My research thesis title is “Imagining Literacy: Finding What is Real By Making Believe”.

When I asked Petra “What does the term literacy mean to you?” I never expected our interview would move away from the table and that we would both be dancing in the school’s administrative office while she talked about how literacy was storytelling with “every part of your body.”

What inspired you to do your research?
I am committed to exploring literacy in ways which build student agency, authorship, and identity (Galgut, Border, & Penwick, 2017) as I believe students can teach us, as educators, to consider the “life and the activity of literacy rather than its components and mechanisms” (Gallagher, 2015, p. 440). Currently, I am a Board of Directors member for a local Indigenous theatre company, Making Treaty 7 (MT7), where I assist with educational outreach as a settler supporter. Additionally, I’ve taught language arts and drama across grades 1-9 and acted as a Literacy Proficiency Teacher (LPT) across grades 3-9.

What is your research about?
My research investigates how students can use the arts to engage in complex literacy practices (Cowan & Albers, 2006) while developing their identity and creativity (Daniels, & Downes, 2014). My research is a phenomenological inquiry exploring if literacy in an arts-based environment comes across as more autonomous (skill based: reading, writing, speaking, and listening) or ideological (influenced by knowledge, identity, and being) (Street, 2006, p. 37). My work combines both phenomenological (DeHart, 2020) and performative (Norris, 2016) research methods to create what The New London Group (1996) calls a “multimodal, contextually responsive, and linguistically diverse literacy environment” (p. 71). Literacy in such an environment can be explored in various forms (e.g., written, spoken, embodied) and can be better related to the context of the school. Within my doctorate, I hope to further explore how drama can be used to engage in complex literacy practices within secondary schools?

How do you do your research?
My research often involves interviewing, journaling, character creation, and performances as a means to generate data about how students personify what literacy means to them. When performing, students have done monologues, song compositions, paintings, shadow puppetry, dance, and ventriloquism. They described literacy within a theatrical space as being about ambition, freedom, hope, speech, trust, connection, unveiling, and understanding (Campbell, 2019). These keywords became central in my understanding of literacy as “a purposeful social activity” (Lenters & Whitford, 2017, p. 122) that has “value beyond success in school” (Newmann, et al., 2001, p. 14). Students create this meaning through “lived experiences” meaning embodied and subjective engagements with “others” (Dreyfus & Wrathall, 2006). Therefore, I am making use of “Theatrical Phenomenology” which Johnston (2017) describes as bringing together drama (the study of dramatic texts), theatre (the process of creating a production), and performance with phenomenological research (p. 21).
What is the implication of your research?
Drama has been called an aspirational pedagogy (Anderson & Dunn, 2013) with the potential to enrich literacy through multimodal approaches (Albers & Sanders, 2010). Additionally, the arts can help students advocate for new literacy possibilities (Dunn & Anderson 2013). Multimodal literacy experiences are important as they move literacy “off of the page” and into a literacy event (Heath, 1982) this means that language arts teachers can help students develop emotional and personal connections to content through multiple literacies (Hansen, 2009), challenge their students to think about their language learning more critically (Shenfield, 2015), and create a more holistic and social literacy experience in their classrooms (Macro, 2015). Furthermore, research shows that inviting students into conversations around curricular concepts, such as literacy, increases the authenticity of their learning (Den Heyer, 2008) which can help to connect curriculum to students’ experiences of everyday life (Starratt, 1996, p. 70).

Works Cited
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*Literacy is about connection.*