable to local contexts and needs. The chapter argues that the classroom is a multi-voiced space, shaped by an intricate web of texts, institutional processes, and social interactions, where teachers play a pivotal role in fostering critical engagement and inclusion.
Chapter 2 Texts in Action

2.1. Introduction to texts

In this chapter, I use the lens of institutional ethnography to examine the curriculum as an institutional text. The curriculum serves as a recognizable and consistent text that orchestrates institutional processes in teachers’ work, activities, and practices (Campbell 2003). In this context, texts play a crucial role in facilitating the coordination of actions across spatial and temporal boundaries. I will explore both the curriculum’s content and its impact on how teachers navigate difficult knowledge topics within its boundaries. This discussion sets the stage for exploring teachers’ creativity in how they address social and historical trauma and injustices. Specifically, Chapter 3 examines the pedagogical strategies teachers employ, while Chapter 4 examines how they navigate institutional tensions to address difficult knowledge topics.

Texts, whether print or electronic, serve as foundational components that lend “stability and replicability” to an organization or institution, according to Smith (2005: 166). The text's ability to coordinate people's actions translocally, or across different locations, relies on its assembly as a “material thing,” capable of appearing in the same form wherever the reader, listener, or viewer may be physically present (Smith 2005: 166). In other words, Smith vividly illustrates how “texts suture modes of social action” (2005: 166). Further, she emphasizes that the very ability of texts to be replicated underpins the "ruling relations" of an institution; in essence, their replicability is a prerequisite for their institutional effects. In an educational setting, this manifests as standardization, achieved through the repeated dissemination of replicable texts.

Institutional ethnography stands apart from other approaches to texts and the ethnography of texts due to its unique focus on the coordination of subjectivities, activities, and relationships among individuals (Smith 2005: 81). The relationship between the text and the reader exemplifies active interchange and processes in text-reader conversations (Smith 2005: 105). Text-reader conversations “are embedded in and organize local settings of work” (Smith 2005: 166). Readers engage with texts through their perspectives and lived experiences, influencing how the text engages with them in
return. This mutual engagement shapes the foundations of text-reader conversations, revealing that texts are embedded in social relations and are constantly in action (Smith 2005: 106). Texts are not static entities but are influenced by and influence the social context in which they operate, particularly in textually mediated institutions like the public education sector. Giving voice to experiences has empowered individuals to transcend social norms and challenge dominant institutional discourses in education (Smith 2005: 88). In the face of limitations imposed by bureaucratic and institutional text-mediated procedures that exert an impact on their daily activities, teachers actively interact with texts and discourses to address difficult knowledge topics both within and beyond the parameters of the curriculum.

The frameworks of institutional ethnography and difficult knowledge both call to action the need to understand how people experience their surroundings, their work, and how they engage with the material environment around them through their perspectives and knowledges. Smith's (2005) proposition of social relations as an examination of people's actions within specific local contexts is particularly pertinent when considering the study of difficult knowledge through the lens of institutional ethnography. She views social relations as temporal sequences, directing attention to the interconnectedness of these actions with past and ongoing activities occurring across space and time (see also Smith and Griffith 2022). This approach allows for an exploration of how teachers interact with and respond to challenging topics within the complex web of institutional relations. The text as a recognizable entity from one site of activation to another is integral to the text’s distinctive form of coordinating ruling relations (Smith 2005: 105).

As texts became more widespread and replicable, they gave rise to new forms of consciousness and organization that no longer relied solely on direct, face-to-face interactions between speakers and hearers (Smith 2005: 108). Bakhtin (1981) described this shift from spoken utterances, where authority relied on speakers, to written or imaged utterances within the text, detached from a physical speaker. Bakhtin’s social theory of utterance points to how “consciousness emerges through dialogic interactions” (Campbell 2003: 7). Although an author or source may be identified, they are not physically present with the reader. The text's utterance stands on its own, seemingly speaking directly to the
reader, but without a specific individual it addresses. This process illustrates the complexity of discourses and texts, as people engage with, activate, and create texts, bringing a world of messages to life, grounded in materiality and shaped by actual individuals in real settings. However, these texts are not confined to a specific location; instead, they actively engage readers and creators in a complex web of relations, coordinating moments of discourses (Smith 2005).

In 1986, Bakhtin introduced the concept of speech genres to encompass the rich diversity of how people communicate through spoken and written language within society (Smith 2005). He emphasized that each realm of language usage develops its own relatively stable types of utterances, known as speech genres. Primary speech genres involve direct experience and communication, while secondary speech genres, primarily written, encompass novels and scientific research as they rely on texts (Smith 2005). When writing conveys experiences, Bakhtin assumes that the reader can draw upon their own experiences to understand its meaning (Emerson 1983). This is particularly central to the work of teachers as they deliver the curriculum to students with various lived experiences and backgrounds, enacting discourses of pedagogical space that allow them to navigate institutional tensions to address difficult knowledge topics inside and outside the classroom.

Inspired by the work of Darville, Smith captured how people engage with texts through their own experience:

The reader, in “making sense” of the story, must “fill in” her own sense of how people are and how things work, into what the text gives… s/he has no choice but to be reminded of her own experience. Thus, to follow a story is to orient both to the experience related, and to one’s own experience, as that is used in interpreting what is related. Part of the attraction of stories is that while they allow one to live through things with their characters, at the same time they pull out one’s own sense of experience (2005: 91).

Texts that express or describe experiences, when activated by the reader, develop interindividual territories (Smith 2005). The focus lies on how interindividual territories
emerge in different modes of communication depending on the individual experiences and perspectives. The distinction between experience-based and text-based interindividual territories lies in the resources that the hearer/reader brings to comprehend what they hear or read (Smith 2005).

To understand interindividual territories, Smith (2005) adopts Vološinov’s (1973) concept of language as a “two-sided act” to examine how the interindividual territory emerges as the product of the reciprocal relationship between the speaker and the hearer. Similarly, Bakhtin (1981) argues that “all utterances contain the intensions of others, making them inherently double-voiced” (Campbell 2003: 7). He considers the utterance the primary unit of analysis that is attached to a voice that expresses individual consciousness and point of view (Pace 2015: 47). In other words, the relationship between the speaker and the hearer is always in action and an outcome of each unique engagement with varying discourses between people and larger institutional processes.

Furthermore, Pace (2015) emphasizes that the classroom operates as charged spaces where teachers actively engage students by selecting texts and topics that elicit and invite conversations that provoke critical reactions. Bakhtin’s conceptualization of discourse sheds light on the potential for dynamic interactions among individuals within the classroom. He elucidates the complex process of communication as the interaction of two or more voices to construct meaning. Bakhtin coined the term “heteroglossia” to illustrate the diverse array of voices present in discourse, encompassing conflicting ideologies and frames of reference. Holquist (1981: 428) defines “heteroglossia” as “the locus where centripetal and centrifugal forces collide.” These voices encompass both the authoritative rhetoric of those in power and the dissenting voices that challenge this authority. In this line of thought, the classroom is “inherently multivoiced” (Pace 2015: 47).

Bakhtin characterizes an utterance “as a contradiction-ridden, tension-filled unity of two embattled tendencies in the life of language.” These include the official, centralizing rhetoric of authorities and the voices that disrupt that rhetoric (Pace 2015: 47). Pace (2015) comments on Holquist (1981: xviii) reference of Bakhtin’s theory of
language on how it rests on a “sense of opposition and struggle at the heart of existence, a ceaseless battle between centrifugal or stratifying forces that seek to keep things apart, and centripetal or unifying forces that strive to make things cohere.” Centripetal forces drive towards establishing authority and assimilation, while centrifugal forces decentralize and introduce disruption in the classroom. In the perspective of Pace, the classroom is a space where these conflicting energies co-exist, generating tension and offering potential for learning. The diverse approaches taken by both teachers and students in maneuvering these forces significantly impact the development of dialogue (Pace 2015: 47).

Bakhtin (1981) asserts that an effective form of communication is “dialogism,” involving the interaction of various voices leading to multiple interpretations in the pursuit of knowledge. As discussed previously, this dialogism encompasses internally persuasive speech reflecting the dynamic interplay of one’s individual thoughts and opinions in shaping and being shaped by broader social and cultural perspectives and voices. In other words, dialogism combines an individual's everyday voice with those of others. In contrast, a monologic approach enforces a single perspective. It is conveyed through an authoritative discourse that communicates an official version of knowledge, which is tightly linked to power and resistant to interpretation (Pace 2015: 47).

Viewing the classroom as a space of “heteroglossia” unveils the potential for it to evolve into a complex site for active exchange and negotiation of different discourses. In their analysis of teacher and student pedagogy, Gutierrez, Rhymes, and Larson (1995) illuminate the benefits of probing multiple discourses in the classroom, specifically in contexts with racially diverse students. In the framework of Bakhtinian heteroglossia, they argue that a “third space” emerges in the interaction of teacher and students, where many perspectives and voices converge. This aspect will be revisited in the following section, where I will explore the concepts and categories of the curriculum in relation to the difficult knowledge topics discussed in this thesis. This interpretation is a product of active negotiation and is shaped by the lived experiences of both teachers and students.
Intertextuality shapes the interconnectedness and mutual influence of various texts within the educational context, such as the stories chosen for lessons, collaborative lesson plans, and interactions among teachers and students. Experiences are communicated through direct speech or writing, reflecting the actual realities of individuals' lives (Smith 2005). In the context of the school site, Toohey et al. (2015) prompt us to scrutinize carefully the intricate processes within schooling sites, exploring how human bodies, classroom setups, materials, discourses about teaching and learning, notions of knowledge, school board policies, and the curriculum are intertwined.

According to Smith (2005), there are different types of texts that create text-based interindividual territories, distinct from experientially based ones. These territories consist of shared objects and individuals, forming an internal repository of references (Smith 2005). For instance, news media constructs a textual ground that builds into the formation of interindividual territories. Likewise, social media platforms offer textual representations that enable teachers to collaborate with other educators, sharing ideas, concepts, and categories to address difficult knowledge topics both inside and outside the classroom. These textual realities extend into the public sphere, making them applicable to various participants (Smith 2005). However, these textual realities indirectly connect with experientially grounded forms of symbolic coordinating.

On platforms like Facebook and Twitter, teachers engage with various discourses about education, encountering challenges and support for their own understanding of teaching and learning challenging topics. Teachers become familiar with the topics discussed by other educators online, creating a resource of in-text identified people, events, objects, and institutional presences that they can relate to when interacting in these spaces (Smith 2005). This resource of in-text identified entities filter institutional discourses, acting as a safeguard against potential risks. But, in other instances, social media also serves as a site where teachers navigate distinct forms of institutional tensions.

Moreover, the Ontario College of Teachers (OCT) publishes a quarterly magazine entitled “Professionally Speaking,” which came to my attention during an interview with a teacher. In this study, my teacher participants expressed feeling a sense of fear induced
by the dissemination of the magazine, which includes a list of teachers who have been disciplined. It exerts pressure on teachers who address difficult knowledge topics, as they fear potential consequences like being fired, disciplined by the administration, or treated differently by colleagues online and in the school environment. I will explore the tensions and risks that teachers experience further in Chapter 4.

In summary, the framework of institutional ethnography provides a valuable lens to examine how difficult knowledge is not inherently “difficult”; rather it is rendered difficult when it confronts people’s world views and when it challenges their epistemological certainties of the world and themselves (Douglas et al 2020). In the context of public education in Ontario, difficult knowledge is rendered and framed as challenging when it confronts the neoliberal, colonial, and capitalist discourses and narratives flowing within the educational institution. For example, the discourse of 'modernization' entices teachers to engage with language and texts related to the “modern workforce” and student “progress,” leading to potential disjunctions with the discourses of equity and inclusivity in education. Ingold's (1999) perspective on teaching and learning highlights that pedagogy is not merely about information transmission but rather “guided rediscovery” (n.p.). This view aligns with Ingold's focus on ecological and material analyses of phenomena. According to Ingold (1999), learning occurs as people develop their embodied skills of perception and action while navigating their daily lives. They acquire skills in perceiving and attending to the “socio-material” relations of their surroundings, observing the practices of others, and improvising new solutions in response to challenges and various contexts (Toohey et al 2015: 325).

By recognizing the complex interplay between texts, discourses, and experiences, teachers emerge as key actors in the educational landscape to address difficult knowledge topics through enacting discourses of the pedagogical space. In the subsequent section, I will explore the interplay of discourses within education and how they interact with one another, influencing teachers' practices and the potential avenues for addressing difficult knowledge topics within the parameters of the curriculum.
2.2. Curriculum

The curriculum serves as a fundamental institutional text that shapes the delivery of education in Ontario, providing standardized learning outcomes and expectations for K-12 students. The curriculum and educational policies are defined by the standards of the provincial government. The Ontario Ministry of Education (OME), under the leadership of the Minister of Education, oversees and regulates the educational system, playing a significant role in curriculum development, textbook approval, funding allocation, and student assessment. In the educational system, the curriculum framework encompasses the formal learning objectives, outcomes, and teaching and learning perspectives outlined in the official curriculum. However, there can be discrepancies between what the curriculum articulates and what occurs in the classroom, reflecting the complexities of rendering certain difficult knowledge topics as challenging due to larger discourses and perspectives (Auger and Rick 2007).

Using the framework of Bakhtin that considers the word as a “tool of pedagogy,” teachers activate agency within their discourses of pedagogical spaces enabling them to address challenging topics while working within the curriculum’s parameters. Heathrow, a Grade 1/2 teacher from Southwestern Ontario further defines the curriculum as an institutional text, akin to “legal documents,” supported by the Ministry of Education, which emphasizes its authority and influence within the educational system. Power dynamics are intertwined with the “coordination of language and texts,” influencing how teachers navigate institutional tensions when addressing challenging topics (Smith 2005: 225; see also Amit 2015). However, it is important to consider the informal and implicit dimensions of the curriculum that influence classroom learning and pedagogy. These dimensions are molded by institutional discourses and overarching social norms within the realm of education (Parkinson 2009).

The official curriculum reflects the standardized narratives of the provincial government, embodying a monologic voice that suppresses the dialogic nature of the social (Smith 1999). The monologic voice of the state is representative of multiple work processes and decisions that allude to the nature of the curriculum as representing the legitimized, official narrative of the state that blur the relations within the text. In the
context of the official curriculum, the unofficial or implicit curriculum operates, shaped by historical, political, and sociocultural discourses in local and trans local contexts. The curriculum, as an institutional text, serves as a standardized framework outlining learning objectives for students across different grade levels. However, the implementation of the curriculum faces institutional and organizational challenges due to a lack of funding, limited resources, and insufficient professional development opportunities to engage with topics that fall under human rights, equity, and inclusive education.

Moreover, the actions taken by the PC government to overhaul the K-12 curriculum can be positioned within the discourse of “modernization,” which is encapsulated in the rhetoric of “back to basics” and “making progress.” The analysis of the term “modernization” by Williams (1975) provides a lens through which to comprehend the evolving nature of this discourse. He critically dissects the language of modernization and its variations such as “modern” and “modernizing,” casting it as a language that implies assimilation rather than inclusion (Williams 1975: 209). While the connotations of modernization discourse suggest local improvements or alterations to existing systems or institutions, Williams (1975) urges critical reflection on the use of such terms as they point to specific types of change. In this context, the modernization rhetoric to overhaul of the K-12 curriculum and classroom structure informs the structure of schooling, which further shapes the social norms, values, and concepts in the school. This illuminates the centripetal forces (authority and assimilation) and centrifugal forces (decentralization and specificity) in the classroom.

The discourses of modernization are in alignment with Nichols' (2019) argument, which asserts that the educational motto of “success for all” is undermined by an educational system entrenched within capitalist and neoliberal frameworks that lead to inequality. As Nichols (2019: 83) aptly elucidates, “the functional outcomes of public schooling are at odds with the discursive organization of the space,” offering a pivotal insight into the complexities in implementing Culturally Responsive Relevant Pedagogy (CRRP). The Ministry of Education's move to streamline education by reorienting its focus towards fundamental skills such as reading, writing, and math is not problematic, as these are indeed vital aspects of effective education. The curriculum explicitly
underscores the expectation that educators in Ontario should embrace CRRP as a guiding framework for the development and dissemination of an equitable curriculum.

The rhetoric of modernization serves to obscure political discourses that run contrary to the principles of equity, inclusion, and anti-racist pedagogy within educational institutions. The markers of success in the modernization discourse tend to prioritize economic growth and technological progress. This discourse is subsequently underscored by initiatives such as the enlargement of class sizes, alignment of the curriculum with the demands of the “modern” economy, a focus on technological skills, vocational training, and mandates for online learning. The rhetoric of modernization aims for uniformity and undermines the recognition and celebration of cultural differences, which subordinates the very essence of equity. This contradiction underscores the nuanced interplay between the ideals propagated by the rhetoric of modernization and the complex reality of educational implementation, particularly when it comes to addressing the multifaceted dimensions of difficult knowledge topics.

Further, discourses of modernization promote standardized educational models and assessments, assuming that all students should meet the same benchmarks to succeed. This approach overlooks the unique learning styles, backgrounds, and needs of individual students. The narrative of modernization and progress conveys the notion that all individuals and groups, irrespective of their backgrounds, encounter the educational system in identical ways. However, this portrayal diverges from the actual reality present in Ontario, where calls to enhance the educational system for all students resonate strongly, particularly in addressing the systemic obstacles confronted by marginalized educators and students within the educational landscape. This rhetoric also stands at odds with the pedagogical viewpoints embedded within the official curriculum.

While the discourse of modernization is evident in government media releases and other institutional processes, it is important to turn to the social studies, history, and geography curriculum to understand the orientation of teachers’ work. The institutional ethnography approach draws our attention to the complexity of curriculum development and implementation in public education. It shifts the focus towards learning from difficult
knowledge, exploring how teachers exercise their agency to critically engage with and learn from such knowledge.

The shift from discourses of modernization to discourses of equity and inclusion introduces complexities to the textual landscape within which the curriculum is implemented. This complexity significantly influences how teachers navigate potential risks when addressing difficult knowledge topics both inside and outside the classroom. These risks may involve concerns about potential fear, professional backlash, or their standing within the teaching community. The provincial government’s stance on discussing challenging topics emphasizes the importance of teachers utilizing their voices, experiences, knowledge, and perspectives to effectively implement the curriculum. This aligns with the OME’s orientation of the SSHG curriculum, emphasizing the active engagement of students and teachers in the process of “doing” social studies, history, and geography.

Research conducted in various political contexts provides valuable insights into teachers’ concerns about working at the boundary of the official curriculum and addressing controversial topics. According to Li-Ching Ho et al (2014), teachers encounter constraints related to political, institutional, and curricular factors in less centralized or less authoritarian systems, including the impact of high-stakes examinations and curriculum standards on their willingness to address difficult topics (Ho et al 2014). On the other hand, studies conducted in contexts with more centralized and more authoritarian political systems reveal that teachers are particularly concerned about the possibility of breaking laws and deviating from the “prescriptive official curriculum” (Ho et al 2014).

For instance, in Singapore, social studies teachers and students are cautious about discussing sensitive topics like race due to fears of violating laws such as the Sedition Act (Ho et al 2014). Although governmental and institutional controls often limit teachers’ freedom to address controversial topics, Ho et al (2014) argue that state positions can also lead to greater freedom under certain circumstances. Explicitly stated government positions on controversial topics may free schools and teachers from external
pressure, but ambiguity in the state’s stance may result in self-censorship due to uncertainty and insecurity on the part of the teacher (Ho et al 2014). Thus, the state can serve as a disciplining and moderating body through the discourses and policies it chooses to enact, rendering certain topics challenging.

The SSHG curriculum has an overarching goal: to foster responsible and active citizenship among students within their diverse communities. By promoting critical thinking and informed perspectives, the curriculum aims to cultivate an inclusive society while equipping students with problem-solving and communication skills to engage with significant developments, events, and issues (SSHG 2018: 6). The introduction of the SSHG curriculum underscores the importance of tailoring it to suit the needs of the classroom, students, and teachers. A key aspect highlighted in the introduction is the necessity for students to feel connected to the curriculum, seeing themselves reflected in what is taught and understanding its relevance in the broader world (SSHG 2018: 3).

Moreover, the curriculum acknowledges the diverse needs of learners, striving to help all students develop the knowledge, skills, and perspectives necessary to be informed, productive, caring, responsible, and engaged citizens in their own communities and beyond (SSHG 2018: 3). To accommodate this diversity, the SSHG curriculum provides flexibility for teachers and students to select topics for investigation within broad parameters, allowing teachers to tailor lessons according to students’ interests and readiness while addressing local community contexts (2018: 3).

Importantly, the SSHG curriculum emphasizes that teachers should actively participate in the process of “doing” history, geography, or social studies rather than simply delivering content (2018: 38). This highlights the role of teachers in engaging students in meaningful learning experiences and fostering a deeper understanding of the subjects. To achieve this, the curriculum encourages teachers to integrate current events and issues directly into the curriculum, promoting connections between classroom learning and real-world events on local, national, and global scales (SSHG 2018: 38). By examining current events, teachers can guide students in analyzing controversial topics, understanding diverse perspectives, forming informed opinions, and developing a more
comprehensive awareness of the world they inhabit. This approach also ensures that the curriculum remains a relevant and living document (SSHG 2018: 38).

While the move to respond to the needs of a changing technological world are appropriate, which is similar to the initiatives to incorporate anti-racist, equitable, and inclusive perspectives to the curriculum and policy documents, the work seems to fall on teachers to respond to the changing structure of educational reform, under whatever name it takes. Without an implementation preparation time and appropriate professional development opportunities, teachers take on emotional, mental, and physical labour to take on the task of translating the curriculum as a “living” document.

At the elementary level, teachers’ flexibility to curate their collection of picture books, stories, and other educational materials is crucial in shaping their discourses within the pedagogical space. It allows them to incorporate diverse and relevant content that resonates with their students. However, the reaction of the community, parents, and the school itself can significantly influence teachers’ comfort levels in exploring difficult knowledge topics during formal lesson planning and informal conversations with students. The perceptions and attitudes of these educational actors may impact how open teachers feel to addressing sensitive topics within the parameters of the curriculum.

Furthermore, in Ontario, the official K-12 curriculum grants teachers the autonomy of “professional judgement” when selecting resources and teaching strategies. According to the OME’s Assessment and Evaluation Standards (2023), teachers are empowered to determine which specific expectations should be used to evaluate students’ overall achievements. Notably, the concept of “professional judgement” was first defined in 2016 by the OME policy documents and the Elementary Teachers Federation of Ontario (ETFO) collective agreement. This definition provides teachers with greater flexibility in choosing the educational materials and resources across the K-12 curriculum. The ETFO, which is the largest teachers’ union in Canada, represents, advocates, and bargains on behalf of elementary school teachers in Ontario.

According to the OME documents and ETFO collective agreement, “professional judgement” entails making informed decisions based on professional knowledge of
curriculum expectations, classroom context, evidence of learning, instructional and assessment methods, as well as criteria and standards indicating student success. This practice of judgement involves purposeful and systematic thinking, evolving with ongoing reflection and self-correction (ETFO/FEEO 2016).

Having established the conceptual framework for understanding the curriculum in relation to various texts, the subsequent section will examine both the intertextual and intratextual analyses. These analyses aim to explore the top-down relationships between the curriculum and governing texts. In Chapters 3 and 4, I will elucidate the pedagogical strategies and approaches that teachers employ to navigate challenging subject matter within the constraints of the curriculum, thereby shedding light on the bottom-up processes at play.

2.2.1. Intertextual Analysis

In this section, I analyze the dynamic relationship between governing institutional texts and the content of difficult knowledge topics found within the SSHG curriculum. To achieve this objective, I conducted an analysis based on Dorothy Smith’s concept of intertextuality. The intertextual analysis recognizes that texts are interconnected, with different level of governing texts influencing and shaping each other. For example, she distinguishes between higher order texts, which in this case would include provincial legislation, influencing the regulatory frameworks and concepts of mid and lower order texts, like the curriculum. By examining the authoritative voice of the curriculum, I explore how this voice is shaped both within and through the curriculum. This analysis aids in understanding the hierarchal dynamics that govern the dialogue between teachers and the curriculum. Refer back to Figure 1 for an overview of the intertextual analysis.

The intertextual analysis informs those dynamics of the text-reader conversation, which helps to illuminate how the organization of the curriculum itself is shaped and informed not only by the movement of other institutional texts, but also by how the teacher’s engagement with text through their perspectives and knowledge informs the meaning and translation of the curriculum. To understand the intertextual hierarchies of the curriculum, I examined governing texts such as federal and provincial legislation and
policy frameworks. Table 2 provides an overview of the federal legislation, such as the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms (1982), which holds significance as part of the Canadian constitution. This legislation informs subsequent institutional texts and establishes the Charter of Rights and Freedoms as a legal foundation. The participating teachers from all regions of Ontario recognize the Charter and the Ontario Human Rights Code as texts that protect their ability to address difficult knowledge topics. The OHRC, enacted in 1990, is a provincial statute with the force of law. It safeguards against discrimination based on various grounds, such as ancestry, race, citizenship, ethnic origin, gender identity, and gender expression, among others (OHRC 2023).

Moreover, the Ontario Human Rights Code is another institutional text that teachers highlight that “protects” their ability to discuss difficult knowledge topics. It is compelling how varying texts, like the TRC reports and the OHRC are incorporated into the specialized speech of teachers in relation to how they legitimized activities and approaches within the boundaries of the curriculum.

Table 2 illustrates the hierarchal order of the institutionalized texts that influence and shape lower-level texts, regulating the frames and concepts. However, it is essential to acknowledge bottom-up dynamics, where mid and lower-level texts, like the curriculum, can also influence provincial legislation and educational policies, rendering the curriculum as a site of contestation and negotiation.
Table 2. Hierarchal structure of institutional “governing” texts

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>Education Act</em> (1990)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>Anti-Racism Act</em> (2017)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Curriculum</td>
<td>SSHG Curriculum (2018)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OME Policies for School Boards (i.e., PPM Policy/Program Memorandum, and reports)</td>
<td>PPM 119: Developing and implementing equity and inclusive education policies in Ontario schools (2009) - in addition to PPM 119 (1993)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>PPM 145: Progressive discipline and promoting positive student behaviour</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>Ontario Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy</em> (2009)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>Ontario First Nation, Métis, and Inuit Education Strategy</em> (2007)</td>
</tr>
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</table>

These texts hold legal significance and shape subsequent institutional texts, including higher governing educational policies like the *Education Act* (1990) and lower governing texts like the *Policy/Program Memorandums* (PPMs) issued by the OME. These texts play a crucial role in shaping and legitimizing discourses that shape individuals' experiences and identities, recognizing structural inequities, such as systemic racism, in the education system.
The *Education Act* (1990) is a legislative text that serves as the governing framework for publicly funded schools in Ontario. It outlines the responsibilities of school boards, sets curriculum requirements, and oversees public education. To translate the policies of the Education Act in schools across the province, the Policy/Program Memorandums (PPMs) are issued by the OME to implement educational policies across the school boards. For example, Table 2 highlights *PPM 119: Developing and implementing equity and inclusive education policies in Ontario schools* (2009) and *PPM 145: Progressive discipline and promoting positive student behaviour* as PPMs that directly intersect with students’ background and identity. These PPMs recognize the historical legacies of disciplinary measures that disproportionately affect racialized students within and beyond the school context. PPMs reflect the policy framework issued by the OME, such as the *Ontario Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy*, which mandates each school board to ensure every school has equity and inclusion policies in place.

The *Anti-Racism Act* (2017) establishes the province’s acknowledgement of systemic racism of institutions, which points to their requirement for anti-racist strategies and policies. Following the Act, Ontario introduced a three-year *Education Equity Action Plan* (2017) that recognized the structural inequities in the education system. This shows the force of the Anti-Racism Act in coordinating the development of legislation, such as educational policies. The Equity Action Plan outlined the process to develop consistent practices for collecting and reporting disaggregated identity-based data in schools across the province in order to identify the experiences of students from an array of backgrounds and lived experiences.

Further, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission reports and recommendations emphasize the responsibility of governments to create and implement educational materials pertaining to the Indigenous Peoples of Canada (First Nations, Métis, and Inuit) and the impact of the Indian Residential School system (TRC 2012). In 2018, the SSHG curriculum was revised in response to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission Report (2015). The TRC Calls to Action 62 and 63 are meant to incorporate First Nation, Métis, and Inuit perspectives, knowledge, and histories in the curriculum and educational
material. The TRC, commissioned by the federal government, produced Reports and Calls to Action with recommendations that carry a different legal significance and framework compared to legislative statues or acts. In addition, provincially the Ontario First Nation, Métis, and Inuit Education Strategy (2007) is a policy framework designed to improve achievement among Indigenous students and bridge the achievement gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students. The strategy also emphasizes the need for culturally relevant educational materials in schools.

Figure 3 demonstrates the presence of the difficult knowledge topics discussed in this thesis, situating them within the textually mediated institutional landscape that governs the curriculum. A central focus is to visualize the constellation of terms and concepts in institutional “governing” texts that interweave with the difficult knowledge topics being examined. The keywords were selected based on interview data that I identified as relevant to the difficult knowledge topics at hand. I counted the number of times that difficult knowledge topics highlighted by the teacher participants are referred to in these texts. I examined the occurrences of the difficult knowledge topics in institutional texts that structure regulatory frames, words, and concepts over the curriculum. Central to this discussion is the idea that to understand how teachers navigate institutional tensions to address difficult knowledge topics, insight into their intertextual strength provides an important foundation.

The frequency of race and ethnicity and Indigenous perspectives and knowledge are higher in the described governing texts compared to immigration experiences and gender identity and sexual orientation. Firstly, race and ethnicity are extensively discussed in higher lever governing texts, most notably the OHRC, Education Act, and Anti-Racism Act. These included word variations of race and ethnicity, including racism, racist, anti-racist, anti-racism, racialized, racial, racialization, ethnicity, and ethnic origin. Secondly, Indigenous perspectives and knowledge are referenced more in lower level governing texts, including the TRC 94 Calls to Action, the Education Equity Action Plan, and the Ontario First Nation, Métis and Inuit Education Strategy, but it was extensively discussed in these categories. Among the category of Indigenous perspectives and
Figure 3. The intertextual analysis of the difficult knowledge topics

R/E: Race and ethnicity
I/K: Indigenous perspectives and knowledge
G/S: Gender identity and sexual orientation
IM: Immigration experiences

Quadrant 1: Topic higher in the governing texts hierarchy and higher frequency in the governing texts
Quadrant 2: Topic lower in the governing texts hierarchy and higher frequency in the governing texts
Quadrant 3: Topic lower in the governing texts hierarchy and lower frequency in the governing texts
Quadrant 4: Topic higher in the governing texts hierarchy and lower frequency in the governing texts

Hierarchy of difficult knowledge topic in institutional "governing" texts
knowledge word variations such as Indigenous history, Indigenous lived experience, Indigeneity, Indigenous communities, and First Nations, Métis, and Inuit are included. Thirdly, gender identity and sexual orientation are most prevalent in higher level governing texts, such as the OHRC and the Education Act, and lower-level governing texts, such as PPM 119. Included in the word variations are gender, gender expression, sexuality, and LGBTQ+. Fourthly, immigration experiences are least prevalent in the higher or lower-level governing texts. This topic was most prevalent in the Education Act. The word variations for immigration experiences include immigrant(s), migrant, refugee, and newcomer.

The intertextual analysis illuminates the hierarchical relation among the curriculum and different governing texts. The results highlight how the curriculum is continuously shaped and reshaped by other governing texts at various levels, which influences the possibilities to address difficult knowledge topics within its parameters. In this context, the curriculum becomes a site of negotiation and contestation, rather than merely a set of directives. These governing texts create a framework that holds legal, cultural, social, and political significance that informs the discursive space in which teachers operate to address difficult knowledge topics. The intertextual analysis further revealed a nuanced spectrum of how frequently different difficult knowledge topics such as race, ethnicity, Indigenous perspectives, gender identity, and immigration experiences are represented in these texts. This not only reflects the discourses and tensions within these governing texts, but also showcases the latitude and limitations teachers have in introducing these topics into the classroom. Next, we turn to the intratextual analysis.

2.2.2. ‘Intratextual’ Analysis

In this section, I examine the relationship between the curriculum, in addition to its various curricular components, in relation to race and ethnicity, Indigenous perspectives and knowledge, immigration experiences, and gender identity and sexual orientation. As an adaptation of Smith’s notion of intertextuality, the intratextual analysis explains the position and reference of the difficult knowledge topics in relation to the hierarchal components of the curriculum. The intratextual analysis is valuable in providing contextual understanding of how difficult knowledge topics are situated within the
authoritative voice of the curriculum as a text composed of multiple texts and voices. In this thesis, it is important to consider all the parts of the official curriculum, including the front matter and the supplemental topics and questions as they together set the tone for the mandated overall expectations and specific expectations. These two sections make up the primary component of the mandated curriculum (OME 2023). Similar to the intertextual analysis, I counted the number of times the difficult knowledge topics were present in each of the hierarchical sections of the curriculum.

The language usage within the curriculum reveals how these topics are distributed and framed within different sections. These factors shed light on the competing discourses and disjunctures that provide the contextual framework within which the curriculum operates. To analyze the structure of the SSHG curriculum, my focus centered on its hierarchal order and organizational framework. Using this framework, I examined the curriculum as composed of multiple texts that engage in a series of governing relations within the curriculum. The mandated curriculum is composed of the overall and specific expectations. The initial section, which the OME calls the front matter, encompasses various elements that play a pivotal role in the curriculum, both in the official curriculum (the overall expectations and specific expectations) and in the suggested examples and questions. This includes delineating the roles and responsibilities of teachers, students, parents, and the broader community. Additionally, the front matter elucidates key concepts in social studies, history, and geography, addresses student assessment and evaluation, and offers instructional approaches for program planning. This introductory section, which encompasses program information, assessment guidelines, planning considerations, and a glossary/appendix, assumes an important position within the curriculum as it outlines the disciplinary concepts throughout. The latter half of the curriculum delineates the learning expectations for different grade levels through overall and specific expectations. This section follows a hierarchical structure as outlined in Table 3: front matter (preface and introduction), front matter (program, assessment, planning + glossary), overview of grade-level expectations, overall expectations, and specific expectations (illustrated with suggested examples, sample questions, and opportunities for student talk).
Table 3. Hierarchal structure of the SSHG curriculum (2018)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Hierarchal structure of the Grade 1 to 6 Social Studies, and Grade 7 and 8 History and Geography Curriculum (2018)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Front Matter: Preface and introduction, program, assessment, planning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overview to grade level</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Overall expectations: strands</strong> <em>Mandatory curriculum</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Specific expectations</strong> <em>Mandatory curriculum</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>List of example topics/themes <em>Suggestions</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sample questions <em>Suggestions</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student talk <em>Suggestions</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Glossary</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

To visually represent the presence of difficult knowledge topics in the hierarchical structure of the curriculum and their frequency, Figure 4 provides a breakdown of the topics and their variations. The frequency of each difficult knowledge topic (e.g., race and ethnicity, Indigenous perspectives and knowledge, immigration experiences, and gender identity and sexual orientation) was determined by counting each instance it appears in the curriculum. Similar to Figure 3, these keywords were selected based on interview data that identified their relevance to the difficult knowledge topic at hand. This visualization allows for an examination of the distribution and prevalence of these topics throughout the curriculum hierarchy.

The examination of the SSHG (2018) curriculum reveals language usage that highlights contradictions between the official voice of the provincial government and how difficult knowledge is addressed and shaped within the curriculum and educational texts. These contradictions or disjunctures are evident when comparing the framing of Indigenous perspectives and knowledge with other difficult knowledge topics, such as race and ethnicity, immigration experiences, and gender identity and sexual orientation.

The analysis of the curriculum reveals the presence of various word variations related to race and ethnicity, Indigenous perspectives and knowledge, immigration
Figure 4. The intratextual analysis of the SSHG curriculum

R/E: Race and ethnicity
I/K: Indigenous perspectives and knowledge
G/S: Gender identity and sexual orientation
IM: Immigration experiences

Quadrant 1: Topic higher in the curriculum hierarchy and higher frequency in the curriculum
Quadrant 2: Topic lower in the curriculum hierarchy and higher frequency in the curriculum
Quadrant 3: Topic lower in the curriculum hierarchy and lower frequency in the curriculum
Quadrant 4: Topic higher in the curriculum hierarchy and lower frequency in the curriculum

Hierarchy of difficult knowledge topics in SSHG curriculum
experiences, and gender identity and sexual orientation. These difficult knowledge topics were selected based on their importance in the interviews. Throughout the SSHG curriculum, instances of these topics are distributed across different sections. Throughout the following sections, the **bold** headings point to the overall and specific expectations and the *italics* point to the supplemental portions of the curriculum (examples, sample questions, and student talk). I use **underlining** to highlight phrases from the curriculum that are directly relevant to the difficult knowledge topics foregrounded in this study.

**Race and Ethnicity**

The curriculum analysis reveals the presence of various concepts and categories related to race and ethnicity, such as racism, racist, anti-racist, anti-racism, racialized, racial, racialization, ethnic origin, and Islamophobia. These concepts were selected based on interview data that identified their relevance to the topic of race and ethnicity. Throughout the entire SSHG curriculum, race and ethnicity are mentioned 42 times. Out of these occurrences, 17 are found in the front matter section. However, race and ethnicity are not prominently highlighted in the overall or specific expectations. Instead, they are subordinated to the examples and sample questions sections, which are considered suggestions rather than mandatory requirements in the curriculum. In the supplemental section of the curriculum, race and ethnicity are mentioned 24 times. Referring to Figure 4, race and ethnicity falls in a lower to mid position in the curriculum hierarchy, as it is subordinate to the supplemental section of the curriculum.

For instance, in the front matter section, specifically in the introduction to the history section of the SSHG curriculum, there is acknowledgement of how “students learn that Canada has many stories and that each one is significant and requires thoughtful consideration. They learn about the impact of colonialism, the Indian Act, the residential school system, treaties, and **systemic racism** on Indigenous individuals and communities in Canada” (OME, SSHG 2018: 12). The front matter also includes a section on **Equity and Inclusive Education in Social Studies, History, and Geography**, which aligns with the Ontario equity and inclusive education policy framework.

This framework emphasizes the importance of:
Respecting diversity, promoting inclusive education, and identifying and eliminating discriminatory biases, systemic barriers, and power dynamics that limit the ability of students to learn, grow, and contribute to society. Antidiscrimination education continues to be an important and integral component of the strategy…. In an environment based on the principles of inclusive education, all students, parents, caregivers, and other members of the school community – regardless of ancestry, culture, ethnicity, sex, physical or intellectual ability, race, religion, creed, gender identity/expression, gender, sexual orientation, socio-economic status, or other factors – are welcomed, included, treated fairly, and respected. Diversity is valued when all members of the school community feel safe, welcomed, and accepted (SSHG 2018: 47).

However, in terms of curriculum hierarchy, words related to racism occupy a subordinate position. They are primarily located within the examples and sample questions sections. For example, in “Grade 3: A. Heritage and Identity: Communities in Canada, 1780-1850,” the examples and sample questions touch upon race, racism, and ethnicity. The examples highlight challenges faced by different groups and communities, whereas the sample questions prompt students to evaluate evidence and draw conclusions about major challenges and measures taken to overcome them, including addressing racism.

The subsequent excerpt from the Grade 3 social studies curriculum serves as illustration of the discussion of race and ethnicity in the examples: **A2.1 formulate questions to guide investigations into some of the major challenges facing different groups and communities in Canada from around 1780 to 1850 (e.g., isolation; climate; lack of access to doctors, law enforcement, or manufactured goods in isolated communities; encroachment of European settlers on traditional First Nations territory; racism facing First Nations peoples and Black Loyalists and measures taken to address these challenges) (OME, SSHG, 2018:18). Also: A3.4 describe some of the major challenges facing communities in Canada during this period (e.g., challenges relating to the climate; isolation in backwoods settlements; competition for resources; European diseases among First Nations; colonial wars and other conflicts; racism) (OME, SSHG 2018: 18).**
Another example can be found in the following excerpt of the Grade 3 social studies curriculum that refers to racism in the sample questions: **A2.5 evaluate evidence and draw conclusions about some of the major challenges facing different groups and communities in Canada during this period, and measures taken to overcome these challenges.** Sample questions: “What are some adaptations that settlers made in response to the lack of manufactured products available in isolated settlements?” “What functions did a barn-raising or quilting bee serve?” “How did some Black people in Nova Scotia respond to racism in that colony?” (OME, SSHG 2018: 18)

Similar instances of mentioning racism can be observed in other grade levels, such as “Grade 5: Heritage and Identity: Interactions of Indigenous Peoples and Europeans Prior to 1713.” Here, racism appears in the examples section, illustrating the vocabulary and formats that students can use to communicate their inquiries on the topic (OME, SSHG 2018: 18).

The following excerpt is from the Grade 5 social studies curricula, which discusses racism in the examples: **A2.6 communicate the results of their inquiries, using appropriate vocabulary** (e.g., Elder, faith keeper, knowledge keeper, Métis Senator, shaman, oral history, wampum belt, pictograph, petroglyph, missionary, colonization, colonialism, settler, xenophobia, racism, prejudice, charter, treaty, coureur de bois, seigneur, Filles du Roi) and formats (e.g., a poem, song, or story that describes the founding of Quebec from two distinct perspectives; an annotated map that shows different perspectives on the growth of the fur trade and resulting settlements; a collection of images they have created themselves, downloaded from websites, and/or taken from printed sources, showing different perspectives on the work of missionaries)” (OME, SSHG 2018: 18).

Furthermore, the glossary in the curriculum includes a definition of ethnicity as “the shared national, ethnocultural, racial, linguistic, and/or religious heritage or background of a group of people, whether or not they live in their country of origin” (OME, SSHG 2018: 221). The glossary does not define race or racism.
Under human rights and diversity definitions, race and ethnic origin are referred to in the description. The curriculum defines human rights as the “rights that recognize the dignity and worth of every person, and provide for equal rights and opportunities without discrimination, regardless of race, ancestry, place of origin, colour, ethnic origin, citizenship, creed, sex, sexual orientation, age, marital status, family status, disability, or other similar factors.” Diversity is defined as the presence of a wide range of human qualities and attributes within a group, organization, or society. The dimensions of diversity include, but are not limited to, ancestry, culture, ethnicity, gender identity, language, physical and intellectual ability, race, religion, sex, sexual orientation, and socio-economic status (OME, SSHG 2018:221).

**Indigenous Perspectives and Knowledge**

Indigenous perspectives and knowledge are encompassed by various word variations, including Indigenous history, First Nations, Métis, Inuit, Indigeneity, and Indigenous communities. These keywords were selected based on their relevance to discussions on Indigenous perspectives and knowledge as highlighted by the teacher participants in my research. Throughout the entire SSHG curriculum, there are 368 explicit mentions of Indigenous perspectives and knowledge. Out of these, 77 are found in the front matter section. Moreover, these perspectives and knowledge are significantly represented 54 times within the official, mandated curriculum, which encompasses both the overall and specific expectations. However, the majority of these references, 237 times, are concentrated in the examples, sample questions, and student talk sections. Referring to Figure 4, Indigenous perspectives and knowledge fall in the supplemental section of the curriculum, and they are discussed at a higher frequency.

Within the front matter section, the SSHG curriculum highlights the Ontario First Nation, Métis, and Inuit Education Policy Framework as a key element central to Indigenous education in Ontario. This framework aims to “support the achievement and well-being of Indigenous students across the province” (OME, SSHG 2018: 14). This inclusion is particularly prominent in the introduction section, emphasizing its
significance within the curriculum. Revisions arising from the TRC’s Calls to Action are also mentioned in this context:

Consistent with the strategy, the present revision of the social studies and history curriculum was developed in collaboration with First Nations, Métis, and Inuit educators, community members, and organizations in response to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission’s calls to action numbers 62 and 63. The revision strengthens learning connected with Indigenous perspectives, cultures, histories, and contemporary realities, including those related to the residential school system and treaties (OME, SSHG 2018: 12).

The following excerpt is from the Grade 8 history curricula, entitled “Creating Canada, 1850-1890,” which discusses First Nations in the examples: **A1.1 describe some of the similarities and differences in various aspects of everyday life (e.g., housing, clothing, food, religious/spiritual practices, work, recreation, the role of children) of selected groups living in Canada between 1780 and 1850 (e.g., First Nations, Métis, French, British, Black people; men and women; slaves, indentured servants, habitants, seigneurs, farmers; people from different classes) (OME, SSHG 2018: 158).** Within the same section, there are curriculum excerpts that refer to examples: **A3.3 identify some key factors that contributed to the establishment of the residential school system (e.g., government and/or settler appropriation of Indigenous land; desire to impose Christianity on Indigenous peoples; government policies and church actions that repressed Indigenous cultures and resistance and/or sought to assimilate Indigenous people; beliefs within settler society about European cultural and race superiority; the drive to expand the British Empire), and explain the impact of this system on Indigenous individuals and communities (e.g., loss of Indigenous language, culture, and identity; disconnection of Indigenous children from family and community; intergenerational trauma and grief; changes in Indigenous children’s relationship to the land; internalization among Indigenous people of the world view of the colonizers; assimilation; exposure to disease; physical, sexual, and emotional abuse).**
Additionally, the glossary section provides definitions for “Indigenous” and the “Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (TRC).” Indigenous is defined as “a term referring to the original peoples of a particular land or region. First Nations (status and non-status), Inuit, and Métis peoples are recognized as the Indigenous peoples of Canada.” The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (TRC) is defined as “a federally commissioned investigative body whose mandate was to learn the truth about the experience of residential school survivors and, in so doing, to create a historical record of and promote awareness and public education about the history and impact of the residential school system” (OME, SSHG 2018: 221).

**Immigration Experiences**

In the curriculum, various word variations are used to refer to immigration experiences, including immigrants, migrant, refugee, and newcomer. The presentation of immigration experiences is distributed across different sections. In the front matter, these experiences are mentioned 8 times, while in the specific expectations, they are mentioned 7 times. However, like the other difficult topics, the majority of references are found in the non-mandated curriculum, specifically in the example, sample questions, and student talk sections, totaling 179 occurrences. Referring to Figure 4, Indigenous perspectives and knowledge are extensively discussed in the supplemental portions of the curriculum. Further, they are prevalent higher in the curriculum hierarchy.

The front matter section includes a subsection on program considerations for English language learners, which discusses newcomers in detail. It highlights that “Ontario schools have some of the most multilingual student populations in the world. The first language of approximately 26 per cent of the children in Ontario’s English-language schools is a language other than English. In addition, some students use varieties of English… that differ significantly from the English required for success in Ontario schools. Many English language learners were born in Canada and have been raised in families and communities in which languages other than English, or varieties of English that differ from the language used in the classroom, are spoken. Other English language learners arrive in Ontario as newcomers from other countries; they may have
experience of highly sophisticated educational systems, or they may have come from regions where access to formal schooling was limited” (OME, SSHG 2018: 221).

In Grade 2 social studies, in the section entitled, “Heritage and Identity: Changing Family and Community Traditions,” immigration is discussed in the examples: **A1.1 compare ways in which some traditions have been celebrated over multiple generations in their family and identify some of the main reasons for changes in these traditions** (e.g., immigration to Canada, family members marrying someone from a different culture, changes in technology). Additionally, the same section includes the following curriculum excerpt: **A3.1 identify and describe different types of families** (e.g., families with one parent, two parents, no children; same-sex families; blended and multigenerational families; immigrant families; families where the parents come from different religious or ethnocultural groups) (OME, SSHG 2018: 221).

A significant revision of the Grade 6 Social Studies curriculum in 2023 mandated education about the Holocaust at the elementary level for the first time, aiming to “address the increasing antisemitism in Ontario” (OME 2022). This revision includes themes related to immigration experiences in Canada. For instance, within the section “Heritage and Identity: Communities in Canada, Past and Present,” discussions on immigration experiences are promoted through sample questions: **A3.10 Describe significant changes within their own community in Canada** (e.g., within their ethnic or religious community, their local community, or their region). Sample questions: *When did members of your community first come to Canada? Where did they settle? What was their life like? How is your life different from theirs? In what ways, if any, has your community experienced discrimination in Canada?* (OME, SSHG 2018: 221).

Furthermore, within the same section, the following curriculum excerpt is identified in the sample topics and questions: **A3.11 Identify and describe fundamental elements of Canadian identities** (e.g., inclusiveness; respect for human rights; respect for diversity; multiculturalism; parliamentary democracy; constitutional monarchy; bilingualism; the recognition of three founding nations; universal health care; recognition of First Nations, Mètis, and Inuit as Indigenous peoples and original
inhabitants of what is now Canada; the importance of treaties and treaty rights)” (OME SSHG 2018: 221). Sample questions: “Why is the relationship between Indigenous peoples and settlers/newcomers important for Canada? In what ways are the monarch and the monarchy connected to Canada and identities in Canada? What are some of the rights guaranteed by the Charter of Rights? When you consider the various elements of Canadian identity, how would you rank them in order of importance to a selected community in Canada? What criteria would you use? Do you think the ranking would be the same for all communities in Canada? Why, or why not? What are some instances of the Canadian government not respecting the human rights of a group of people?” (OME, SSHG 2018: 221).

In the glossary section, the terms “refugee” and “immigration” are defined. “Refugee” is defined as “a person who is forced to flee for safety from political upheaval or war to a foreign country.” “Immigration” is defined as “the act of coming to a new country or region” (OME, SSHG 2018: 221).

**Gender Identity and Sexual Orientation**

Gender identity and sexual orientation encompass various aspects such as gender, gender expression, sexuality, and LGBTQ+ experiences. These topics are addressed multiple times in the curriculum, with 10 mentions in the front matter. Similar to other challenging subjects, gender identity and sexual orientation are primarily presented in the examples, sample questions, and student talk sections, accounting for 8 occurrences. This topic falls in a lower level in the curriculum hierarchy. Also, it is not referred in the SSHG curriculum in terms of inclusive and equitable education nor in terms of gender identity and sexual orientation.

The front matter section includes a subsection entitled “Equity and Inclusive Education in Social Studies, History, and Geography” which emphasizes the importance of creating an inclusive environment where all students feel valued. This is the curriculum excerpt: “It is important that teachers of social studies, history, and geography create an environment that will foster a sense of community where all students feel included and appreciated. It is imperative that students see themselves reflected in the
choices of materials, resources, and examples selected by the teacher. When leading discussions on topics related to diverse religious, ethnocultural, or socio-economic groups or the rights of citizenship, teachers should ensure that all students – regardless of culture, religious affiliation, gender, class, or sexual orientation – feel included and recognized in all activities and discussions. By teachers carefully choosing support materials that reflect the makeup of a class, students will see that they are respected and will, in turn, come to respect the differences that exist in their classroom and in the larger community” (OME, SSHG 2018: 48).

Under human rights and diversity definitions, gender identity and sexual orientation are explicitly referred to in the description. The curriculum defines human rights as the “rights that recognize the dignity and worth of every person, and provide for equal rights and opportunities without discrimination, regardless of race, ancestry, place of origin, colour, ethnic origin, citizenship, creed, sex, sexual orientation, age, marital status, family status, disability, or other similar factors.” Diversity is defined as the presence of a wide range of human qualities and attributes within a group, organization, or society. The dimensions of diversity include, but are not limited to, ancestry, culture, ethnicity, gender identity, language, physical and intellectual ability, race, religion, sex, sexual orientation, and socio-economic status (OME, SSHG 2018: 221).

To conclude the intratextual analysis, I have explored the interconnectedness between the curriculum and its diverse hierarchal components, focusing specifically on subjects such as race and ethnicity, Indigenous perspectives and knowledge, immigration experiences, and gender identity and sexual orientation. Using Smith's concept of intertextuality as a framework, the intratextual analysis clarifies how difficult knowledge topics are positioned and cited within the curriculum's hierarchical structure. This process proves invaluable for contextualizing how difficult knowledge topics are accommodated within the authoritative voice of the curriculum, which itself is an amalgamation of various texts and discourses.

The front matter of the curriculum serves as a critical cornerstone, establishing the tone, objectives, perspectives, and values that guide content, particularly with regard to
difficult knowledge topics. Interestingly, these topics often appear more frequently in supplemental sections rather than in the core, mandated portions of the curriculum. This pattern highlights a hierarchical value system, suggesting that these topics are accorded less importance in relation to more generalized concepts. This hierarchical placement has practical implications: it may shape teachers' perceptions of the significance of these topics, thereby influencing their pedagogical approaches in the classroom. For instance, Indigenous perspectives and knowledge do receive higher visibility, albeit mostly in supplemental sections. This gives them a more prominent, though not dominant, position within the curriculum framework. In contrast, other challenging topics—such as race, ethnicity, immigration experiences, and gender identity—are largely confined to these supplemental sections, indicating their subordinated status within the educational structure.

To conclude this chapter, I have argued that in order to grasp how K-12 teachers in Ontario address difficult knowledge topics, it is important to examine the role of the curriculum and its relation to teachers' work and activities. The curriculum is an institutional text that serves as a guiding document that coordinates teachers’ actions across space and over time. This coordination relies on the curriculum’s “materiality,” meaning its ability to exist in a replicable form – whether as a physical copy or in a digital format – accessible to teachers anywhere (Smith 2995: 106). In essence, the curriculum serves as a stable, recognizable text that orchestrates institutional processes in teachers' work and practices. This orchestration manifests in a dynamic interplay between the curriculum (as a text) and the teachers (as readers), highlighting the curriculum’s role as an active component embedded in social and school relations. This becomes especially pertinent in the realm of public education, where diverse experiences are channeled through multiple textual forms, including classroom materials, discourses, and policy documents. Viewing the curriculum through this lens reveals the complexity of school environments, where classroom dynamics, pedagogy, and discourse are all deeply interconnected.

Importantly, teachers' voices and agency are acknowledged through the concept of “heteroglossia,” suggesting that the curriculum's governing role does not necessarily
stifle teachers' creativity or capacity for negotiation. In other words, the curriculum, while authoritative, is never completely monologic. When it is put into practice, the curriculum allows for a multiplicity of voices and narratives. This is particularly evident in classroom settings where multiple perspectives—those of teachers and students alike—coexist, making it a heteroglossic space. This diversity of voices is relevant to difficult knowledge topics discussed in this thesis, underlining that the curriculum, like the classroom itself, is a complex, multi-voiced entity.

In terms of social relations in education, the curriculum serves as an institutional text with considerable authority. It plays a crucial role in coordinating teachers' actions and activities across Ontario, by defining the conditions for how teachers address difficult knowledge topics. However, the coordination of teachers’ work is not merely a top-down process; it is dynamic, informed by a heteroglossic interaction between the curriculum and its implementation by teachers. The curriculum contains an ‘authoritative voice’ that shapes and molds the curriculum contents to fit within the official narratives and representations of the government. For instance, the discourse of modernization exemplifies the force of the government’s political orientation, which shapes how difficult knowledge topics are engaged with in educational materials. However, this singular, ‘monologic’ voice neither dictates nor annuls alternative perspectives. For instance, the SSHG curriculum encourages teachers to blend current events into their teaching, granting them leeway to choose materials and resources based on their "professional judgment," as stipulated in their collective agreements.

The flexibility and ability teachers have to select materials and pedagogical strategies depends on a variety of factors, including allocation of preparation time and administrative support, which are shaped by institutional processes (which I will examine further in Chapter 3 and 4). Teachers leverage this flexibility to activate the classroom's heteroglossic nature, employing a range of concepts, activities, and perspectives that aim to orchestrate the diverse voices and experiences of students. This manifests as a pedagogical space where teachers invite students to bring their lived experiences and perspectives into the learning process, thus acknowledging the complexities, vulnerabilities, and ambivalences involved—this is the bottom-up approach. Next, we
turn to the strategies that teachers use to bring these topics into classroom learning activities.
Chapter 3 Teacher Strategies for Addressing Difficult Knowledge

3.1. How Teachers Understand Difficult Knowledge

Having elucidated how the curriculum identifies and positions difficult knowledge topics, I now examine how teachers maneuver within the space provided by the curriculum to address difficult knowledge with their students. The school is a complex site where texts intertwine with physical bodies and material objects, evolving continuously across time and space (Campbell 2003). In this study, teachers emphasize the significance of the discursive practices that come into play when they engage with students and colleagues to address difficult knowledge topics. Within this interaction, the discourses of pedagogical space emerge as pivotal for fostering creative collaborations and interactions among teachers and students, enabling the process for learning, un-learning, and re-learning.

I observe that teachers understand difficult knowledge as having to do less with the specificity of a particular difficult knowledge topic (or not being confined to a particular difficult knowledge topic); rather, they discuss the significance of creating a pedagogical space that allows and gives room to explore an array of topics with teachers and students from different lived experiences and backgrounds. More than half of the teachers in this study discussed how their classroom composition was highly diverse, including students who are racialized, immigrants, come from different ethnic and religious backgrounds, and gender identities.

Figure 5 is a visual of the strategies and approaches teachers enact in the discourses of pedagogical space, arranging the strategies identified by teachers in my interviews based on their relevance, from the most to the least significant. To address difficult knowledge topics, teachers deploy an array of strategies, each assembled to navigate institutional complexities that arise inside and outside the classroom. These encompass pedagogical tools such as employing picture books and storytelling, dialogic strategies involving conversations and dialogues, collaborative inquiries in the school and on social media, and the integration of local context through community engagement.
Interwoven through these diverse strategies is a shared element: teachers proactively anchor their students’ experiences and identities at the heart of their discursive conceptualization of pedagogical spaces.

In this study, teachers employ compelling concepts and categories to describe the discursive practices they employ in navigating institutional tensions to address difficult knowledge within the parameters of the curriculum. These categories and concepts give insight into the ways teachers are formulating the classroom space for pedagogical engagement with students taking into consideration the physical, emotional, and figurative aspects of pedagogy. For instance, my teacher participants define the figurative and conceptual space as “creating space,” “safe space,” “soft starts,” courageous space,” “ever-fluctuating space,” “interactional space,” and “buffer zones.”

The discourse surrounding pedagogical spaces draws our attention to the interplay between the physical space, such as the classroom and the educational environment, and
the presence of the physical body within that space. Teachers in this study are actively theorizing about the ways the classroom extends beyond its physical boundary and connects with language and power. Zemblyas (2014) argues that classrooms serve as deeply divided realms where diverse histories and lived experiences converge, giving rise to complex pedagogical spaces for teachers. These challenges are further complicated by the social, political, and embodied traumas and inequalities prevalent in the world, directly impacting both teachers and students. Consequently, engaging with difficult knowledge necessitates a critical examination and understanding of its manifold consequences. As Jansen (2009: 258) asserts, the critical classroom involves more than challenging official narratives or ideologies; it demands engagement with the people present, the bodies in the classroom, who carry their knowledge that must be acknowledged, disrupted, and transformed (as cited in Zemblyas 2014).

Further, Farley (2015) highlights the affective force of difficult knowledge, noting that its significance lies in the need to “tolerate the loss of certainty in the very effort to understand” (543). As a result, she suggests a crucial approach for managing traumatic portrayals within the curriculum: the creation of pedagogical spaces where “teachers and students can make from the affective force of ‘difficult knowledge’ a meaningful narrative where we can consider how conflicts on the outside hook into, echo, and transform conflicts on the inside” (549). This perspective of uncertainty becomes the viewpoint from which teachers and students might require Farley’s concept of “radical hope” to effectively address the emotional impact of challenging knowledge (Farley 2015). Farley’s orientation of radical hope is significant because it challenges the notion of epistemological certainty, prompting both teachers and learners to contemplate how pedagogy and learning can be influenced by uncertainty, disruption, and trauma (Zemblyas 2014). A pedagogy that takes into account the multitude of human experiences, including the emotional and physical dimensions, opens teachers and students to the emotional challenges and responsibilities of constructing not just new “meanings” about others, but also novel forms of ethical social interaction and political connectedness with them (Zemblyas 2014: 408).
3.2. Literacy-based Strategies

The discourse of pedagogical space begins with a collection of literacy-based tools, strategies, and activities intended for teachers to engage effectively with and convey difficult knowledge topics. Among these tools, picture books and storytelling have emerged as the most frequently identified resource in interviews with teachers, further emphasizing their relevance at the elementary level. Violet, an active Grade 6 teacher from Southern Ontario, eloquently described how she used “books and read alouds as buffer zones [to have] conversations with students that parallel what’s happening in the world.”

In practice, teachers incorporate picture books and storytelling into various literacy-based activities, one of which is the practice of “read aloud.” This is a common whole-group instructional activity in elementary education, which involves a teacher reading aloud a book to students as they listen and follow along with the text and illustrations (Tainio and Slotte 2017; Hall & Looney 2019). Within this activity, teachers actively engage students by orally sharing a chosen book or story with the class. This technique involves asking questions related to illustrations, vocabulary, and themes that align with the curriculum's learning objectives. The read aloud activity offers flexibility in guiding discussions based on the teacher's desired outcome. For instance, my teacher participants explain how picture books serve as effective tools to initiate conversations with students, depending on the teacher's desired focus—whether aligning with learning objectives or responding to the current situation.

Through the texts, teachers are engaging students in dialogues about the world and events around them, which informs a broader strategy and discursive framework of pedagogical spaces. As Violet underscored in the quote above, the pedagogical space is signified as “buffer zones.” The utilization of picture books and storytelling, enriched with illustrative metaphors, provides accessible tools that enhance students' comprehension of difficult knowledge topics. In this study, teachers emphasize the pivotal role they have in presenting diverse narratives enriched by multicultural representations, which becomes significant for students with distinct backgrounds and lived experiences.
3.2.1. Picture Books and Storytelling

In the realm of elementary education, the utilization of diverse and engaging pedagogical tools fosters an inclusive and equitable learning environment. The voices of two dedicated educators, Valentina and Heathrow, resonate strongly in this context, shedding light on the central role of picture books and storytelling within their teaching practices. Hailing from different corners of Ontario—Valentina from the Greater Toronto Area (GTA) and Heathrow from Lambton County—these teachers share insights that emphasize the profound impact of literature in addressing difficult knowledge inside and outside the classroom.

Valentina, an active K-6 teacher and teacher-librarian, elucidated how picture books and storytelling serve as the cornerstone of elementary teaching. This is highlighted in the following interview quote:

*Stories are something tangible to make the curriculum more inclusive and equitable. Picture books and stories are key resources because it's a staple of the elementary classroom. I always try to find out who my students are then affirm and expand their identities or experiences.*

Through picture books and storytelling, Valentina centers and affirms the identities and experiences of her students, which illustrate how the literacy-based tools aid the teacher in focusing on the life of the student. Like Valentina, Heathrow contributed her perspective on the transformative impact of books and stories through the thought-provoking concept of “windows, mirrors, and sliding glass doors.” This idea reflects on the prevailing narratives in media and curriculum, which often center dominant discourses, like white, middle-class, and heteronormative narratives, that subordinate diverse and multicultural perspectives and narratives. She stated:

*The idea that books are windows, mirrors, sliding glass doors is if you want to expose kids to books that are windows, that is allowing them to see into somebody else’s world [and] mirrors allow them to reflect their own experiences back at them. If you are a straight, white, male from a middle-class background then books, television shows, and all media*
reflects at you all the time. Most media are a mirror for you. I live and teach in a very small farming community where a big part of our population is white middle class, like farmers, [who are] English speaking. Most of the time it’s books that might offer more windows or might offer a mirror to a student who needs it. A book with a gay character might offer a mirror to a student who isn’t getting it in their classroom on a regular basis.

The conceptual framework of “windows, mirrors, and sliding glass doors,” as exemplified by Heathrow, originates from Dr. Rudine Sims Bishop's 1990 article entitled “Windows, Mirrors, and Sliding Glass Doors.” Bishop stands as a foremost advocate for diverse narratives in children's literature. A notable excerpt from her seminal work reads:

Books are sometimes windows, offering views of worlds that may be real or imagined, familiar or strange. These windows are also sliding glass doors, and readers have only to walk through in imagination to become part of whatever world has been created or recreated by the author. When lighting conditions are just right, however, a window can also be a mirror. Literature transforms human experience and reflects it back to us, and in that reflection, we can see our own lives and experiences as part of the larger human experience. Reading, then, becomes a means of self-affirmation, and readers often seek their mirrors in books (Bishop 1990: 6).

Heathrow infused her insights into the dynamics between teacher and student to activate the content of the text through her theorization of Bishop. The metaphor takes center stage as a profound framework through which Heathrow envisioned how the interplay of illustrations, representations, and words in a picture book engage students in a collaborative exploration of the text. These metaphorical elements become a vital conduit for her pedagogical approach.

Within this context, picture books are examined in the Smithian framework as replicable texts that are interwoven into the broader array of reading materials available to schools across the province. This becomes particularly intriguing as it corresponds to
the way teachers skillfully engage multiple students through the dynamic medium of read-aloud sessions. This symbiotic relationship between the picture book and its readers manifests as a captivating “text-reader conversation,” a concept introduced in Chapter 2. This interaction not only reflects how educators strategically curate their pedagogical strategies but also embodies their orchestration of the discursive space, encompassing the nuanced conceptualization of pedagogy and language within the realm of teaching and learning.

Like Heathrow and Valentina, teachers adeptly employ picture books as pedagogical tools, creating a space that encourages the integration of difficult topics into classroom discussions. The practice of reading aloud serves as a cornerstone, offering a contextual backdrop within which educators thoughtfully structure the classroom environment, mindful of the roles both teacher and student occupy.

Throughout the study, teachers underscored the importance of infusing multicultural perspectives and diverse narratives into their selection of reading materials. This observation aligns with the preceding discourse on curriculum, wherein the Ontario education system actively promotes the adoption of the culturally responsive and relevant pedagogy approaches in teaching and learning. However, as discussed in the previous chapter, the discourses and rhetoric of modernization creates tensions for the possibilities of culturally responsive educational policies. This approach recognizes that students’ learning paths are enveloped with their distinctive backgrounds, languages, family structures, and social and cultural identities (OME 2023). Meredith, a Grade 5/6 teacher in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA), exemplified how texts can be employed to counter racism by fostering intercultural engagement among students and educators. She articulated:

*With one of the 70 classes, we're doing a book club with the kids and it's super open-ended. We’re using a critical literacy framework. I purchased 32 books in little sets of 4 because I wanted books that would be culturally responsive. Books that would disrupt racism or the status quo and give them things to think about on a critical level. It's so*
often that we find white teachers that will just read old white books, and the kids are sleeping on their desk as a teacher stands at the front and reads aloud. It has no meaning to anything or anyone, I can't draw or make a connection from my lived experience with these books that were written by Ray Bradbury in 1950.

Gloria Ladson-Billings (1995) underscored the necessity for a fundamental shift in the set of beliefs, practices, and assumptions surrounding the definition of effective teaching strategies and pedagogies (Scherff and Spector 2011). Culturally relevant pedagogy (CRP) stands as a potent theory founded on principles drawn from sociocultural learning theories, culturally situated practices, and sociolinguistics (Scherff and Spector 2011). Ladson-Billings (1995) elucidates how “a culturally relevant pedagogy is designed to problematize teaching and encourage teachers to ask about the nature of student-teacher relationships, the curriculum, schooling, and society” (483).

Meredith illustrated her deliberate selection of texts that challenge the “status quo,” a focal point aligned with the critical nature of Ladson-Billings’s culturally relevant pedagogy, which endeavors to question and disrupt conventional norms. Scherff and Spector (2011: 17) expound on how this pedagogy strives to reshape the symbiotic relationship between “structures, resources, and the status quo.” This entails revealing, examining, and transforming the societal structures and both explicit and implicit institutional processes involved in perpetuating the status quo—strengthening and upholding it by distributing human, material, and symbolic capital (Scherff and Spector 2011: 17).

Scherff and Spector (2011) thoroughly explore CRP across three interconnected yet distinct categories: culture, relevance, and pedagogy. These aspects encompass the following dimensions: recognizing the legitimacy of diverse cultural heritages and ethnic groups as influential factors in informing student perspectives and experiences in the official curriculum; validating and affirming these cultural legacies; establishing bridges of meaning between home and school experiences; employing a diverse range of learning
techniques and styles; and integrating multicultural resources and information across all subject areas in the parameters of the curriculum (Scherff and Spector 2011).

Through the perspectives of literacy and cultural studies, Garrett and Kerr (2016) define texts as “anything that is authored or constructed and that can therefore be mined for meaning and social significance” and text as “an object that provokes an experience in need of, and used for, interpretation” (508). They illuminate the notion of “aesthetic texts” as texts that evoke emotions and senses in the exploration of form and style. In this sense, here, texts encompass literature, film, visual art, photograph, or drama that demand the reader for interpretation of the material. The definition put forth by Garrett and Kerr (2016) closely aligns with the concept elucidated by Smith (2005), who portrays the interaction between text and reader as a conversation that brings the text to life. Additionally, the authors contend that social studies educators play a role in curating an experience with objects that necessitate the active engagement of the viewer to fully comprehend the object's essence (Garrett and Kerr 2016: 525).

Interpretation and discourse are closely related concepts that share a number of key features that shape how teachers communicate on difficult knowledge topics. As referred to Chapter 2, discourse is an organization of relations among actual people engaged and active in local settings – like classrooms – whose activities and work are textually coordinated (Smith and Griffith 2022: 34). Smith (2005) articulates how each moment of discourse in action both reproduces and changes it. Discourse provides a framework for individuals to engage in meaningful communication and understand each other’s intentions. The way language is used, the choice of words, the framing of ideas, and the cultural references all contribute to the context of discourse. Interpretation, in turn, relies on the understanding of the relevant discourse to grasp the intended meaning of a text in the educational space. Especially at the elementary level, picture books are particularly relevant as they integrate the components that make up the text (e.g., illustrations, metaphors, and words) to activate the text. The activation of the text is illustrated by the metaphor of windows, mirrors, and sliding doors as the literary tools that contextualize and frame the experience of a student engaging with the text (Bishop 1990).
According to a description provided by Henrietta Moore (1996: 87), texts of all kinds hold complex meaning that emerges from the interplay of their parts. She describes how a “literary text is not reducible to the meaning of its individual sentences; a spatial text cannot be brought down to the structure of its material parts; and social action cannot be understood as a mere conglomeration of events.” This stems from the fact that while the text retains the attributes of its constituent elements, its creation mandates a specific mode of interpretation. Moore introduces two distinct approaches to analyzing and understanding a text. This approach gives rise to two primary viewpoints: internal analysis, which explores a text's linguistic structure and meaning; and external interpretation, which considers the text as a product of social actors within a specific context, focusing on its connection to the broader world.

Furthermore, Moore underscores the validity of both approaches and their significance in the act of reading. Drawing on the insights of Paul Ricoeur (1981), she asserts that these approaches should be seen as a dialectical relationship—essentially, a dynamic interplay of opposing viewpoints—within the process of reading (Moore 1996). Ricoeur’s perspective is that both the internal analysis (akin to providing explanations) and the exploration of external reference (akin to interpretation) are crucial for a comprehensive understanding of a text (Moore 1996). The dynamic relationship between the content of the text and its interpretation explored by Moore is comparable to Smith’s (2005) examination of the interindividual territory that emerges in the active relationship between the speaker and hearer engagement with the text.

Violet, a Grade 6 teacher from Central Ontario, provided a deeply insightful exploration around her utilization of the picture book in the “read aloud” activity to her students. The picture book, entitled “Lubna and Pebble,” casts a light on the complexities of friendship and family amid times of uncertainty.4 Through the lens of a young girl’s journey in a refugee camp, the narrative interweaves themes of the refugee crisis and immigration experiences. I would like to draw your attention to Violet’s artful use of

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4 The author of Lubna and Pebble is Wendy Meddour and the illustrator is Daniel Egnéus.
metaphors within the text, which she harnessed at different times to respond to the needs of her students in articulating their present experiences. She expressed:

_I read them a book called “Lubna and Pebble.” It's about a little girl who has a pebble; sort of your thing you keep with you, your stuffy, your lovie, the thing you need. This family had to move to a refugee camp, but it doesn’t say this in so many ways because it’s a picture book. She has this pebble and at the end, she meets a boy. Her family finally gets to leave the refugee camp, so she passes it on to the other little boy. We talked about what this pebble is, what it means, what it represents, what are things that give us safety, hope, love... what are our constants. We did a writing task around that, and the kids could share if sometimes it was a person, or sometimes it was an object. We talked about how we all have our thing; sports or something that really gives us joy and hope. Our thing that we want to pass on, but maybe we're not ready to pass it on yet. That's a great example of using literacy to talk during our hard times. We can come back to that book if you're having a hard time. Do you have that pebble or is there something I can do as a teacher to help you? This is a read aloud I do out of many. That’s the piece that you can keep reflecting on the text, we talk about metaphors and the kids get the reference, it feels safe because it’s what you’re supposed to be doing in school and you can get to those feelings in a roundabout way, rather than putting a student on the spot._

Violet employed the metaphor of a “pebble” as a means of imparting literacy concepts through the medium of texts, consistently employing this metaphor throughout the academic year with her students. The “pebble” is representative of an object that provides comfort, security, and a sense of belonging during challenging times. Violet used metaphors as a way to work beyond the boundaries imposed by the official curricula by retaining the imaginative component, which, as noted by Garrett and Kerr (2016: 525), draws students into varied modes of engagement with these texts across space and over
time. This practice aligns with the questioning posed by Garrett and Kerr (2016), wherein they investigate the relationship between texts and experiences: Rather than thinking about bringing history to life, one could ask in what ways does the social studies bring *people* to life? How does a text move individuals? How do those movements, if articulated, put people into different relations with other students and teachers? (526)

Metaphors, as Moore suggests, transition from the literal to the figurative, weaving layers of meaning and inviting connections beyond their immediate context (1996: 83). Violet’s utilization of metaphors is comparable to the intertextuality framework that refers to how texts are interconnected, shaping, and informing each other through shared categories, concepts, and narratives. Moore discusses metaphors as a means of creating, sustaining, or manipulating meanings, which echoes intertextuality's perspective on how texts influence and reinterpret each other. This interplay of meanings within metaphors mirrors the interchange of meanings within the larger literary and cultural landscape, where texts interact and influence the interpretation of one another. Moreover, Moore's view of metaphors as repositories of affectivity and feeling resonates with intertextuality's acknowledgment that texts evoke emotional and cognitive responses through their interwoven references. Just as metaphors imbue words with emotional resonance, intertextuality deepens our engagement with texts by invoking familiar echoes from other literary and cultural sources.

Cody, a Grade 5 teacher from Middlesex County, highlighted how picture books forge a shared language among the students, creating a common ground of mutual understanding. A compelling illustration of this concept emerges from the pages of the picture book entitled “Fatty Legs,” which powerfully narrates the experience of an Inuvialuit girl within Canada's residential school system. Similar to how Violet employs the metaphor of the “pebble” to forge connections with her students' personal histories and contextualize the refugee crisis text, Cody engaged her students through the medium of the picture book. Cody’s approach is especially captivating as she stretched beyond her students’ initial encounters with the text, embracing the narratives of their immediate and extended families. The teacher’s immersive engagement within the book encourages students to contemplate their personal experiences through a multigenerational lens. For
example, two students from Saudi Arabia and Nigeria shared their experiences within the narratives of their parents and grandparents who had been touched by violence, genocide, and war. Further, Cody contemplated how the absence of Indigenous students in her class does not impede the development of “vertical” student learning, where connections arise from shared experiences and intergenerational conversations. Picture books take on an essential role as valuable literacy tools, serving as a versatile text for delving into and conversing about historical and cultural narratives through the medium of storytelling. Cody provided further insight:

_The library ordered a lot of picture books about the residential schools because we were doing Orange Shirt [Day] activities. I don't have any Indigenous students in my class, but the rest of them, I asked, “does anybody have some connection in their own life?” Sometimes it’s their parents that went to residential schools. Then, there was a boy from Saudi Arabia who would get this strap in his school, then, another boy from Nigeria talked about his parents' experiences. As we talked, we realized they come from so many different parts of the world, and they were able to share lots of experiences that either their grandparents had told them or parents. We connected their experiences with different parts of the book ‘Fatty Legs,’ a story about a survivor of the residential schools._

Picture books, like “Lubna and Pebble” and “Fatty Legs” stand as prime examples of stories that confront legacies of injustice, social disparities, and historical trauma that have affected marginalized communities. Cody and Violet actively engage with the act of storytelling through the texts’ textual representations, illustrations, and metaphors as a way to navigate discussion on difficult topics. In relation to the power of storytelling, Jackson (2002) points to how stories “belong to the in-between spaces of intersubjectivities” (251). Storytelling activates the potential and possibilities of the curriculum, an institutional text that its content is part of broader institutional control and regulation. Jackson elaborates on this in the following passage:
For in telling stories, we testify to the very diversity, ambiguity, and interconnectedness of experiences that abstract thought seeks to reduce, tease apart, regulate, and contain in the name of administrative order and control’. Storytelling achieves distance… through rhetorical devices that transport us, the listeners or readers, into another space-time.... The journey away always brings one back to where one began, though with a transformed understanding. It is in this sense that once upon a time is always the here and now (Jackson 2002: 252).

Cody and Violet are actively engaged in the exploration of strategies and tools aimed at addressing social and historical trauma. Their efforts shape the discursive landscape of the pedagogical space, embracing its potentialities and contradictions, all within the bounds of the curriculum. As Garrett and Kerr (2016) highlighted, teachers are bringing the students to life through the read-aloud sessions, which reverberates through everyday conversations and interactions across the entire academic year. This serves as an active strategy teachers use to cultivate intercultural and equitable engagement within and beyond the classroom. By fostering a deliberate relationship with texts and students, my teacher participants are cultivating a “known in common social context” (Smith 2022: 34). This practice brings forth diverse interpretations of the text in the present moment through storytelling, illustrative metaphors, and textual representations. In this context, teachers are engaging with difficult knowledge topics to further strengthen the discourse of pedagogical spaces through equity and inclusion.

A noteworthy dimension evident within the scope of the discussed picture books during read-aloud sessions is the fluid interaction between challenging topics and the dialogues taking place between teachers and students. This facet is underscored by the insights shared by Heathrow and Valentina, that point to the fluidity with which they navigate complex themes during read-aloud sessions. On the one hand, Heathrow elucidated how she reads two picture books a day in a read aloud session to provide space for student inquiries as an opportunity to engage in discussion:

* I read at least two picture books a day. In that way, I run my classroom in a flexible manner... I don’t always compartmentalize subjects. I’ll do
a read-aloud and it might lead into a comprehension strategy, or lead into a social studies topic. It might lead into a discussion about residential schools because that’s where I want to go, or because of what’s happening in a particular time, or if I’ve heard the kids talking about it.

Heathrow refers to a critical dimension of addressing difficult knowledge topics in terms of how spontaneous the decision is to introduce a difficult knowledge topic, for example if the students are talking about it. This is critical because it shows how the teacher participants are actively adapting to the moment to respond to the interests of students through conversations. Valentina, on the other hand, reiterated how stories are texts that provide a fluid structure to be able to meet the curriculum requirements across a number of subject areas. This is a more efficient process in the structure of bureaucratic and institutional processes that constrain how teachers effectively implement the curriculum. Just as the picture book does not exist in isolation, it is activated in the relationship between the teacher and the student, the curriculum also does not exist in isolation, it is activated in the daily work of teachers. She explained:

*Having some power as an elementary teacher to choose and decide how to deliver the curriculum. The stories are ways in which I can make things more equitable because so much can come from a story... You can help students understand the message and you can show them who’s represented. It can be a springboard to other curriculum topics - it’s cross-curricular.*

During read-aloud sessions, Heathrow and Valentina actively positioned themselves as co-learners alongside their students, creating an environment that facilitates responses to student inquiries. Within this context, they showcased their dedication to equity by not only intently listening but also prompting student introspection about challenging topics. Their participation is not passive; rather, it constitutes a proactive effort to use read-aloud sessions as texts to navigate the intricate complexities that shape not just their own lives, but also the lives, experiences, and
perspectives of their students. By inviting diverse perspectives and knowledge into read-alouds, Heathrow and Valentina are engaged in a conceptual exploration of how language, textual representations, and illustrations facilitate discussion about social and historical trauma. The interplay between teacher and student in read-aloud sessions underscores how textual representations can remarkably shape pedagogical practices within the curriculum's confines. The picture books, once animated by the teacher, extend beyond temporal boundaries, enabling students to connect with social and historical narratives within the current moment. This approach further exemplifies the wealth of pedagogical knowledge teachers possess, derived from their experiences of addressing challenging subjects through both planned, formal lesson plans and spontaneous interactions with students. This concept will be explored in greater detail later in this chapter.

Furthermore, the involvement of picture books also underscores the significant role played by librarians and teacher librarians within the school setting. Teachers in this study frequently highlight the pivotal contributions of these colleagues, as they facilitate the circulation of texts within the school environment. Often, the books chosen and ordered by librarians become the materials educators employ in their classrooms. The library serves as an extension of the classroom environment, akin to the way the home environment extends into the classroom. Over the course of the academic year, the texts selected by the librarian frequently evoke difficult knowledge topics. In Chapter 4, I will explore into how libraries and books frequently become spaces and objects entwined with political implications, presenting educators with challenges to navigate. Nevertheless, teachers actively manage the institutional tensions surrounding the introduction of texts that engage with difficult knowledge, employing creative and collaborative strategies both within and beyond the classroom.

The previous section has drawn on the voices of elementary teachers Valentina, Heathrow, Meredith, Violet, and Cody, who collectively emphasized the influence of picture books and storytelling in fostering an inclusive and equitable learning environment. Their insights underscored how picture books stand as cornerstone resources in the elementary classroom, serving as versatile conduits for addressing
difficult knowledge topics to foster intercultural engagement. Through the orchestration of experiences in the read aloud sessions, these teachers are creatively working within the parameters of the curriculum through literature. Picture books act as “windows,” “mirrors,” and “sliding glass doors,” inviting students into worlds both familiar and unfamiliar, providing constructive avenues for addressing difficult knowledge. In the following section, I will explore the second most discussed strategy employed by teachers, dialogic strategies.

### 3.3. Dialogic Strategies

This section explores how my teacher participants cultivate a discursive pedagogical practice that extends beyond the literacy-based strategies. I refer to dialogic strategies as both formal and informal dialogues that serve as key approaches for teachers to address and communicate about difficult knowledge topics. Notably, dialogic strategies emerge as the second most extensively discussed strategy within the interviews. Throughout the interviews, numerous participating teachers expressed how conversations about difficult knowledge topics often unfold organically through everyday interactions with their students. These discussions might materialize as teachers respond to students’ everyday inquiries or react to significant global or local events. My research participants frequently found themselves in situations where they must decide whether to address these impromptu questions. This decision-making process might involve sharing political opinions, disclosing personal family experiences, and more. Within this specific context, teachers grapple with the complex navigation of discussions that revolve around the concept of identity. This highlights how "identity" assumes a central role within the pedagogical practice, with the student experience positioned at its core.

Within this framework, my teacher participants employ strategies like “courageous” and “critical” conversations to affirm students’ identities as informed by diverse lived experiences and backgrounds. One of the goals in dialogic strategies is to create both literal and metaphorical pedagogical spaces within which students can engage in conversations about difficult topics. To facilitate these dialogues, these teachers employ a range of pedagogical techniques, similar to read alouds, that organize the pedagogical space. For example, the implementation of the “wonder wall,” initiation of
“community circle,” and the encouragement of “soft starts.” In comparison to the previous section where I explored how texts were the medium for interpretation, in this section, conversations between teachers and students function as the conduit.

3.3.1. Dialogue as Conversations

In this section, I formulate the spoken or written conversational exchanges between the teacher and student, which summarizes the informal and formal interactions inside and outside the school. One aspect which illustrates dialogic strategies can be identified in the experience shared by Clive, a former Grade 7/8 teacher from the Greater Toronto Area (GTA). He underscored the significance of “interactional” approaches to address conversations on gender identity and sexual orientation. Clive emphasized that these conversations are brought up in the context of day-to-day interaction with his students, as opposed to being confined to formal lesson plans. He asserted:

> It is interactional; it's not a lesson. It's making sure the kid who transitioned gender last month is called by the proper name, that I'm always calling her by her chosen name and I'm not denying her reality. None of that is formal; that's all interactional. It's in the conversations that have nothing to do with gender identity or sexual orientation. Justice is not taught in a lesson, or even explicitly.

For instance, his interactional perspective encompasses ensuring that students who have recently transitioned gender are referred to by their chosen names, thus acknowledging and respecting their identities. Clive highlighted that these interactions extend beyond specific topics, but rather are dependent on the interaction between the teacher and the student in the moment, which dispels the notion that justice or understanding must be imparted solely through formal lesson plans. Thus, he placed emphasis on the informal exchanges where the teacher and student confront the situation in a “vertical” dynamic of co-learners.

The discursive space that arises from the exchanges between Clive and his students vividly underscores the significance of informal conversations between teachers and students. These exchanges provide fertile ground for delving into a diverse range of
identities, including various facets of gender and sexual orientation. The open and responsive dialogue that unfolds within these interactions can be likened to the concept presented by Pace (2015), which highlights the potential of dialogism in addressing spontaneous inquiries about sensitive topics. Dialogues allow for “self-making” in their capacity to grapple with contradictory viewpoints and perspectives in open-ended dialogues (Bekerman and Zemblyas 2012). Teachers negotiate the balance of authority, status, and identity as they engage in or withdraw from conversations with students (Pace 2015: 63). Clive actively navigates the “unifying and decentralizing forces” in education (Pace 2015: 63) of the discursive space to address conversations on gender identity and sexual orientation.

The dialogues taking place between Clive and his students reflect the long-term relationship he cultivates with his students over time. In this context, elementary school education allows for prolonged and consistent interaction between teachers and students. Elementary teachers like Clive teach the same class of students across most subject areas throughout the academic year. He enlivens the parameters of the curriculum to address gender identity and respectful pronoun usage by emphasizing their importance and value in open dialogues with his students. Clive exemplifies how he actively uses the “unscripted moment,” or the unplanned interaction between himself and the student to enact a discursive pedagogy that aligns with his values and notions of equity (Parsons and Vaughn 2016: as cited in Cassar et al 2023).

Similarly, Heathrow reflected on her experience as a teacher over time, drawing from her 17 years of experience within the English public school system. She recounted how conversations about race or related topics were scarcely deliberate in the earlier stages of her career. Historical and social studies classes might touch on these subjects, but the content was marred by outdated perspectives and limited scope, creating narrow discussions. This experience was echoed by several other teachers. Those texts often constrained discourse, even if race-related discussions emerged occasionally within historical contexts. Heathrow explained:
Early in my career we never had deliberate conversations about race, for example, it might have come up in social studies or in history. In Grade 7 and 8, you’re talking about 1812 and Indigenous communities, but our textbooks were horrible and weren’t reflective of what happened. There was a very narrow view of what was going on. Conversations would have been during history and there would have been a reason to have that conversation because the curriculum would have given you that reason. Now it’s more encouraged to bring in these topics in other ways and there’s some legislative pieces that make that happen. Orange Shirt Day about the residential schools and Truth and Reconciliation Day in the month of September; that's how you start your school year.

In the past, Heathrow's teaching was guided by a curriculum-centered pedagogy that heavily leaned on textbooks. However, the present educational landscape encourages a dynamic interaction between teachers and students, animated by the exchange of diverse texts. Heathrow astutely observed that the contemporary teaching environment is shaped by events and activities that transcend the confines of the classroom. In alignment with participating teachers in this study, she underscores the significance of observances like Orange Shirt Day, which serves as a vivid example of a school-wide commemoration fostering a broader context for addressing the history and ongoing legacy of the former residential school system. As conveyed to me, teachers are often prompted to engage with their classes before and after such gatherings or assemblies. Depending on the grade level, these interactions involve strategies such as read-aloud sessions, structured lesson plans, and activities centered around Indigenous perspectives and knowledge. Heathrow's insights shine a light on the intricate interplay between higher-level governing texts, like the TRC recommendations, and lower-level governing texts, such as the curriculum. The complex interplay of texts shapes the discourse surrounding equity and inclusion within the school. This shift embodies a more participatory and interactive discursive environment.
Furthermore, Cody, a Grade 5 teacher from Middlesex County, provided a compelling example of a discursive approach to classroom engagement, one that revolves around cultivating open dialogue with her students. This is evident in her practice known as 'soft starts,' which she employs daily. During this dedicated period of approximately 20 minutes each morning, she encourages her students to freely move around the classroom, such as engaging in play, reading, crafting, resting, or engaging in conversation with peers or the teacher herself. She explains:

*Listening is such a powerful tool to understand what these kids really need from me. What am I going to give them within the parameters of a school and in a classroom? I started to do small things to make sure we were doing the opening circle and letting the kids gradually settle in the morning so I could chat with them. Little, tiny shifts that I could handle as a teacher.*

Cody views seemingly subtle routines as potent tools for gradually establishing an atmosphere of active listening and deep connection with her students. Through her implementation of ‘soft starts,’ she crafts a method that effectively centers her diverse group of students, acknowledging their unique backgrounds, lived experiences, and individual perspectives. This approach serves as a catalyst for meaningful discussions encompassing identity development, aspects like race, ethnicity, immigration experiences, and the wide spectrum of gender identities. Central to Cody's approach is her understanding that students are far from passive recipients of knowledge; rather, they are individuals with complex emotions, concerns, and personal ties to the world around them. This conceptual framework of her role in the classroom lays the groundwork for meaningful dialogues with her students. It arises from her understanding that students harbor a curiosity and an open-mindedness that make them receptive to engaging with complex issues of social and historical injustices. This approach positions the students as active co-teachers within their own educational journeys.

Moreover, the practice of 'soft starts' assumed particular significance in the aftermath of a tragic incident that struck close to the school's local community. On June
6th, 2021, the Afzaal family were the victims of a hate-motivated terrorist truck attack in London, Ontario while on an evening walk through the neighbourhood (DeGuire 2022). Four of the members of the family, Salman Afzaal, Madiha Afzaal, Yumnah Afzaal, and Talat Afzaal, all perished in the attack, and the youngest son was seriously injured (DeGuire 2022). The family, who were active and well-loved members of the Muslim community, were targeted because of the outward signs of their religious affiliation. This tragedy propelled conversations about Islamophobia and hatred to the forefront, emphasising the alarming outcomes of violence, discrimination, and the dangerous ideology of white supremacy. Cody explained:

I have a lot of students from the Middle East. When the tragedy happened in June 2021, we were [learning] online, and the next day when we got on at nine, I did not know how to address it properly. But then the kids started to share their experiences. It was a little easier once I got going because they’re sitting at home and I didn’t know if their parents were there too, so I didn’t quite know how to manage. I shared that I was uncomfortable with them and then it went okay. There are some things that I felt have been hard to address as a white educator in a sensitive and proper manner.

The pre-established daily ritual of 'soft starts' transformed into a vital space for Cody to navigate the delicate aftermath of this traumatic incident with her students, many of whom were Muslim. Even in the face of the challenges posed by the shift to online teaching due to the COVID-19 pandemic, Cody approached this immensely difficult subject through open dialogue. As a white teacher, she embraced vulnerability, candidly sharing her own unease in addressing the tragedy with her students. This transparency not only established a bridge of understanding but also paved the way for her students to reciprocate by sharing their personal experiences and emotions surrounding the tragedy.

When faced with the difficulty of addressing the Afzaal family tragedy, Cody's students took the lead in brainstorming ways to commemorate together. She iterated:
I asked them what they would like to do, and they decided to wear green and purple. I used to always feel that I had to direct everything, but the students came up with ways to remember the family. We went on a walk through the woods to remember the family and we were just quiet for 15 minutes. With purple and green chalk, they wrote messages on the wall. They came up with these ideas that they shared with me, and we were able to implement some of them at school.

They chose to wear purple, the favorite color of Yumna Afzaal, the daughter of Salman Afzaal and Madiha Salman, and green as “symbolic pushback against Islamophobia” with its symbolic connection to Islam (quote by Sana Yasir CBC News 2021).

Cody’s experience serves as a vivid illustration of how the teacher-student dynamic transcends the parameters of the curriculum, mediated by social relations that extend far beyond its boundaries. Her experience stands as a living testament to her active engagement with the role of a teacher, particularly in confronting complex themes like Islamophobia, violence, and hatred. Cody accomplished this by fostering a dialogue that grapples with the unresolved threads of trauma and injustice. Rather than attempting to neatly tie up loose ends to find solace in the face of emotional pain, Cody allows the individual strands of her students’ experiences to interweave within a unified context. She achieves this by providing space for them to express and describe their experiences, confronting emotions, vulnerability, and unease. Garrett (2017) emphasizes that vulnerability is a social construct that can orient pedagogical lines of questioning. Rather than deploying narratives of closure, redemption, and comfort, vulnerability points to how individuals are intertwined with the lives of others in social and political situations that make some more vulnerable than others (Garrett 2017).

When confronted with trauma firsthand, the aftermath of the experience raises questions about the conventional understanding of education. This recalls Paulo Freire's poignant analogy of the “banking” model of education, a framework he critiques for its perception of knowledge as mere deposits poured into the empty vessels of students' minds, akin to vacant cabinets awaiting filling (Freire 1970/2005: 97). He contends that
this conventional educational approach undermines the true essence of learning and knowledge as active processes of inquiry. In resonance with Freirean pedagogy, Cody’s approach illustrates that education is not a unilateral act of depositing knowledge, but a dynamic process rooted in the interaction between individuals and the world around them. As Freire aptly contends, “people educate each other through the mediation of the world,” and in doing so, the “word takes on new power” (Freire 1970/2005: 32). He adds “each individual wins back the right to say his or her own word, to name the world” (Freire 1970/2005: 33).

Similar to Cody’s practice of ‘soft starts’, Violet also employed a deliberate approach in shaping both the physical and conceptual aspects of her classroom conversations with a ‘community circle’. The knowledge behind this practice originates in Indigenous pedagogy within decolonial, educational practices, including talking circles (Barkaskas and Gladwin 2021). Violet explained further:

*The idea of a community circle is based on an Indigenous circle, where everybody’s on the same level. No one is standing versus sitting and there’s a talking piece that gets sent around to keep the flow of conversation. But to me, space is looked at a couple different ways: it can be the physical space that you’re working with. In a classroom, I might put everybody in a circle and bring us back from whatever we’re doing and put everybody in a state of calm. If I’m going to have a hard conversation, I’m going to ask them first, are you ready to have these hard conversations? We’re going to create the criteria together as a collective. How are we going to address the person speaking? I let the students navigate how they want to find space.*

The notion of a community circle draws from Indigenous practices, where equality among participants is a guiding principle. As Barkaskas and Gladwin (2021:25) highlight, relationality is essential for decolonizing and Indigenizing education as it nurtures empathy and reciprocity. The community circle eliminates hierarchical distinctions like standing versus sitting and incorporates a talking piece to ensure a fluid
exchange of ideas between the teacher and students. Talking circles offer a transformative potential within educational spaces (Barkaskas and Gladwin 2021). The discursive space that is facilitated by the community circle, creates a separate “third space,” as the interplay of Indigenous perspectives and knowledge with Western-orientated perspectives and knowledge in pedagogical practices. Bakhtin’s term heteroglossia emphasizes the dynamic and diverse nature of language, communication, and discourses in specific cultural contexts. The talking circles foster connections between groups rather than isolating individuals. In Indigenous knowledge systems, talking circles are potent practices that serve as spaces to critically engage in the calls to decolonize institutions. Through this relational approach, meaning is constructed collaboratively, loosening the grip of hierarchical power structures that perpetuate systemic oppression (Barkaskas and Gladwin 2021).

Moreover, the pedagogical space that emerges from the dialogues between teachers and students serves as a vivid illustration of the potential of dialogues in addressing difficult knowledge. This potential is further exemplified through the experiences of two educators, Valentina and Violet. Both of these cases shed light on how dialogues play a pivotal role in centering the student identity and the various factors that make up an individual’s identity, such as race and ethnicity. According to Bekerman and Zemblyas (2012), it is helpful to conceive of identity as a “dialogic” process; the ongoing process of becoming through language. In other terms, identity is an ongoing process dependent on “languaging,” or the act of doing language (Bekerman and Zemblyas 2012: 32). Valentina referred to a specific teaching activity entitled “inside and outside identity,” which aimed to initiate discussions about identity. She described:

*It’s been really cool to have conversations with students about the different things that make up our identity. I’ve never noticed that it’s been a little bit hard, particularly in schools where most of my students are white. They have a tough time talking about identity, for example, I did a lesson “inside and outside identity,” and they had a really hard time naming their race. They would say “I like swimming” as being a part of identity, but that’s an interest. It was really hard for them to say*
“I’m white” even if they had to be prompted by asking who's in your family. I found that in schools that I’ve worked with more culturally, racially diverse groups with prompts and scaffolding, some of those students maybe can name their race a little bit more clearly, like they could say I’m Brown, I’m Pakistani, I'm Indian, or I’m Spanish. Identity has been a lot of my work in different contexts because identity centers the student.

The pedagogical activity employs curated prompts and scaffolding techniques that enable students to explore and express various facets of their personal identity, including their racial or ethnic background. In the course of the activity, Valentina observed distinct trends: students from racialized backgrounds predominantly associated their race or ethnicity as central to their identity, while students from non-racialized backgrounds primarily linked their identity to personal interests or hobbies. Urrieta (2009) considers the concept of identity as not only an ever-shifting perception of oneself but also one influenced by psychological and racial factors that contribute to its development. He regards identity as a “dynamic co-construced cultural phenomenon” (Urrieta 2009: 69). People, whether individually or collectively, interpret and communicate their personal and political identities in relation to others, and these meanings evolve over time and across space. Violet explained:

I do work with students on identity. If I’m sitting here as a male 10-year-old student, who loves sports, and has siblings, that’s the lens you are coming with into the conversation. Versus the student beside you who is female, Muslim, with no siblings, that’s the lens they are coming with into the conversation. How are those perspectives going to meet?

Violet’s encounter with identity presents an additional dimension to the ongoing discourse on pedagogical space, showcasing how students connect and find common ground within their diverse identities, as shaped by their interactions within the class. Violet's pedagogical approach aligns with Urrieta's (2009) perspective on identity as being inherently relational.
Furthermore, the activities enacted by Valentina and Violet vividly illustrate the way teachers utilize the pedagogical space to navigate the dialogue on identity factors, like race and ethnicity, among students in the class. In line with texts, my teacher participants use dialogues as spaces to address difficult knowledge, which carry internal conflicts and contradictions. Both Valentina and Violet exemplify the practice of culturally responsive pedagogy, which fosters an environment that acknowledges and appreciates students' life experiences. Their approaches effectively bridge the gap between students' home lives and the school setting. Culturally responsive pedagogy advocates for recognizing the valuable resources that students bring from their communities and homes, rather than dismissing this knowledge when they step into the classroom (Scherff and Spector 2011: vi).

In summary, the narratives presented here underscore the transformative power of dialogues within the pedagogical space, illuminating their potential in addressing difficult knowledge. Now, I will move on to explore the collaborative inquiries enacted by teachers.

3.4. Collaborative Inquiries

In this section, I explore the category of collaborative inquiries, a topic that emerged as the third most frequently highlighted strategy during the interviews with teachers. Collaborative inquiries involving both colleagues and students assume a crucial role in the local implementation of the curriculum, allowing for adaptability to the specific needs of the school community and the wider local context. I then turn to the category of community engagement and local context in the subsequent section.

I adapted the term “collaborative inquiries” derived from the perspectives shared by Anne-Henderson, a participant in the study, who highlights the profound impact of collaboration with both students and colleagues on shaping pedagogical discussions. From my perspective, collaborative inquiries refer to situations where teachers, students, parents, and the broader community engage in discourse-driven practices to activate the pedagogical space within the curriculum's boundaries. This encompasses a variety of discursive practices, including textual, visual, or spoken-based forms of curriculum, such
as lesson plans, activities, guest speakers, that complement the official curriculum. The curriculum is not just a static entity but is actively shaped and executed within its local context by teachers, allowing it to be tailored to meet the specific needs of the students. This study benefits from the unique insights of retired teachers with extensive teaching experiences in Ontario, ranging from 26 to 33 years. Among them are Nyx and Jack, who taught in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA), and Morrison, who taught in Middlesex County. Interestingly, the consensus among retired, former, and current teachers underscores the vital role of collaboration in crafting curriculum elements, including lesson plans, activities, and events, that effectively address difficult knowledge topics, like immigration experiences and gender-related topics. As Anne-Henderson described:

Collaborative inquiries are this beautiful model for how to improve education because you’re working in collaborative groups with large numbers of educators all learning from each other.

At the heart of these efforts are collaborative inquiries, which highlight how teachers actively foster social relations with other teachers, students, and the community. This process occurs while navigating the task of addressing difficult knowledge topics within the parameters of the official curriculum. Often these interactions occur in-person in the school context. However, due to the emergence of the digital sphere mediating social relations and the limitations imposed by COVID-19, online collaborations are an important interaction for student learning. Social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter emerge as a pivotal site in shaping the curriculum implementation in the local context. I contend that social media posts and interactions serve as valuable texts that disseminate information to educators throughout the province demonstrating the possibilities and contradictions of the curriculum. This showcases how my teacher participants are guided by the official curriculum, yet concurrently take an active role in orchestrating the curriculum. They achieve this by sharing resources, lesson plans, activities, ideas, and opinions on Facebook and Twitter, fostering co-learning from other teachers. These practices provide insights into the real-world experiences of teachers across the province.
3.4.1 In-Person and Online Collaboration

One central focus of in-person and online collaborations lies in the localized development of curriculum within each school's unique context, aimed at addressing specific challenging knowledge relevant to that community. This occurs within the framework of the curriculum as an institutional text that is mandated across the entire province. These localized efforts are undertaken in collaboration with teachers and educators within the school community. For instance, this could involve crafting lessons that explore immigration experiences, creating assignments that encourage parents' involvement in understanding the impact of ethnic tensions on their children, or inviting guest speakers and community representatives to lead discussions about LGBTQIA+ experiences and perspectives.

On one hand, Nyx, a retired K-12 teacher with 30 years of teaching experience, offered insight into her proactive approach of tailoring curriculum to address gaps within difficult knowledge topics, such as racism and gender-based violence, and to incorporate narratives often excluded within the parameters of the curriculum. She elaborated:

\[\text{Education reacts to the flavor of the moment. It takes a while to process because they have committees to make curriculum then they give us the curriculum and we all look at it. A great deal of my work as a teacher was developing curriculum. I'll get the topic done but I'll do it in my own way, so we made up our own constantly.}\]

On the other hand, Jack, a retired teacher with three decades of teaching experience offers insight into his pedagogical practices in the eighties and nineties. He elucidates how he engaged in “developing curriculum locally within our classroom” by leveraging guest speakers and sharing lesson plans with colleagues. Collaborating with fellow educators, he embarked on crafting lesson plans about refugee experiences and sexual orientation. These endeavors were both individual and collective, fostered through lunchtime discussions and after-school planning sessions. He illustrated:

\[\text{It was difficult because the curriculum hadn't been developed. This is the 80’s through the 90’s, even the early 2000’s--we were developing}\]
the curriculum locally within our classroom... We bounced ideas around together, like how can we teach about refugee issues? How can we teach about gender specific subjects, like sexual orientation? It just came out of the environment of sharing lunches and after school planning. We developed our own curriculum, and we reached out to the community as well. We brought people in to speak because we never claimed to be the experts on these topics. It propelled us to see the interest kids showed in learning. Maybe it was contrary to discussions that they would have with the parents at home.

This entailed utilizing guest speakers and sharing lesson plans with colleagues to create educational content collaboratively. His collaboration with fellow educators led to the design of lesson plans addressing refugee experiences and sexual orientation. These endeavours were both solitary and collaborative, fostered through informal lunchtime conversations and after-school planning sessions. The act of crafting curriculum takes on a multifaceted role, this approach extends to engaging the broader community by integrating expertise and resources, elevating “local curriculum development” to encompass not only textual materials but also community figures and guest speakers within the educational context.

Furthermore, Morrison, a retired K-12 teacher and principal with 33 years of teaching experience, discussed how he used a journal writing activity with his student throughout the year called “Dear Diary.” This approach was a text-based activity that promoted conversational collaborations between the student, parents, and the teacher. He implemented this strategy because he recognized that long-term issues between families were impacting the classroom environment and that he could not solve these problems within the classroom alone, due to ethnic tensions among families in the community. He explained:

_The first year I taught I was in a grade six class in a little core school._

_It was ugly and pretty much out of control. There were long term issues between families, and kids in the classroom grew up hating other kids._
in the classroom. I learned that I couldn't solve the problem in the classroom, so I engaged with the parents when I thought was appropriate and needed. This was in “Dear Diary.” If I read something in the diary, I might take the kid aside and say, “what would your mom and dad say if they read this?” then if there wasn't a resolution, I would contact the parents because it's too dangerous not to.

Morrison responded to the needs of the student by facilitating a textual space for the student to voice their feelings and concerns living in a community with high ethnic conflict, where evidently community concerns trickled into the classroom. By engaging with the parents, he connected the environments of the home as an extension of the classroom space through the text-based activity that provokes a response from the teacher or parents. This is important at the elementary level given the central role parents play as collaborators in their child’s educational journey. Garrett (2017) argues that the value of engaging a pedagogy that provokes is located in the degree to which the object, the text, allows the subject to narrative their lives in new ways (124). Through the diary prompt, Morrison is activating the pedagogical space with parents as a natural extension of this space, which offers him a tool to address and mitigate community tensions inside the classroom.

On another note, social media is an extended realm of the pedagogical space, building upon the point that online collaborations shape and influence the strategies educators employ to address difficult knowledge. As highlighted by Miles (2019), we are currently in an age where individuals, especially the younger generation, increasingly navigate and comprehend the world through textual content and visual imagery. Such interactions have found a platform on social media due to the pervasive influence of technology and the digital landscape in our daily lives (Miles 2019). On platforms like Facebook, interactions transpire within either public or private groups. Within these, teachers establish resource-sharing communities where they engage in discourse, exchange ideas, perspectives, concerns, and instructional strategies tailored to specific grade levels or subject areas. Similarly, Twitter offers a distinct dynamic as interactions
unfold through individual teacher profiles, where educators engage in public interactions through 'tweets' (text and visual-based posts) and comments.

Jack provided further insight into this phenomenon through his role as a teacher mentor. In his current capacity, he guides and supports new teacher graduates across the GTA. Drawing from his time as a retired teacher and mentor, Jack reflects on the evolving role of social media in teaching. He recognized how this digital landscape has revolutionized teaching's potential, introducing both opportunities and complexities. One significant observation he makes pertains to the politicization of certain difficult knowledge topics over others, such as discussions surrounding racism and gender identity. He explained:

*The approach that I'm learning with newer teachers is the significance of social media in the kinds of conversations being had in the classroom, regardless of what is said in the curriculum. The curriculum can only expand so much. The curriculum has to be seen as something not static, but something that's ongoing and being added to. The curriculum slings back and forth with more current issues that kids are interested in that affect their lives directly.*

Social media serves as a dynamic arena for the rapid exchange of ideas and opinions. On one hand, it offers a beneficial platform for teachers to find camaraderie and connect over shared teaching experiences. This textual landscape becomes an innovative avenue for teachers to collaborate, pooling ideas and strategies to address difficult knowledge topics. However, it is essential to recognize the flip side – the swift exchange of text and visual posts can inadvertently foster a sense of surveillance. This occurs when teachers with differing pedagogical perspectives feel under scrutiny, potentially fostering apprehension and reluctance toward addressing difficult knowledge topics in their pedagogical practice. This will be expanded upon in Chapter 4.

In the preceding section, I reviewed the collaborative inquiries as mechanisms that shape discourses within pedagogical spaces within the parameters of the curriculum. In the subsequent section, I will explore the community context, which stands as an additional extension of the pedagogical space.
3.5. Community Engagement

Here I turn my focus to the category of community engagement, which highlights how my teacher participants forge significant partnerships between the school and its surrounding local context. One avenue is through activities such as field trips and community tours, offering teachers and students an opportunity to interact with their local history, heritage, and cultural practices. This approach, much like the utilization of dialogic and collaborative strategies, contributes to crafting a curriculum that resonates locally and emphasizes a particular connection with the school's historical, environmental, and demographic backdrop. In this context, teachers purposely engaged with social and historical trauma and injustices when they confronted it as a pedagogical practice to address difficult knowledge.

In this study, teachers employ diverse methods anchored in the community context and partnerships. Examples include initiatives like “community walks” and “adopt a park,” which serve to facilitate critical pedagogy centered around the organization, structure, and design of communal public spaces. Further, teachers draw upon the insights of the community by incorporating guest speakers, workshops, and school-wide events with community collaborators, enriching student learning through diverse perspectives. This underscores how teachers conceptualize pedagogical spaces tailored to approach and communicate about challenging knowledge topics.

3.5.1 Local Context

Valentina and Jack both critically reflected on how the local context shapes and informs how teachers address difficult knowledge within the parameters of the curriculum. On the one hand, Valentina described establishing a pedagogical practice that emphasizes the local community context in how the pedagogy translates across space and over time. She suggested that by cultivating a pedagogical practice that “systemically” shows care and respect, she has increased capacity to introduce diverse perspectives and knowledge to communities with homogenous or heterogenous populations. Valentina explained:

*By creating space that systemically shows I care, there's more room to introduce new stories and conversations about people who might be*
similar and different from them. I've been in schools that have been racially, culturally, or linguistically diverse, but I've also been in schools in the pocket of Toronto that's very homogeneous. Young people in all places are keen to make sense of things, and sometimes they need to be introduced. That's why the context matters.

On the other hand, Jack pointed to how equity work translates differently across Ontario, which introduces a different set of questions depending on the context. The community context in the whole of Ontario influences the conversations occurring in schools among staff and students. Thus, this intersects with dialogic resources, such as informing the classroom conversations in the community context. He explained:

*One thing that's common over the years is that the geography in Ontario makes a huge difference. Teachers in the North have a higher population of Indigenous kids in the classroom so they're more than willing to jump into what might be ‘controversial’ topics, like the residential schools because they have kids that are maybe second-generation. Their grandparents might have attended those schools, whereas in a Toronto suburb, you've got a totally different makeup of kids where their issues might be refugees, or the whole of LGBTQ issues.*

Jack highlighted a crucial factor: the spectrum of challenging knowledge topics addressed in classrooms varies across the province. However, irrespective of the geographical context, Valentina observed that students possess an inherent curiosity and an eagerness to comprehend the world around them. However, initiating this process often necessitates guidance. This underscores the pivotal role of the local context – encompassing the land, history, and culture – in shaping students' openness to embrace differing viewpoints and narratives. According to Pace (2015), the discourse surrounding difficult knowledge in socially and culturally diverse classrooms can evoke anxiety due to the potential for conflict, particularly when compared to more homogeneous settings. Similar to Valentina's experience, he underscores how the local population's influence
contributes to what is rendered difficult or challenging within that specific region as influenced by its historical, social, and political past.

Furthermore, I explore land-based activities that two teachers, Valentina and Anne-Henderson, shared with me that activate the local land and history as discursive practices that engage in the pedagogical space. Valentina, a teacher-librarian, described a year-long collaboration with a fellow teacher and her Grade 1 class to explore the topic of community helpers, which is a core topic in the Grade 1 SSHG curriculum. She expanded:

*Most of my work as a teacher librarian was working with home room teachers. We worked together to deliver a project in a Grade 1 class focused on homelessness. We started the topic about community helpers because that’s a big theme in Grade 1. In terms of community helpers, we were looking at our local community. Students were really interested in how the local park, High Park, is used by different community members like families with young children, animals, and nature. We talked about the different stakeholders who use the park and then students brought up that homeless people also use the park. We talked about different homeless experiences, like homeless people are individuals, but sometimes they are families as well. We talked about some of the reasons why people might become homeless; they might lose their job, they might face racism so they can’t get a job, or they might not have enough money to pay rent.*

To probe community helpers, topics emerged to extrapolate the different communities, people, animals, and infrastructure that informs the park environment and based on what they observed in the park. The park was an extension of the pedagogical space that the teachers probed with students to understand the intersections and complexities of human experience such as homelessness, racism, poverty, and domestic violence.

Similarly, Anne-Henderson discussed an educational experience involving Grade 8 students engaging in an inquiry-based learning activity. The catalyst for this inquiry is
the mandatory curriculum's focus on the historical aspects of the 1800s. To enhance this learning, Anne-Henderson incorporates “land learning,” where students explore the surrounding environment. She elaborated:

_students do an inquiry in Grade 8 because the mandatory curriculum is interested in the histories of the 1800s. I take them on the land to do land learning. Once, they brought up an elementary school in the community named Molly Brandt. We had no idea why they named it this way, so the student investigated and there happens to be a statue downtown of Molly Brant. We went down to the land, and there was a plaque on an old age home that happened to be her home. It was written in English and in Mohawk. This was the first time the kids had ever seen written Mohawk, so they took rubbings of it so we could identify Indigenous presence in the area from old French and British maps. These showed that there was an Indian store at the end of the street, also an Indian camp down by the museum. Along with staff, we went on the walk as the culmination of the investigation. On a PD Day, we did the walk with teachers and students who were interested, and we wrote a publication for the board so other teachers can similarly take their kids on the land to learn._

For context, Mary Brant (1736-1796), known as Konwatsi’tsiaiénni in the Mohawk language, which translates to “someone lends her a flower,” is a prominent Indigenous figure among the Kanyen'kehà:ka (Mohawk) people and in Canadian history (Conn 2019). She was a Loyalist, political advocate, and diplomat. As the culmination of their investigation, the students, along with the school staff, embarked on a walk to these locations. This outing serves as an immersive experience to bring their learning full circle. Anne-Henderson extended this opportunity beyond the classroom. On a professional development day, they conducted the same walk with interested teachers and students. This collaborative effort resulted in the creation of a publication for the school board, aiming to guide other teachers in similar land-based learning endeavors with their students.
Through the voices and narratives of teachers, this chapter investigated the complexity of pedagogical spaces informed by the relation between the curriculum and teachers' discursive practices. In this dynamic, literacy-based strategies, dialogic strategies, collaborative inquiries, and community engagement converge to shape teachers’ theoretical understanding of the pedagogical space.

The exploration of literacy strategies, particularly through the use of picture books and storytelling, underscores the significance of literature as opening up discursive spaces to engage with difficult knowledge topics. For instance, the use of metaphors and visual elements serve as effective mediums for exploring identity and lived experiences via literary and symbolic frameworks. The "read aloud" activity stands as a vivid example of the potential for dynamic learning through literature. Similarly, the dialogic strategies employed by teachers foster open conversation about difficult knowledge topics, providing students with spaces to question and discuss complex and sensitive themes. The versatility and adaptability of dialogic approaches are evident in both formal classroom discussions and informal interactions, where teachers create spaces for students to engage with the affective dimensions of historical and social trauma and injustices.

Moreover, collaboration, as revealed through collaborative inquiries, emerged as a powerful force in shaping pedagogical spaces and practices. Collaborative inquiries refers to the local practices that foster the input of teachers, students, parents, and the broader community. According to the narratives of the teachers, this practice is integral to adapting the curriculum to the specific needs of the school community in the local context. The chapter's exploration of community engagement further illuminates how teachers link their students to the physical, cultural, and historical contexts of their surroundings. Similar to the collaborative inquiries, teachers actively forge connections between the school and the local community. These practices translate the curriculum as a locally relevant text, which shapes how teachers frame, discuss, and incorporate difficult knowledge topics in their teaching practices.
In the exploration of pedagogical spaces, teachers in this study are embracing Farley’s (2015) assertion that teachers and students can harness the “affective force” of difficult knowledge topics to construct meaningful narratives. These narratives serve as reflective tools to explore how “conflicts on the outside hook into, echo, and transform conflicts on the inside” (Farley 2015: 549). Pedagogical strategies ranging from storytelling and dialogic methods to community engagement are unified by a singular focus: centering students' unique identities and lived experiences within the educational discourse.
Chapter 4 Navigating Tensions

In this chapter, I probe the tensions that my teacher participants face when addressing and navigating difficult knowledge topics within and beyond the parameters of the curriculum. These tensions revolve around the dimensions of time, work dynamics, and politicization. Through the experiences and narratives of teachers, I explore how these tensions shape their pedagogical practices and engagement on topics, such as race and ethnicity, Indigenous knowledge and perspectives, immigration experiences, and gender identity and sexual orientation inside and outside the classroom. Further, this chapter sheds light on the institutional constraints and challenges that my research participants encounter, the emotional labor involved, and the nuanced ways these tensions intersect. As illustrated in Chapter 3, teachers engage in discursive practices that employ creative and collaborative strategies to address difficult knowledge topics both within and outside the parameters of the SSHG curriculum.

In the context of social studies and history, Cutrara (2018) explores possibilities as to why teachers are resistant to teaching through an anti-racist and decolonial lens. She explores individual and structural racism, lack of knowledge or appropriate resources, and fears generated by perceived controversial content (Cutrara 2018). In my research, teachers actively embrace the complexity and potential of culturally responsive teaching. These teachers exemplify a heightened awareness of the social norms and values that shape their teaching practices. They demonstrate attentiveness to the institutional and cultural contexts within which they operate, all the while being responsive to the emotional challenges that arise when confronting difficult knowledge topics (Schoffner and Brown 2011).

4.1. Time as a Tension

In addressing difficult knowledge topics within the parameters of the curriculum, teachers in this study are confronted with a multifaceted tension that centers around the notion of time. The dimension of time becomes a crucial factor in their attempts to engage with difficult knowledge topics related to race and ethnicity, immigration experiences, Indigenous perspectives and knowledge, and gender identity and sexual orientation.
Time, both within the scope of work hours and teachers' personal lives, emerges as a crucial tension that shapes the way educators approach and navigate the complexities of teaching difficult knowledge topics. This is illustrated through the experience shared by Valentina:

*Often, it's at your own time because you're trying to give students a comprehensive curriculum. I do find that there is a community that's building whether it's on Twitter or social media where folks are sharing resources or coming together to share these ideas. Some teachers like to collaborate but a lot of it is on your own shoulders.*

Valentina's observation of how teachers often find themselves dedicating their personal time to crafting a comprehensive curriculum speaks to the underlying tension of time allocation. The lack of institutional resources to effectively support and prepare teachers infringes upon their work time and personal time, rendering them overburdened by the demands of delivering a curriculum that addresses equity concerns. Similarly, the time pressures experienced by teachers, as exemplified through the narratives of Valentina and Clive, highlight a systemic challenge that compromises the pursuit of equitable education. Clive, a former Grade 7/8 teacher from the Greater Toronto Area (GTA), vividly expresses how important time is for teachers as a factor to effectively implement the curriculum. He explained:

*The education system is in crisis mode. I had many times last year where I didn't have any preparation time to plan for the next day. I've had to supervise classes that have collapsed of 60 plus people... this is incredibly stressful and difficult, and to me, the only answer is a political answer, we need to find ways of funding the system better, and that'll only happen through political engagement.*

While both teachers expressed their willingness to learn and adapt, the lack of institutional support, combined with the overbearing demands on their time, hinders their capacity to bring their students to understand and connect with difficult knowledge topics effectively. Institutional constraints further compound the tension of time that teachers
encounter. The institutionally structured time allocated to these subjects fails to allow for an in-depth exploration, hindering the potential for transformative learning experiences.

Further, Clive highlighted the constraints imposed by institutional processes, noting that the allocated discretionary and preparation times often go unrealized due to additional responsibilities such as class supervision – a consequence of the shortage of teachers, exacerbated by the spread of COVID-19 infections among school staff. This institutional context frequently results in teachers like Clive having to supervise groups that exceed the conventional number of students per class (approximately 25 students per teacher at the elementary level), requiring them to manage two classes, sometimes together consisting of over 60 students per teacher. Also, he underscored that teachers typically have just one period per day designated for planning and marking, as stipulated in the contract. When this time is insufficient, educators find themselves balancing their workload both at home and within the school to effectively address difficult knowledge topics. Further, Clive scrutinized the institutional limitations that affect endeavors to incorporate Indigenous perspectives and knowledge in the classroom. He elaborated:

We were asked to develop as a school a strategy to incorporate Indigenous ways of knowing into our teaching practice. That’s a serious thing to ask a teacher to do. Instead, it is lumped into 15 minutes in the staff meeting, or even half the day.

He provides an illustration of the time constraint by elucidating how discussions on Indigenous perspectives and knowledge are confined to a few minutes during staff meetings or condensed into half-day workshops. Such institutional constraints of time hinder the meaningful integration of anti-racism pedagogy into these contexts or the curriculum at large. Likewise, Angel, a Grade 7/8 teacher from the GTA, described the interplay of texts, time, and difficult knowledge as informing the ways she incorporates Indigenous perspectives and knowledge within the parameters of the curriculum. She explained:

A huge piece of teaching hard things in the school curriculum is that the opportunities are there, but it’s left subjectively to teachers. The history curriculum has a lot of things about Indigenous communities, but here’s the
problem: we're not provided the support, we're given a textbook. I have a kid. I don't have time to go out of my way, research, and find out all this information to bring back to my students. I'm going to take what the textbook is giving me because that's the easiest thing. Teachers are willing to learn, but if they're not given the time to learn, they will not go out of their way on their own time to do it.

Difficult knowledge topics, due to various institutional limitations, are left to the discretion of individual teachers, leading to uncertainty in how these lessons are conveyed within the classroom and school environment. According to Angel, teachers prefer resources that are easy to comprehend and require minimal time for the teacher to adopt. She points to the gendered and familial aspects in how her time is structured inside and outside the classroom. The allocated time that governs teachers' work creates tensions, necessitating my teacher participants to dedicate their personal time to researching and procuring resources. Without this, teachers are not prepared to deliver the curriculum. Pace (2019) emphasizes the need for preparation time in order to navigate the diverse dialogues that enter the classroom from teachers and students from different backgrounds and lived experiences. She defines preparation time as the time that goes into expanding one’s knowledge about a particular topic or issue. This includes the active institutional involvement in the curriculum process that fosters conceptual understanding, critical questions, and active pedagogies (Pace 2019).

Now that I explored time as a tension, I turn to examine the work dynamics and emotional labour as tension.

4.2. Work Dynamics and Emotional Labour as Tension

The work dynamics within educational institutions and the emotional labor associated with equity work create an atmosphere of vulnerability for teachers. Valentina and Clive expose the apprehension and fear experienced by new and non-permanent educators, who grapple with the potential impact on job security and professional prospects when engaging in equity work. The precarious nature of non-permanent teaching positions exacerbates these challenges, where embracing an equity lens becomes a delicate balancing act. Valentina described it as such:
I feel nervous and scared doing this kind of work, particularly being a newer teacher, a teacher who’s not permanent. Those things are coming into play and into my mind. If a school is committed to anti-racism, then I can say “this is our school’s goal.” I can say that the school board has equity policies if I get pushback, but it's different saying that our school is focused on this. We are unpacking this as a school and we're unpacking this in different grades. It's more localized. Rather than me quoting some equity policy which is there, but it’s far removed.

Additionally, Valentina discussed how the intertextual relationship between governing texts and the curriculum results in differing levels of enforceability. The influence of equity policies carries greater textual weight within the local context when the school takes proactive steps to actively implement and reinforce equitable processes. Otherwise, it leads to what Valentina described as the teacher feeling isolated and alone, resulting in emotional burdens in addressing difficult knowledge topics. Likewise, Meredith, an active Grade 5 teacher from the Greater Toronto Area (GTA), emphasized the disproportionate burden placed on racialized educators to address and rectify racism. The practice of designating racialized teachers as the “voice” of anti-racism training exacerbates the emotional toll and differential treatment in these spaces. She explained:

Racialized people have to take on this trauma and be impacted by the work, whereas white people, we’re not put in the same positions to fix it or be the voice. When you go to do anti-racism training or in a staff meeting, and you’ve got white teachers that are denying or resisting, how does that look like? Can we offer affinity spaces?

The emotional labor involved in addressing personal experiences and incorporating external knowledge sources becomes even more pronounced for racialized teachers, as they navigate internal and external resistance in the school. For instance, Kalim (2022) explored the experiences of racialized teachers and non-racialized teachers in Ontario in relation to emotional labour. Based on his research findings, Kalim (2022) argued Black teachers perform significantly more emotional labour than non-racialized
teachers. Levy (2022) interviews Jamil Kalim who argues that the interplay of race and emotional labour is a significant in how Black teachers engage in pedagogy. Further, Levy (2022) highlights the institutional tensions that there are significantly fewer Black teachers in Ontario compared to white teachers. This factor considerably shapes how conversations of race translate within and beyond the parameters of the curriculum. Further, Valentina corroborated Meredith’s observation on the interplay of race and institutional backlash in different contexts. She explained:

*The curriculum has space for us to do this work, but that's not to say that you won't get pushback whether it's from other educators, administrators, or even family and parents that you're serving. In my experience, if you're racialized and you're doing this work, you get a lot more pushback.*

Furthermore, Angel expressed how she leans on her previous career as a social worker to inform her working knowledge of how to approach difficult knowledge topics in the classroom. She explained:

*I personally have background experience with social justice and anti-oppressive education because I was a social worker. I was working in community outreach before I became a teacher. I had training in youth working, counseling, trauma, violence, gang, and drug prevention. I come into the classroom with all that knowledge, but your regular teacher will come in with just their certificate. It's not a teacher's fault that they don't have that exposure. The training that they're giving them is ridiculous, it's a slideshow about micro-aggressions. Anti-racism is a framework you have to think about, it's a way that you see people and you never stop learning.*

Angel’s experience illuminated how teachers conceptualize and reflect about addressing trauma, violence, and mental health. She adapted and learned from previous experiences to inform her current teaching practices. Further, Heathrow and Valentina described how the teachers’ and students’ identity influenced the way they experienced the school environment. On one hand, Heathrow described how race was a polemic topic in her classroom. As she put it:
I noticed that race was bad to talk about it. If you said Black, it was an insult to my kids. If somebody said they were Black, they thought they were saying something bad about them. That's a huge issue, the fact that we can't even have these conversations points to all kinds of problems.

On the other hand, Valentina described the encounters of teachers integrating anti-racist and equity pedagogy in their classrooms are far from consistent, often marked by institutional pushback. She depicted:

*Your identity is already scrutinized when you're in the space and once you start doing equity work, you're further scrutinized. It brings up lots of microaggressions and ostracization. In my experience, I've felt alone in the equity work in the schools that I've been in because of the community. Maybe it has to do with how my body is read, whereas educators who might identify as white, or who might pass as white, might not get as much scrutiny, they'll be read differently.*

She articulated how a teacher's identity is already subject to examination within the school setting, and this scrutiny becomes even more pronounced for those who are racialized and actively engaged in equity work. As a racialized teacher herself, Valentina narrated her personal experiences of facing backlash from colleagues who refused to collaborate due to her incorporation of an equity lens. In both of these narratives there is an active interaction of how dialogues and the school’s local context shape the parameters for teachers work. In another instance, Valentina illustrated how teachers work translates differently across geographic context. She elaborated:

*Whether it's posters on the wall in the school, books that are being read in the classroom, conversations that are happening, messages on TV when you're walking to and from school of something that's acknowledged and validated, it gets much easier to have those conversations, whereas Islamophobia would be really hard. I can't even imagine myself having conversations in some of the communities that I have worked in. That’s not to say anything about the communities, but I would feel less comfortable and more nervous around approaching it.*
Now that I explored work dynamics and emotional labour as a tension, I turn to how my teacher participants examine politicization as a tension.

4.3. Politicization as Tension: Negotiating Discourses

The process of politicization becomes a complex tension for my teacher participants as they navigate discussions around race, ethnicity, Indigenous perspectives and knowledge, immigration experiences, and gender identity, which often intersect with their personal experiences. Politicization embodies the complex interaction between discourse and texts. This concept is underscored by Pace's (2019) assertion that the prevailing political climate could potentially create challenges for teachers seeking to incorporate discussions of challenging and politically charged topics into their classroom teachings. Educators like Anne-Henderson and Angel emphasize how schools mirror wider societal dynamics and often perpetuate systemic inequities. Anne-Henderson explained the relationship of schools and the world:

*People who naturally do this work have to be thick skinned and brave because it’s hard work. There is a lot of racism in the world... schools are microcosms of the world.*

The issue of race, although critical, is often approached with apprehension, and discussions can be met with resistance due to a culture of shame and fear of offending. The language and terms used, such as “decolonizing spaces,” can mask the lack of substantial change and leave teachers feeling ill-equipped to effectively address these issues. She explained:

*We use language at the board level like ‘decolonizing spaces’ when there’s no decolonizing spaces happening in operations. Schools are exactly the same. We’ve got this language now that we can use to hide behind things, or to hide behind what we’re not doing. If we can talk about it in a staff meeting, then we might think that it translates into the classroom, but for the most part it doesn’t.*

Meredith explores the nuanced dynamics of how language manifests differently within various spaces within the school and how these translations become
operationalized. This complex process is underpinned by institutional constraints stemming from the ways that discourse operates within policy and is subsequently interpreted within the school. Further, Meredith shared that she has access to spaces based on the color of her skin, while her racialized colleagues have harder time accessing those same spaces. This further intersects with racialized emotional labour and politicization of race and discourses. She described:

*I've talked to a number of colleagues that are in this position that are racialized people, and they talk about their experience doing equity work as very different from mine. I am allowed access to any space just based on the color of my skin, whereas they have a harder time, or they find it more difficult to get into those spaces. Then the work can even be harmful for them, especially when you face resistance in the work. Words really impact them, their communities, and their families.*

She points to how some students are labelled by their teachers as inherently limited, an outcome of racial prejudice. Meredith related this to a disciplinary system based on suspensions. The suspensions especially affect the racialized students because she points out that they experience the school environment differently compared to non-racialized students. She explained:

*When I first arrived, there were a couple of students that had folders that were this thick. It was all about suspensions, suspensions, suspensions. Again, who belongs and who doesn't.*

In a parallel vein, Angel shed light on the process of “politicizing” subjects such as race and ethnicity. In doing so, she highlights how conversations around race intersect with the personal experiences of both racially marginalized and non-racially marginalized educators. Angel navigates the challenges that teachers encounter when addressing the profound complexities of anti-Black racism. This challenge is intensified by the prevailing “climate of shame” that surrounds discussions concerning race within the educational sphere. She explained:
First of all, most teachers are white, especially within the GTA. They're going to come in and try to do something about Black racism, they're going to come in defensive because they're like, “I'm a white lady, what can I offer.” They're scared to offend anyone or get in trouble for doing the wrong thing because we've created this culture of teachers where if they do something wrong, they're shamed for it.

Angel's insights highlight the struggle non-racialized teachers encounter when applying an equity lens to teach about race. She provides reflective analysis on the difficulties inherent in discussing racism within the context of the GTA. The community's specific dynamics create a setting where discussions revolving around racial categories hold vastly different implications for racialized teachers and students in comparison to their non-racialized counterparts. This distinction between racialized and non-racialized teachers shapes the discourse, leading to distinct dynamics when tackling topics of race and racism.

Furthermore, Angel probes the complex landscape of social media as a platform for teacher backlash, revealing how it generates institutional tensions. Social media platforms serve as a conduit for criticism from fellow teachers across different schools and regions, generating a punitive feeling among teachers. While these concerns do impact the day-to-day experiences of teachers, they concurrently contribute to a broader institutional discourse that ignites a context of tension and unease. She explained:

What makes me mad is teachers posting about other teachers on social media. Teachers will shame teachers on Twitter about the resources they use – it’s misconstrued. You’re not helping the cause; you’re just making teachers more afraid to teach the hard things. That’s why everyone for the past two years is on edge now.

Furthermore, Angel highlighted how both social media and print media, including publications like the Ontario College of Teachers’ magazine, become spaces where teachers become susceptible to backlash from peers, parents, and community members. This underscores the powerful role of these platforms in shaping perceptions and
judgments. These instances of institutional backlash and constraint are unmistakable signs of how power dynamics manifest in social relations, influencing the ways teachers are disciplined and punished. She iterated:

My biggest fear as a teacher would be ending up in the media, or on the pages of Professionally Speaking; the Ontario College of Teachers releases a monthly magazine. At the back, they publish all the teachers who have been fired or suspended and their cases.... Basically, if you do something wrong as teachers, they publish it for the world to see and nobody will hire you again.

The exploration of institutional tensions in teaching difficult knowledge topics—which focus on issues of time, work dynamics and emotional labour, and politicization—provides a nuanced view of the educational landscape in Ontario. Time emerges as a critical constraint, affecting both the work hours and personal lives of teachers, and influencing how they approach and engage in discussion on race and ethnicity, Indigenous perspectives and knowledge, immigration experiences, and gender identity and sexual orientation. Work dynamics and emotional labour add another layer of complexity. In this study, teachers find themselves in a delicate context as they undertake equity-driven work, and this has a disproportionate impact on the experiences of racialized teachers. Politicization introduces further complexities when addressing sensitive topics within the confines of the school and curriculum. These institutional tensions are exacerbated by systemic inequalities, the current political climate, and fears of public and institutional backlash. Through this analysis, we gain insights into the tensions teachers face in their ongoing efforts to include and address difficult knowledge topics, aiming to foster inclusive and equitable narratives and experiences both within and beyond the school curriculum.
Chapter 5 Conclusion

This study explores the pivotal role of teachers within Ontario's educational landscape in addressing "difficult knowledge", based on the experiences of my teacher participants. Difficult knowledge encompasses narratives of violence, oppression, and historical trauma, presenting epistemological challenges. It forms a cornerstone for addressing themes like equity, inclusion, reconciliation, and democracy in education. Within the complex web of relationships involving teachers, students, the community, and institution processes, this research examines the ways K-12 teachers, particularly in Grades 1 to 8, navigate institutional tensions to address difficult knowledge topics within the framework of the Social Studies, History, and Geography (SSHG) curriculum. It also explores the opportunities that the curriculum offers for addressing such difficult topics. The analysis of difficult knowledge topics is anchored in the following thematic areas that were highlighted by my study participants: race and ethnicity, Indigenous perspectives and knowledge, immigration experiences, and gender identity and sexual orientation.

The theoretical frameworks underpinning the study—institutional ethnography and the exploration of difficult knowledge—enriched our understanding of the multifaceted dimensions in teachers' experiences of their pedagogical strategies and approaches. The exploration of difficult knowledge underscored the interplay of texts, discourses, and representation within the boundaries of the curriculum. It illuminated how my teacher participants bridge social and historical injustices with present-day contexts, fostering dynamic pedagogical spaces that encourage critical engagement. Institutional ethnography as an analytical framework illuminated the intricate social relations present within contemporary institutions, specifically in the realm of education. It also underscored the role of texts to reveal relations to systems of power, forming the basis of ruling relations that govern work across diverse contexts.

The implementation of the curriculum across the province is influenced by the significance of local context. My teacher participants do not simply follow the curriculum: they breathe life into it, making it a dynamic institutional text. Through their daily practices and curated pedagogical approaches, teachers interact with the curriculum as a "living" entity. While the curriculum provides a framework, teachers play a key role
in creating spaces for dialogues, discussions, and collaborations. They ensure that the topics are accessible to students from diverse backgrounds and experiences.

While the teachers in this study communicate on difficult knowledge topics in exceptional and creative ways, it is important to acknowledge that there are many others who do not engage in this work. My teacher participants were well aware that they were not representative and some of their colleagues opposed, or simply did not take on, this work. The teachers in this study represent an exceptional group, underscoring the need for ongoing research in how teachers, through their daily experiences and voices, navigate the different discourses in public education. Future research could examine the diverse experiences of educators representing various racial and ethnic backgrounds, socioeconomic statuses, and regional contexts in their approach to teaching difficult knowledge topics. Given the current shifts towards equity, inclusion, and reconciliation efforts in education in Ontario, future research in these areas could play a pivotal role in comprehending how teachers adapt their pedagogical strategies to meet evolving curriculum expectations and to address the changing dynamics of the world around them.

This research study is guided by the following general questions: How do teachers in Ontario navigate institutional tensions to address difficult knowledge topics within the boundaries of the Social Studies, History, and Geography (SSHG) curriculum? And what spaces does the curriculum provide for addressing such topics? In addition, the following research questions structured the thesis in the analysis of teachers’ experiences: What kinds of difficult knowledge topics did teachers identify during the open-ended interviews? What resources and strategies are teachers using to present and discuss knowledge within and beyond the parameters of the SSHG curriculum? What experiences have teachers had in discussing difficult topics in classrooms where students have different degrees of understanding and lived experiences with those topics?

The elementary curriculum emerges in this thesis as a quintessential institutional text, orchestrating and guiding the efforts of teachers throughout various communities in Ontario. The curriculum functions as a standardized text that aligns teachers' activities both spatially and temporally. Its "materiality," or the capability to exist in a consistent,
reproducible form—be it digital or printed—ensures its accessibility to educators everywhere (Smith 2005: 106). Essentially, the curriculum acts as a consistent, identifiable text that governs the institutional processes in educational practices. This governance model fosters a dynamic, ever-changing relationship between teachers and the curriculum. This not only highlights the curriculum's active role in shaping social interactions but also underscores its significance in educational contexts. This is particularly relevant in public education, where a variety of experiences are conveyed through different textual media such as educational resources, books, and policy documents. Further, the concept of "heteroglossia" recognizes the agency and voice of teachers, suggesting that the curriculum's authoritative nature does not entirely suppress their creative or negotiating abilities. The curriculum and the classroom are not monolithic but rather spaces where multiple perspectives, including those of teachers and students, coexist. This diversity is especially relevant to the complex topics of knowledge discussed in this thesis, highlighting that both the curriculum and the classroom are multi-voiced entities.

Further, the curriculum serves as an institutional text that guides teachers in addressing difficult knowledge topics, but its influence is not strictly top-down. Rather, it allows for a dynamic, heteroglossic (or bottom-up) interaction between the curriculum's guidelines and teachers' implementation of them. Through the analysis of the discourse of pedagogical space, it becomes evident that teaching is not a one-dimensional process but rather a complex interplay of voices, texts, and discourses that configure inclusive and equitable learning spaces. In this study, teachers leverage a rich tapestry of pedagogical strategies—encompassing literacy-based practices, dialogic engagement, collaborative inquiries, and community involvement—to navigate the complex pedagogical landscape. These pedagogical approaches collectively enrich the educational experience for teachers and students in addressing difficult knowledge topics.

The exploration of literacy strategies, particularly through picture books, storytelling, and dialogues, underscores the significance of literature as a transformative tool. In this study, teachers have demonstrated the power of literature to create meaningful relations between the teacher, students, and the text. Through the
metaphorical portals of “windows, mirrors, and sliding glass doors” students are able to connect with unfamiliar worlds and reflect upon their own experiences. Likewise, the dialogic strategies employed by teachers foster open conversations about difficult knowledge topics, providing students with discursive spaces to question, discuss, and understand complex and sensitive themes. The versatility and adaptability of dialogic approaches are evident in both formal classroom discussions and informal interactions, offering students opportunities to engage with a variety of perspectives. In addition, as revealed through collaborative inquiries, collaboration emerged as a powerful force in shaping pedagogical discussions. Teachers, through their collective efforts, activate the curriculum, transforming it from a static document to a dynamic framework that responds to the unique needs of their school community. This collaborative spirit extends beyond the classroom walls, involving parents, community representatives, and social media networks. Similarly, community engagement further illuminates how teachers link their students to the physical, cultural, and historical contexts of their surroundings. By bringing in guest speakers, organizing workshops, and establishing partnerships, educators weave the local environment into the educational journey, enriching students' understanding of their place in the world.

Nonetheless, the dimensions of time, work dynamics and emotional labour, and politicization converge as institutional tensions that shape teachers' pedagogical approaches and their interactions with difficult knowledge topics. Through the vivid narratives of teachers, this analysis explores the nuanced manifestations of these tensions, shedding light on the institutional barriers that teachers encounter, the emotional labour they invest, and the intricate interplay among these multifaceted dimensions. Time constraints due to workload pressures emerge as a central tension that significantly influences teachers’ efforts to navigate the complexities of difficult knowledge topics. It is noteworthy that half of the participating teachers are not currently active in teaching roles, which might explain a greater willingness among them to engage in extensive discussions about these topics, possibly due to a perceived sense of safety and distance from their current professional positions.
However, the institutional tensions teachers face are multi-fold. Beyond the institutional challenges brought about by the pandemic and the increasing politicization of educational institutions has become notably pronounced in recent years. Besides inherent curriculum complexities, broader sociopolitical factors, such as the increasing politicization of education spaces, compound these challenges. Notably, in Florida, an apparent backlash against themes of inclusion and equity can be seen in legislative moves to control educational content, emphasizing book bans and limiting discussions on gender identity and sexual orientation (Mazzei et al 2023). This institutional perspective on education gives rise to a politically charged environment, where teachers, regardless of their context, grapple with escalating anxieties and ambiguities stemming from political discourses and rhetoric. Teachers in Ontario are aware of these broader trends.

Adding another layer to this complex educational landscape is the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, which has reshaped teachers’ pedagogical environments. In relation to the teachers I interviewed, they are now contending with a new set of challenges imposed by the pandemic, which intersect with the institutional tensions highlighted previously. To begin, COVID-19 is still ongoing and is a critical factor for how teachers and students are experiencing the school environment. For instance, several teachers reflected how COVID-19 changed the way they take up space and foster relationships in the classroom, in the interaction with students, families, and broader community. For instance, the pandemic fundamentally shifted how teachers, colleagues, and students engage in in-person interaction to account for safety measures in place to decrease the chances of contracting the illness. Due to this, several teachers described how COVID-19 became politicized in the school environment due to rapid spread of misinformation online about the mask and vaccine-related mandates, resulting in more polarized opinions within certain school contexts. Similarly, several teachers described how the constant shift from virtual to in-person learning created confusion among teachers having to navigate multiple institutional policies that caused constant shifts due to factors within and beyond the parameters of the school. These examples illustrate how teachers are navigating external forces that extend into the school context, blurring the boundary between the school and the larger political context.
Furthermore, COVID-19 intensified work dynamics and emotional labour that teachers experience. The pandemic marked a sharp turn to virtual teaching and learning, which created another set of barriers that teachers faced during times of uncertainty and loss. In this context, it is apparent how agile and adaptable teachers in this study are in actively responding to the concerns, emotions, and feelings of their students, their families, and the school, while also facing the same fears, anxieties, and uncertainties themselves. This dynamic relation sheds light on the space between what the mandated curriculum sets out and what actually happens in the educational space day to day.

Similarly, teachers faced the added institutional tension of ensuring emotional support for students while meeting the curricular expectations. In this specific context, COVID-19 was itself rendered a difficult knowledge topic through the complexities it brought up in regard to social inequality, historical trauma and injustices, and systemic oppression.

This intensified dynamic, coupled with the constraints imposed by the pandemic, demanded teachers adapt, innovate, and employ even more resilient pedagogical strategies to facilitate these essential conversations. Even though COVID-19 was a catalyst for rapidly changing conditions in the school, teachers enacted their agency to apply creative perspectives to maneuver through the limitations imposed by the pandemic. To highlight, some teachers described how the pandemic opened doors to pursue professional development opportunities online, enabling them to widen their network of like-minded educators to share ideas and collaborate. Some other teachers reflected on how online learning opened up spaces for student participation, which facilitated the process to introduce difficult knowledge topics. For instance, during virtual teaching, students have the opportunity to turn off their camera, easing the process to be vulnerable and share their perspectives in a different kind of pedagogical space.

The school environment is not merely a physical space, but a dynamic realm where texts, bodies, and materials coalesce, shaping how teachers communicate on difficult knowledge topics within and beyond the parameters of the school and the curriculum. Through discursive practices, teachers navigate these complexities to foster creative collaborations among students from diverse backgrounds, emphasizing the importance of inclusive pedagogical spaces. In their toolkit, teachers harness an array of
methods — from dialogic exchanges and collaborative initiatives to grounding lessons in local contexts. Whether through the art of storytelling or community engagement, a common thread ties these approaches: centering students' unique identities and narratives within the educational discourse.
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https://www.ontario.ca/page/ontario-demographic-quarterly-highlights-first-quarter#section-related


https://ruor.uottawa.ca/handle/10393/39384


Toohey, Kelleen, Diane Dagenais, Andreea Fodor, Linda Hof, Omar Nu~Nez, Angelpreet Singh, and Liz Schulze. 2015. “‘That Sounds So Cooool’: Entanglements of


Appendices

Appendix A: List of Acronyms

OME  Ontario Ministry of Education

SSHG  Social Science History Geography Curriculum (2018)

MPP  Member of Provincial Parliament

TRC  Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada

OCT  Ontario College of Teachers
Appendix B: Ethics Approval

Date: 13 May 2022

To: Dr. Kim Clark

Project ID: 120563

Study Title: Communicating Difficult Knowledge in Schools and Museums in Ontario
Short Title: Communicating Difficult Knowledge in Schools and Museums in Ontario

Application Type: NMREB Initial Application

Review Type: Delegate

Full Board Reporting Date: 03 Jun 2022

Date Approval Issued: 13 May 2022 15:17

REB Approval Expiry Date: 13 May 2023

Dear Dr. Kim Clark,

The Western University Non-Medical Research Ethics Board (NMREB) has reviewed and approved the WREM application form for the above mentioned study, as of the date noted above. NMREB approval for this study remains valid until the expiry date noted above, conditional to timely submission and acceptance of NMREB Continuing Ethics Review.

This research study is to be conducted by the investigator noted above. All other required institutional approvals and mandated training must also be obtained prior to the conduct of the study.

Documents Approved:

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No deviations from, or changes to the protocol should be initiated without prior written approval from the NMREB, except when necessary to eliminate immediate hazard(s) to study participants or when the change(s) involves only administrative or logistical aspects of the trial.

The Western University NMREB operates in compliance with the Tri-Council Policy Statement Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans (TCPS2), the Ontario Personal Health Information Protection Act (PHIPA, 2004), and the applicable laws and regulations of Ontario. Members of the NMREB who are named as Investigators in research studies do not participate in discussions related to, nor vote on such studies when they are presented to the REB. The NMREB is registered with the U.S. Department of Health & Human Services under the IRB registration number IRB 00000941.

Please do not hesitate to contact us if you have any questions.

Sincerely,

Ms. Zoë Levi, Research Ethics Officer on behalf of Dr. Randal Graham, NMREB Chair

Note: This correspondence includes an electronic signature (validation and approval via an online system that is compliant with all regulations).
Curriculum Vitae

Name: Zsofia Agoston Villalba

Post-secondary
Education and Degrees:

Western University
London, Ontario, Canada
2015-2019 Bachelor of Arts

Western University
London, Ontario, Canada
2021-2023 Master of Arts

Honours and Awards:

Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC)
Canada Graduate Scholarship – Masters (CGSM)
2022-2023

Ontario Graduate Scholarship (OGS), declined.
2022-2023

Related Work
Experience

Graduate Teaching Assistant
Department of Anthropology, Western University
2021-2023
ANTH1020: Sociocultural and Linguistic Anthropology
ANTH2222: Debates in Sociocultural Anthropology
ANTH2212: Cultures of the Pacific

Conferences

Service
Co-President, Western Anthropology Graduate Society, 2022-2023
TA Union Representative, Western Anthropology Graduate Society, 2022-2023
Journal Editor, University of Western Ontario Journal of Anthropology, 2022-2023
Judge, Ontario Ethics Bowl, Regional Cases, October 2022