



What perspectives are found in teachers who are helping students grow as leaders of a better future?

LENSES

Transformational teachers see themselves, others, and their work differently, which enables different teaching and learning.

OVERVIEW

Get started with the key ideas of lenses and a toolkit of key resources.

DISCOVER

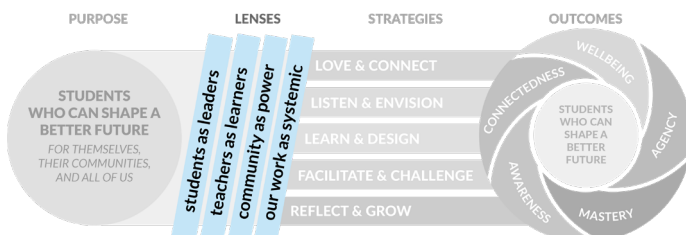
Virtually explore transformational classrooms to find distinguishing lenses.

LEARN & DO

Uncover the big ideas around the lenses that grow students as leaders who can shape a better future, and find resources, learning theory, self-assessments, and other teacher-development tools around lenses.

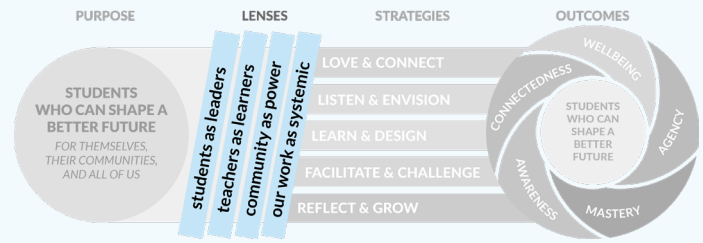
SHARE

Contribute to and explore incoming insights, challenges, questions, resources, and research.



OVERVIEW

We are finding clear patterns in the ways transformational teachers make meaning of their experiences. These patterns show up in how they interpret and make sense of their students, their own role as teachers, their communities, and the challenges we all face.



Lenses give not only a language but a perspective that we can bring into reflection, to coaching, to training—to all that we do. A unifying language that is more aligned with our vision.

Maria Azevedo
Co-founder and Head of Program,
Teach For Portugal



DISCOVER

Watch and hear many voices bringing these lenses to life. To start, check out [this](#) compilation of student, teacher, and family perspectives.

LEARN & DO

When we commit to growing students as leaders who can shape a better future, that purpose shifts our perspectives. And perspectives shift our actions.

These lens shifts are critical because they (a) help teachers navigate the complex and dynamic challenges of teaching, (b) help us see misalignment between our aims and our actions, and (c) surface assumptions about our students, ourselves, community, and work that we might not realize we carry.

Four ways of seeing and making meaning consistently show up in transformational classrooms:

REFLECTION TOOLS

We have gathered tools to help provoke reflections that help shift lenses.

We have developed three different reflection exercises designed to help you (or to help you help others) become more aware of your own perspectives in hopes of helping to enable “lens shifts.” You can find these tools in each of the lens “two pagers” linked below:

- [Polarities](#)—What is your perspective and why?
- [Benefits and Costs](#)—What value comes from having (and not having) this perspective?
- [Enablers and Inhibitors](#)—What conditions make shifting toward this lens possible?

<u>STUDENTS AS LEADERS</u>	<u>TEACHERS AS LEARNERS</u>
<p>We see our students as whole and intelligent people who are capable of shaping their own lives and the world around them</p> <p>... instead of as passive “vessels” to be filled with knowledge.</p>	<p>We see ourselves as lifelong learners who respond to challenges with curiosity, humility, and creativity</p> <p>... instead of as the sole source of knowledge and skill that students need.</p>
<u>COMMUNITY AS POWER</u>	<u>OUR WORK AS SYSTEMIC</u>
<p>We see communities as sources of power and wisdom and recognize that lasting change requires authentic partnership with students, families, and other educators</p> <p>... instead of as places with difficult challenges and unaddressed needs.</p>	<p>We see our work as challenging root causes of injustices that inhibit students’ potential—systemic barriers around us and limiting beliefs inside us</p> <p>... instead of as getting students to work extra hard to adapt to injustices around them.</p>

Lenses have profound implications for teacher development. Learning new knowledge can come through exposure and practice. Developing new ways of seeing and interpreting the world comes through disorienting experiences and reflection.



SHARE

Share your insights, questions, resources, and challenges related to teachers’ perspectives, lenses, and mindsets in our Co-Learning Padlet.

DISCOVER

Discover lenses for yourself

We think the best way to understand Teaching As Collective Leadership is to make the model your own, connecting it to your own context, your own experiences, and your own goals. So, clear your mind, settle in, and explore the stories below. See what patterns you discover.

Virtually visit two or three of the **transformational classrooms** below and consider how they are similar and different. Please visit more than one. The power of these virtual visits is in seeing their contrasts and connections so that global patterns and local contexts can come to light.



Learning to let go of fear

In this [video](#) from 2018, Óliver Jabato Rodríguez explains how when he let go of his fear of failure, he saw his students and himself transformed. To change what he was doing and how his students were learning, he found he had to shift his perspectives and ways of being.



Seeing the world with new lenses

Ako Mātātupu (New Zealand) trains participants to engage deeply with Maori communities. In this [video](#) from 2018, participant Jonathan Wieland shared that this training led to discovering assumptions he never knew he had and transformed his approach to teaching.



The lens through which we define success

In this [video](#) from 2018, then college student Elijah Miles challenged us to consider how identity, culture, and community shape how we see the world and the students we are working with.

GLOSSARY

Transformational classroom: These are classrooms where students seem to be on a different trajectory. They are making dramatic progress in their wellbeing, connectedness, awareness, agency, and mastery. That growth is transforming their paths and opportunities going forward.

REFLECTION TOOLS

- What patterns do you notice in how these educators see the world?
- What experiences have most shaped the lens they bring to their work?
- How are these lenses similar or different to your own lenses?
- What would it take to shift your own, or others' lenses?
- What other illustrations of these lenses come to mind? (Please share them with us!)



Gaurav and the garbage mountain

In 2009, Teach For India fellow Gaurav Singh spent a day working alongside the parents of his students. During [this](#) experience, he found his judgments about the community disappear. He replaced them with a clear idea of the systemic nature of cycles of inequity.

Want to explore more? Here are some fascinating stories to help you discover more about lenses:

- In 2018, [Brittany Packnett](#), a powerful leader from the Black Lives Matter movement, explored how internalized injustice shapes our daily actions.
- [Educators in New Zealand](#) shared in 2018 how the Maori concept of ako allows us to open up a relationship of genuine dialogue with students.
- [Miguel Nique](#) from Perú showed in 2018 how education can provide the tools to make us free.



HELP US DISCOVER & ILLUSTRATE

transformational teaching actions: [Submit](#) other examples.

LEARN & DO

Lenses are perspective-shifts requiring “unlearning” internalized assumptions about our students, ourselves, our communities, and our work—and they enable transformational action with students.

Every other chapter in this guide has separate “Learn” and “Do” sections. Why are they combined for this chapter? “Lenses” is our attempt to describe the place where learning and doing intersect. Learning IS the doing. Or, perhaps we should say “unlearning is the doing.”

Why “Lenses”?

Purpose Shifts Perspectives . . . and Perspectives Shift Practices

Most teacher frameworks and rubrics center around actions. They attempt to answer the question, “What do teachers DO to get the results we want to see in classrooms?” This approach leads many frameworks to focus on creating “toolkits” for teachers—a set of actions or tactics or “moves” to learn, master, and apply. Guidance for new teachers on *what to do* is enormously helpful.

And yet, we are hearing from our collective explorations of transformational classrooms (and from the transformational teachers themselves) that “ways of making meaning” are even more foundational than “ways of doing.”

We believe there are three reasons that lenses are proving so fundamental to transformational teaching and learning:

- 1. The Complex and Changing Challenges of Teaching.** Teachers work in dynamic, constantly shifting environments, and teachers make thousands of decisions every day. This may be unsettling for new teachers to hear, but *no rubric or checklist of teacher actions can ever cover all the decisions and judgments of great teaching.* Teachers’ “lenses,” *the way they see and make meaning of people and the context around them,* inform all those (often unpredictable) decisions.
- 2. Misalignment Between Inherited Systems and the Purpose of Growing Students Who Can Shape a Better Future.** Most education systems are not designed to grow students who can shape a better future. As a result, most transformational teachers are often making choices that are counter-systemic, choices not supported and encouraged by the systems around them. How transformational teachers see their students, themselves, their communities, and the education system around them gives them conviction and guidance when they find themselves “swimming upstream” against assumptions, policies, practices, and systems that are inhibiting students’ growth as leaders of a better future.
- 3. Unlearning Internalized Assumptions Creates Space for New Ways of Teaching and Learning.** From our own experience in and around schools and classrooms that were built for very different purposes, many of us have internalized assumptions that inhibit fully aligning our daily actions to growing students who can shape a better future. Sometimes we do not even realize how deeply ingrained these ideas are:
 - *Are we more comfortable seeing students as empty vessels to be filled by teachers’ knowledge? Or as whole people with the capacity to lead in the learning process?*
 - *How often do we default to seeing ourselves as sources of knowledge, instead of as facilitators of collective learning?*

GLOSSARY

Grow students: We have chosen the verb “grow” in this phrase because we feel it’s more active and meaningful than more traditional terms like “develop.” We made this intentional choice to inspire readers to pause and think about the opportunity and responsibility we have to help students be prepared for a very different future than the one that shaped conventional classroom models.

Leaders of a better future: This concept emerged years ago when Teach For All hosted a collective, year-long reflection process among students, teachers, teacher developers, CEOs, community leaders, and families about the aims of our network. One clear theme in those conversations was the changing and challenging world today’s students are inheriting, and the need for education to prepare them to face and improve that future for themselves and others.



For me, one of the most striking (and challenging) insights from these crowd-sourced studies is that teachers' perspectives may be even more important to great teaching than teachers' practices. When I think about the ratio of energy in teacher training that goes to practices over perspectives, I wonder if we need to make some significant changes.

Steven Farr

Teach For All's Global Learning Lab.

Click [here](#) to hear Steven's story about the moment he realized how critical lenses are to transformational teaching.

- What have we internalized about the deficits and challenges of our communities instead of seeing their assets?
- When are we assuming that our students' behaviors are problems within them, instead of reflections of systems around them?

When we (as teachers, teacher coaches, program designers, CEOs, parents, researchers, policymakers, or any adult concerned about education equity) commit to growing students' leadership, we often realize that assumptions we have internalized are in conflict with that purpose.

Simply stated, **purpose shifts perspectives. And perspectives inform practices.**

So What ARE "Lenses"?

Seeing Our Students, Ourselves, Our Communities and Our Work . . . Differently

As thousands of students, teachers, teacher coaches, community leaders, and others have virtually visited transformational classrooms across the Teach For All network, they have helped us identify four key patterns in the ways of seeing and "making meaning" of these teachers.

STUDENTS AS LEADERS	TEACHERS AS LEARNERS	COMMUNITY AS POWER	OUR WORK AS SYSTEMIC
<p>We see our students as whole and intelligent people who are capable of shaping their own lives and the world around them</p> <p><i>... instead of as passive "vessels" to be filled with knowledge.</i></p>	<p>We see ourselves as lifelong learners who respond to challenges with curiosity, humility, and creativity</p> <p><i>... instead of as the sole source of knowledge and skill that students need.</i></p>	<p>We see communities as sources of power and wisdom and recognize that lasting change requires authentic partnership with students, families, and other educators</p> <p><i>... instead of as places with difficult challenges and unaddressed needs.</i></p>	<p>We see our work as challenging root causes of injustices that inhibit students' potential—systemic barriers around us and limiting beliefs inside us</p> <p><i>... instead of as getting students to work extra hard to adapt to injustices around them.</i></p>
<p>A teacher who sees students as leaders who can shape a better future, for example, might set up her classroom for active debate where students learn from one another, rather than looking to herself as the sole expert (even though that action wasn't on any teacher rubric she'd ever seen).</p>	<p>A teacher who identifies as a learner might, for example, stop a lesson that is not working well and vulnerably examine his lesson's shortcomings with students, modeling the reflective leadership he hopes to grow in students (even though that action wasn't taught in his training).</p>	<p>A teacher who sees communities as power might, for example, engage parents in co-creating a vision for students rather than doing it on her own (even though her university courses had suggested that she set classroom goals on her own).</p>	<p>A teacher who sees her work as systemic might, for example, inquire more deeply about what's going on in a child's home environment, rather than jump to conclusions when facing a disruptive child (even though some of the teacher's colleagues are jumping to conclusions about the inherent potential of the child to succeed in school).</p>

To explore more deeply how our actions change when our lenses shift—and to find reflection tools to help shift our lenses—please check out each lens's "two-pager" with the links below:

STUDENTS AS LEADERS	TEACHERS AS LEARNERS	COMMUNITY AS POWER	OUR WORK AS SYSTEMIC
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How Do We Shift Lenses?

Shifting Lenses Often Comes from Disorienting Experiences and Reflection

Learning Theory

Lenses have profound implications for teachers and teacher developers. They inform, shape, and drive skills and actions. And yet, lenses do not shift in the same ways that skills and actions develop.

As we explore more in the [“Learning About Learning”](#) section of this guide, shifting our lenses does not happen the same way building skills does. We cannot tell a teacher to “see students as leaders who can shape a better future” and expect that to happen. And watching videos of someone with a particular lens does little to transfer that lens to the viewer.

While it is a bit of an oversimplification, it’s helpful to note that skills and actions are often (but not exclusively) developed by watching someone model the skills and practicing the skills. By contrast, lenses most often shift when we have disorienting experiences or relationships and have the opportunity to reflect and make new meanings of those experiences and relationships.

And, as crudely illustrated in the (oversimplified!) visual below, shifting lenses and growing skills can be part of a powerful, interrelated cycle of development. What we do (experiences) gives us fodder for reflection, which yields new learning and knowledge that we can then practice to create new experiences.



Conflicting Reflecting on Enablers and Inhibitors of These Lenses

Shifting our lenses is **deeper work**. It requires us to confront fears, biases, or hidden commitments that we (in some cases) didn’t even know we had and that might be serving our interests in ways that make us uncomfortable. For example, a teacher coming from a place of privilege may have lived an entire lifetime without any awareness of how vastly inequitable education systems are for many children. Coming to this awareness can be personally conflicting, as it may disrupt one’s view of oneself, one’s identity and place in the world, and one’s views of the world at large. Similarly, a teacher whose identities have long been disempowered and oppressed may have internalized self-doubt and assumptions that “get in the way” of her work to fulfill her potential.

Factors within and around us might make it challenging to shift a perspective. For example, in early beta tests of the Teaching As Collective Leadership Framework, we asked teachers to reflect on what stops them from seeing themselves as learners. We watched as teachers began to discover some of the **factors around them that inhibit their actions and progress**. “I have a head of school who doesn’t like me asking questions,” one teacher reported. “Some parents expect me to be an expert,” said another.

Becoming more aware of the “lenses” that inform how they see the world around them is also helping teachers discover the **factors inside them that inhibit their growth and development**. We hear things like “I may have internalized an assumption that teachers should know all the answers” or “When I get scared or uncomfortable because a lesson isn’t going well, I tend to try to take greater control and to take ownership of the learning away from students.”

I have mixed feelings about calling these ways of meaning-making and ways of being “lenses,” because you can take your glasses on and off easily. The reality is that we all make sense of the world through a complex set of internalized and socialized assumptions, and “switching” those is not easy. Certainly not as easy as putting on a new pair of glasses.



Anastassia Baichorova

Supporting organizations in the Teach For All network as they explore how to become more diverse, inclusive, and equitable

If we want students to learn differently, teachers must learn differently. If teachers are going to learn differently, they may have to unlearn some of what they think they know about teaching and learning.



Laurelin Whitfield

Leadership Coach and Facilitator, Teach For All

Most teachers were teaching as they had been taught, short class periods inhibited in-depth explorations, district-mandated curricula, and teacher evaluation systems were not aligned with efforts to emphasize critical thinking, and parental and college pressures mitigated against change. In fact, we came to think that many of the most successful classrooms, extracurriculars, and schools that we encountered were successful because they had found ways to buffer the expectations of the external ecosystem in order to create space to do something different.

Jal Mehta and Sarah Fine

from [In Search of Deeper Learning](#) (2020)



When they come to the program and when they leave the program, they're not the same. But we never had the words to describe this change—we just say they've matured, they've grown, they're different.

It appears to be a side effect, in a way, rather than an intended consequence.

Kristi Klaasmägi

Former CEO of Noored Kooli (Estonia)

Teachers can also use reflection on these lenses to discover **conditions that enable them to maximize their growth and development**. Some teachers realize the power of having “a teacher coach who asks me every week what I am learning.” Others share more personal, internal enablers: “My family and religious values emphasize service through humility” or “I have gone through discrimination as a child myself, and if I managed to get through that, I want to help others do the same.”

We are finding that having teachers reflect on each lens with the question, “What around me and inside me is inhibiting or enabling my ability to see the world in this way?” is a productive way to prompt important realizations that lead to meaningful growth and improved teaching.

In each of the lenses “two-pagers” (later in this chapter), you will find reflection exercises designed to help you (or help you help others) increase awareness of the perspectives you or others are bringing to our work. You’ll find three kinds of exercises:

- **Exploring Lens Polarities.** *Where am I today in my perspectives? Where am I usually? Why? What changes my position on the lens spectrum?*
- **Exploring Lens Benefits and Costs.** *When do I find these different perspectives valuable? What are the costs? What are the benefits and costs of the “opposite” lens? How do these shape my actions with students?*
- **Exploring Lens Enablers and Inhibitors.** *What external conditions and internal factors maximize and minimize my ability to maintain this lens? In these exercises, we try to figure out what allows us to be where we want to be on a lens spectrum.*

The Power of Lenses for Teachers, Teacher Developers, and Program Designers

As teachers and program designers across the Teach For All network experiment with these lenses, we are seeing their profound and interconnected implications for teachers, teacher coaches, and program designers. The links below lead to collections of insights, illustrations, resources, and tools for each of these audiences:

FOR TEACHERS

We are finding that lenses give a **powerful language for growing awareness of our patterns of thought (we could call this our “metacognitive awareness”)**. It helps us understand the ways we make meaning of the world that influence our daily actions. How can we use lenses to give new teachers a way to name, describe, and think about their own growth?

FOR TEACHER COACHES

The centrality of the lenses could **dramatically change classroom observation and coaching conversations**. Instead of focusing primarily on what we see teachers doing, the lenses give us a path to exploring the underlying, internalized perspectives in a teacher that are shaping those actions. “Coaching” shifts toward more “inner” and “adaptive” work, with deeper, longer-term, and more powerful conversations on new teachers’ growth and development.

FOR PROGRAM DESIGNERS

The importance of lens-shifting **could lead us to rethink many elements of how teachers are trained and supported**. Consider how different a pre-service training might be if it focused not just on practicing skills but also on shifting mindsets. Shifting your perspective, or the lens through which you see the world often entails uncovering blind spots (areas we don’t even know that we don’t know) and this requires a different learning approach.

A CLOSER LOOK AT STUDENTS AS LEADERS WHO CAN SHAPE A BETTER FUTURE

We see our students as whole and intelligent people who are capable of shaping their own lives and the world around them, instead of as passive “vessels” to be filled with my and others’ knowledge and skills.

Conventional classroom models assume students are “empty” and “passive” receivers of teachers’ knowledge and skills. But students are capable of discovering, constructing, and creating learning as well. And, if our aim is for students to become leaders of a better world, the classroom needs to be a place to develop and practice leadership, critical thinking, creativity, and collaboration.

What Happens When We See Students As Leaders Who Can Shape a Better Future?

Seeing all our students as “creative, curious, and capable” transforms our relationship to learning. Rather than bribing or coercing our students into learning, our challenge is to find ways to connect with them to cultivate intrinsic motivation and student voice, ownership, and leadership.

Here are some examples of the ways transformational teachers report that shifting their lens toward “students as leaders” has influenced their daily practice and accelerated students’ mastery:

- Curiosity Not Judgment**
What are your students’ previous experiences of schools? Seeing students as leaders who can shape a better future means seeing them as whole people with complex past experiences that shape their learning today. What ideas about learning or about themselves have they internalized? Stay curious about your students’ motivations and the roots of any disengagement.
- Learning as a Web, Not a Ladder**
Do you create curiosity in your subject? Seeing students as leaders means not seeing them as machines. Take time to think about how to introduce your subject in ways that inspire your students and have meaning and purpose. This might be connecting it to interests, questions, or concerns they already have or experiences they can relate to, or it might be about opening up new horizons in ways that puzzle your students. [Bloom’s Taxonomy](#) is a handy tool for helping us think and plan for different levels of learning.
- Get Out of the Way!**
Do you create space for student leadership in learning? It can be tempting to step in too quickly as a teacher or to move the lesson on too fast. Sometimes a little silence goes a long way. Teachers who facilitate deep learning create time and space for authentic conversation between and among students.

I became aware of the lenses I was actually seeing my students through and faced my own fears around it. We don’t question our mindsets enough and it’s painful to face them. Seeing students as leaders goes beyond seeing them leading their team in the classroom, it is thinking about how they are going to impact their own community and their families.



Andrea Padilla

Primary school teacher, Enseña Perú Alumna and Leadership Coordinator of Principals Program at Enseña Perú

Even though I am a small child, I can help the community. Even though we are small, we have a power, a strength inside us. Everyone has a strength inside them. They just need time to show their strength....



Kusum

Former Teach For India student. (Quote taken from Kusum: [“We have a power, a strength inside of us”](#), 2018)

More Voices:

- Charles Obore (Uganda) on [student leadership in the classroom](#)
- [Kids’ Education Revolution](#) (2018)

The best teachers we saw often started with a puzzling question or authentic overall task, then integrated the content and skill-building into the unit. As one observer quipped, most teachers saw the process as “Bloom as ladders”—basics now, higher-order skills later—whereas the most compelling teachers we saw seemed to have a “Bloom as web” approach, meaning that they were moving back and forth between lower-order and higher-order tasks.

Jal Mehta and Sarah Fine
from [In Search of Deeper Learning](#) (2020)



The first ingredient that I’m learning is that the adults involved in developing democratic education with teenagers have to unlearn all their previous notions about the role of students in education. No magic will happen unless adults can see each and every day a young person as a leader for today’s world, not—as people like to say—the future of our society. This is a profound shift in mindset that impacts all planning and implementation of education.

Franco Mosso
Former CEO & Co-founder at Enseña Perú, Alumni from the Harvard Graduate School of Education and Fellow from the Salzburg Global Seminar

REFLECTION TOOLS

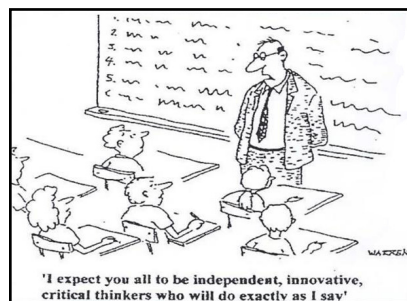
We have developed three different reflection exercises designed to help you (or to help you help others) become more aware of your own perspectives on **students as leaders who can shape a better future**:

- **Polarities**—What is your perspective and why?
- **Benefits and Costs**—What value comes from having (and not having) this perspective?
- **Enablers and Inhibitors**—What conditions (inside you and around you) make shifting toward this lens possible?

Shifting Lenses Changes the Questions We Ask...

Seeing students as leaders who are *whole and intelligent people who can shape their own lives and the world around them* influences how we “show up” in the classroom. We come into the classroom **asking different questions**:

- To what extent do I believe students can lead their own lives and shape the world around them?
- When teaching, how often do I lead from the front vs. stepping back to allow students to lead? What gets in the way of my doing this?
- Am I seeking and acting on feedback from students regularly?



Comic strip by the artist Warren

...Which Changes the Actions We Take

Those questions and the mental narrative that comes with them **changes our behavior**. A teacher who sees students as leaders who can shape a better future is more likely:

- To involve students in creating classroom norms, rituals, and systems
- To work toward a culture where students learn from each other
- To see assets students bring to the classroom rather than focusing on deficits

Why do we celebrate change-makers like Malala and Greta outside the classroom but not foster such leadership from inside the classroom?

The power of these lenses is that they **enable actions** aligned with growing students as leaders who can shape a better future. In the next chapter on **STRATEGIES**, we explore the 25 actions that seem to distinguish the classrooms we have studied. While a “Students as Learners” lens boosts all of the Teaching As Collective Leadership actions, the following may be especially enabled:

LOVE & CONNECT	LISTEN & ENVISION	LEARN & DESIGN	FACILITATE & CHALLENGE	REFLECT & GROW
BUILD RELATIONSHIPS	BROADEN PERSPECTIVES	BUILD CRITICAL KNOWLEDGE	FACILITATE EFFECTIVELY	TAKE CARE OF YOURSELF
FOSTER BELONGING	HOST DIALOGUE & DISCUSSION	PLAN BACKWARDS	MANAGE NORMS & RITUALS	PAUSE & REFLECT
NURTURE CULTURE	PARTNER WITH FAMILIES & COMMUNITY	VALUE LEARNER VARIABILITY & OWNERSHIP	FOSTER COLLECTIVE DISCOVERY	FIND & FOSTER ALLIES
KNOW YOURSELF	CRITICALLY EXAMINE HISTORY	EXPECT HIGHER-ORDER THINKING	FLEXIBLY ADJUST COURSE	SEEK FEEDBACK
BE HUMAN	COLLECTIVELY ENVISION SUCCESS	LEVERAGE LEARNING THEORY	MONITOR LEARNING & PROGRESS	LEARN & UNLEARN

A CLOSER LOOK AT TEACHERS AS LEARNERS

We see ourselves as lifelong learners who respond to challenges with curiosity, humility, and creativity, instead of seeing ourselves as the source of knowledge and skill that students need and as the implementer of “what works.”

We need to unlearn the idea that power lies only in the hands of teachers and pay attention to the complexity of the learning process where the two main roles, student and teacher, must be interchangeable.

Mălina Luciana Flocea
Teach For Romania Alumna

I used to think I had solutions for my students’ crises. But even though we live in the same city, they experience very different crises. I shouldn’t walk into my classroom with answers, I should walk in with questions. I am not a superhero, they are. This is where the idea of student leadership comes from.

Sara Kassab
Passionate educator in Lebanon who works to ensure quality holistic learning is delivered to all students regardless of their background

In conversations with transformational teachers, we frequently hear some version of “I hope my students are learning as much as I am. I became a great teacher when learning began flowing to and from students.”

We are also learning from these teachers that *teaching as learning* is key to *loving teaching*. This work is more fun, exciting, and fulfilling when you are learning alongside and from your students.

What Happens When We See Teachers As Learners?

Rigorous lessons involve teachers and students exploring topics together, with the teacher genuinely interested and invested in the learning journey.

Here are some examples of the ways transformational teachers report that shifting their lens toward “teachers as learners” has influenced their daily practice and accelerated students’ mastery:

BRING POWERFUL QUESTIONS

What question is the lesson answering? Take time to explore why the lesson feels important and meaningful. Author Parker Palmer argues that the most inspiring lessons are dominated not by the student or teacher, but by the subject, the great thing that guides the inquiry.

DRAW ON YOUR INSPIRATION

What is your most powerful learning experience in your subject? If you have felt deeply inspired by your subject in the past, think back to when and why, and bring that energy to your classroom. Why do you care about the subject? What awakened your passion? Who were the people who inspired you to be an apprentice in your field? How can you create a similar learning journey for your students?

BE AN APPRENTICE

Whom can you learn from? How can you create space and time for your own learning? Can you create a peer support group? Open your class to visitors and fresh perspectives who will give you the “critical friendship” you need to help you learn and improve. Try to shift from any sense of defensiveness, to embrace failure and experimentation in service of continuously improving your practice as a teacher.

LISTEN AND CARE

Do you care what your students think? Do you want to learn from them? Are you genuinely interested? Students have a great radar for inauthenticity. If you really care about what they have to say and treat them with respect, including respecting them enough to challenge them, they will respond with engagement.



In 2012, Ignacio Brea (Argentina) asked for students' feedback, discovering solutions to his own challenges and serving as [a powerful model](#) for constant learning.

- [Letting Go of Fear of Failure](#) (Spain, 2018)
- [Unlearning Historical Narratives](#) (Navajo Nation, 2017)
- ["Ako": Teaching IS Learning](#) (Maori, New Zealand, 2018)
- [Vulnerability and Healing in the Classroom](#) (Romania)
- [Overcoming Experiences of Inequity](#) (Uganda)

In their research done for their book [In Search of Deeper Learning](#), Harvard professors Jal Metha and Sarah Fine found that "Achieving deeper learning is challenging because it requires significant unlearning. For traditional teachers, moving toward giving their students deeper experiences in their domains entailed a substantial loss: of some breadth in pursuit of depth, and control, as teachers realized that being a teacher didn't always mean talking in front of the class. Making these shifts was difficult and painful, and even for our most successful teachers it often took many years."

Consider this powerful case study illustrating that point:

In more recent years, Mr. Fields had begun letting students pick the passages to discuss: "Actually learning to withdraw from the conversation, I think, is really essential. Learning to ask the question with passion because you do care about it, but to say, 'The reason it matters to me doesn't have to be the same reason that it matters to you'..."

*He found that decentering his role had both increased students' engagement—they were talking about the passages that mattered to them—and signaled his respect for his charges as people whose interests were as important as his own. This shift, while now foundational to his approach, had not come easily because it meant reconceiving his role as a teacher: "When I first started doing this, it felt revolutionary because I decided to go into the room and abandon what I knew about the text. I was no longer the authority on the text. I'm the teacher. **Your identity as a teacher is wrapped up in being the one who knows. I think that there's something terrifying about that because, for a teacher, you're walking in, saying to students, 'Well, I have my own thoughts about it but they're not actually what matter,'...** I think that's really scary for a lot of teachers 'cause basically what you're doing then is you're walking into a big question mark. In fact, you are the question mark."*

REFLECTION TOOLS

We have developed three different reflection exercises designed to help you (or to help you help others) become more aware of your own perspectives on **teachers as learners**:

- [Polarities](#)—What is your perspective and why?
- [Benefits and Costs](#)—What value comes from having (and not having) this perspective?
- [Enablers and Inhibitors](#)—What conditions (inside you and around you) make shifting toward this lens possible?

Shifting Lenses Changes the Questions We Ask...

- *How do I react when things get uncomfortable or tough? Do I approach these difficult situations with control or curiosity?*
- *How am I modeling the outcomes I want to grow in my students?*

...Which Changes the Actions We Take

Those questions and the mental narrative that comes with them change our behaviors. A teacher who sees herself as a learner is more likely:

- *To stop a lesson that is not working well and vulnerably examine her shortcomings with students, modeling reflective leadership.*
- *To design lessons where she is discovering alongside students.*
- *To seek critical friendship and feedback to guide daily improvements in the classroom.*

The power of these lenses is that they **enable actions** aligned to growing students as leaders who can shape a better future, especially these:

LOVE & CONNECT	LISTEN & ENVISION	LEARN & DESIGN	FACILITATE & CHALLENGE	REFLECT & GROW
BUILD RELATIONSHIPS	BROADEN PERSPECTIVES	BUILD CRITICAL KNOWLEDGE	FACILITATE EFFECTIVELY	TAKE CARE OF YOURSELF
FOSTER BELONGING	HOST DIALOGUE & DISCUSSION	PLAN BACKWARDS	MANAGE NORMS & RITUALS	PAUSE & REFLECT
NURTURE CULTURE	PARTNER WITH FAMILIES & COMMUNITY	VALUE LEARNER VARIABILITY & OWNERSHIP	FOSTER COLLECTIVE DISCOVERY	FIND & FOSTER ALLIES
KNOW YOURSELF	CRITICALLY EXAMINE HISTORY	EXPECT HIGHER-ORDER THINKING	FLEXIBLY ADJUST COURSE	SEEK FEEDBACK
BE HUMAN	COLLECTIVELY ENVISION SUCCESS	LEVERAGE LEARNING THEORY	MONITOR LEARNING & PROGRESS	LEARN & UNLEARN

A CLOSER LOOK AT COMMUNITY AS POWER

We see communities as sources of power and wisdom and recognize that lasting change requires authentic partnership with students, families, and other educators instead of as a place with difficult challenges and unaddressed needs.

Many of us have internalized the persistent and unjust narrative that marginalized and oppressed communities are faulty, broken, and in need of saving by outside forces. Transformational teachers report, however, that once they “open their eyes” to community assets, collective wisdom, and potential, their approach to the classrooms changes dramatically.

What Happens When We See Community As Power?

Teachers who connect what is happening in their classroom to the assets, values, and traditions of the communities they work with can draw on a deep well of knowledge and support. Those connections help make the learning relevant and meaningful to students.

Here are some examples of the ways transformational teachers report that shifting their lens toward “community as power” has influenced their daily practice: and accelerated students’ mastery:

- [Community as the Unit of Change](#) in Haiti (2018)
- [Mosaic of Global Voices on Community as Power](#) (2018)
- [Indigenous Education](#) on the Navajo Nation
- [Co-teaching with an Aboriginal Elder](#)
- [Parents Engagement](#) in deeper learning

BRING COMMUNITY INTO THE SCHOOL

What opportunities are there to break down walls between school and community? Learning does not only happen in school. There are so many sources of insight within our communities, and the more students feel a sense of connection between their learning and the world outside, the better.

BUILD COMMUNITY SUPPORT

What do people in the community want for their children? Parents and community members can be the most powerful advocates for change in a school. Take the time to understand what they want for their children, what their experience of school has been, and how they understand their future prospects. Is the current school system delivering for them? By starting with questions about the purpose of education, you can build up a shared vision with others, and then identify ways to meet that vision.

FIND COMMUNITY IN YOUR SCHOOL

Who are potential allies? Teacher and professor Taylor Delhagen has the following advice... “Find somebody at your school who has power and ask them to mentor you. Ask for space to take risks. Find ways to create space to take risks.”

CREATE PARTNERSHIPS

What organizations can support the learning of your students? Some of the most powerful learning happens in partnership with local employers, museums, and civil society organizations. What existing relationships can you build on? How can you help set these up?

When we view the community as power, our classrooms become a mirror of the community itself. And so you are not showing up having to be someone different at school, whether you’re the teacher or the child, you’re just showing up as yourself. That sets everyone up to teach and learn more effectively.



Denisse Arias

Former Director of Equity & Belonging at Teach For All and Teach For America Alumna

At Teach For Nepal, we call ourselves a movement. What do we mean when we say it’s a movement? Like whose movement? Who’s leading this movement? You can’t really say a movement has begun unless the ones who are affected are the ones who are leading the movement.



Swastika Shrestha

Co-founder, CEO and former Head of Training at Teach for Nepal. Click [here](#) to hear Swastika’s story

We cannot achieve anything without working with our student’s families and the larger community. And that’s what Lugowski said, he said it to Albert, he said it to Piaget, even the conductive theories say that you have to link yourself in some other way with the community, because you can’t leave aside that fundamental factor of what social is. So being social not only develops the person but also develops the cognitive part.

Roger Garcia

Enseña Perú Alumnus

Only the hood can heal the hood. Our communities need to lead the way.

Michelle Johansson

Michelle is a Tongan mother, theatre-maker and educator working in Aotearoa New Zealand. She served as Kaitiaki at Ako Mātātupu: Teach First NZ, as a Director of Māia Centre for Social Justice and Education, and as the Creative Director of the Black Friars

REFLECTION TOOLS

We have developed three different reflection exercises designed to help you (or to help you help others) become more aware of your own perspectives on community as power:

- **Polarities**—What is your perspective and why?
- **Benefits and Costs**—What value comes from having (and not having) this perspective?
- **Enablers and Inhibitors**—What conditions (inside you and around you) make shifting toward this lens possible?

During the COVID-19 pandemic, after more than 260 days of distance education, we could start in-person classes on the second floor of the church of the community!

The collective effort and leadership of the parents allowed us to be the first class in the district to start in-person classes. The parents lead partnerships with the priest and the major. They prepared our classroom. They ensured that our space was safe. They guaranteed that every student came to class ready to learn.

For me, Nuevo Progreso and its members are power, inspiration, and an invaluable source of learning.

Alexandra Vassallo
Enseña Perú Alumna



Shifting Lenses Changes the Questions We Ask...

When we recognize that lasting change requires authentic partnership with students, families, and other educators we “show up” in the classroom differently. We come into the classroom **asking different questions**:

- *How well do I understand the history and context of this community?*
- *What assumptions and beliefs do I have about the community? Where do they come from? Could they be limiting me from fully supporting my students?*
- *When I interact with parents and other community members, do I come with an agenda or do I listen openly? What gets in the way of my listening?*

...Which Changes the Actions We Take

Those questions and the mental narrative that comes with them **change our behavior**. A teacher who sees community as power is more likely:

- To engage parents in co-creating a vision for students rather than imposing one
- To connect objectives to real-world opportunities and challenges in students’ lives
- To live in and connect with the community in ways that help foster meaningful relationships with students and families

The power of these lenses is that they **enable actions** aligned to growing students as leaders who can shape a better future, especially these:

LOVE & CONNECT	LISTEN & ENVISION	LEARN & DESIGN	FACILITATE & CHALLENGE	REFLECT & GROW
BUILD RELATIONSHIPS	BROADEN PERSPECTIVES	BUILD CRITICAL KNOWLEDGE	FACILITATE EFFECTIVELY	TAKE CARE OF YOURSELF
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KNOW YOURSELF	CRITICALLY EXAMINE HISTORY	EXPECT HIGHER-ORDER THINKING	FLEXIBLY ADJUST COURSE	SEEK FEEDBACK
BE HUMAN	COLLECTIVELY ENVISION SUCCESS	LEVERAGE LEARNING THEORY	MONITOR LEARNING & PROGRESS	LEARN & UNLEARN

A CLOSER LOOK AT WORK AS SYSTEMIC

We see our work as challenging the root causes of injustices that inhibit students potential and challenging systemic barriers around us and limiting beliefs inside us, instead of seeing our role as getting students to work extra hard to overcome their deficits to succeed in the system around them.

Remember those drawings of children on bicycles that we used to explore different paradigms of education equity? And how different children in those drawings had more and less conducive paths to success?

When our aim is to close achievement gaps between our students and children born with distinct advantages, we tend to put responsibility for overcoming that injustice on the children who are “behind.” But as transformational teachers, we are learning to insist that many of the barriers to learning assumed to be in students are actually reflections of systemic challenges around them.

What Happens When We See Our Work As Systemic?

Inextricably intertwined with issues of diversity, equity, and inclusion, the “our work as systemic” lens is about seeing often-hidden rules and expectations that society applies to children of certain identities and not to children of other identities. This “work as systemic” lens is about the often-unspoken motivations and purposes behind systems influencing our students. It’s about seeing often-hidden rules and expectations that society applies to children of certain identities and not to children of other identities.

Here are some examples of the ways transformational teachers report that shifting their lens toward “community as powers” has influenced their daily practice and accelerated students’ mastery:

- [Roots of Inequity: Unlearning Implicit Bias](#) (Global, 2018)
- [Colonial Roots of Systemic Inequity](#) in Uganda
- [What Lenses Do I Have?](#) (New Zealand, 2016)

PUSHING HARDER vs. COLLECTIVE EFFORT

How do systems actually change? The emerging science of systems change suggests that increasing pressure on one part of a complex system is unlikely to change the system, but a critical mass of people in the system doing things differently will change the system.

EMPATHY WITH STUDENTS

How can we work together to change the systems inhibiting our growth? “Zooming out” to see ourselves as part of and frustrated by the same systemic pressures as our students can be a way to build collective learning and action. How are some students’ problematic behaviors and the teacher’s frustrations with them actually emerging from the same root cause? How can they take that on together?

INNOVATION

How can we learn and experiment in ways that help us evolve beyond the system we work in? As products of the existing education system, unless we make a conscious effort to experiment we will simply perpetuate what we know and experience.

The point of education is not to escape poverty. The point of education is to end it. But we don’t educate in this society. We school. We have built a system of schooling, and schooling is the process by which you institutionalize people to accept their proper station in life. Education is the process by which you teach people that they can fundamentally change society.

Jeff Duncan-Andrade

Founder of Roses in Concrete Community School in the USA. (Quote taken from [“Jeff Duncan Andrade The game is rigged \(inequity by design\)”](#), 2017)

I perceive my responsibility as centered around questioning. The teacher should initially establish a connection and then progressively introduce tension to a bearable level, enabling things to be set into motion.

Nicole Ames

Enseña Perú Alumna

REFLECTION TOOLS

We have developed three different reflection exercises designed to help you (or to help you help others) become more aware of your own perspectives on work as systemic:

- **Polarities**—What is your perspective and why?
- **Benefits and Costs**—What value comes from having (and not having) this perspective?
- **Enablers and Inhibitors**—What conditions (inside you and around you) make shifting toward this lens possible?

Systems Thinking for Collective Leadership

The deep changes necessary to accelerate progress against society’s most intractable problems require a unique type of leader—the system leader, a person who catalyzes collective leadership. The entrenched and historic systemic injustices undermining the potential of many children across the world demand we think about leadership development that goes beyond the reach of current existing institutions and their fixed structures. The article [“The Dawn of System Leadership”](#) by Senge, Hamilton, and Kania, describes three core capabilities (and a subset of guiding ideas) that foster collective leadership:

- Seeing the larger system (the forest not only the trees), to build “a shared understanding of complex problems.”
- Fostering reflection and more generative conversations (through a learner-centered approach, critical mirror exercises) for “building trust where distrust had prevailed and for fostering collective creativity.”
- Shifting the collective focus from reactive problem solving to co-creating the future.

Shifting Lenses Changes the Questions We Ask...

If we see our work as systemic, we come into the classroom **asking different questions**:

- What are the things that make it harder or easier for someone to succeed and where do they come from? What are the root causes of inequity?
- How do we define success? Whose interests does this vision include and exclude?
- Whom do I represent in the system? What biases and assumptions do I bring?

...Which Changes the Actions We Take

Those questions and the mental narrative that comes with them **change our behaviors**. A teacher who sees our work as systemic is more likely:

- To recognize students’ misbehavior as expressions of frustration, fear, or trauma responses to challenges around them, and seek their root causes.
- To take time to critically examine the roots of inequity in the community.
- To realize that her own experience has led her to internalize assumptions about her students or herself or her community that she needs to work to “unlearn.”

The power of these lenses is that they enable actions, especially these:

LOVE & CONNECT	LISTEN & ENVISION	LEARN & DESIGN	FACILITATE & CHALLENGE	REFLECT & GROW
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BE HUMAN	COLLECTIVELY ENVISION SUCCESS	LEVERAGE LEARNING THEORY	MONITOR LEARNING & PROGRESS	LEARN & UNLEARN

SHARE

Make your voice heard: Help us evolve and improve these ideas and resources

Teaching As Collective Leadership is a collective effort. It has been developed through contributions from thousands of people—teachers, coaches, students, families, researchers, and others from all around the world. Please join us in continuing to evolve this work by sharing your perspective.

Below is our “digital bulletin board” which we are constantly updating with the input of generous readers who share their ideas. Please take a moment to click [here](#) on our **Co-learning Padlet** to contribute your thoughts, questions, challenges, illustrations, and links.

LENSES GENERAL INPUT

The teachers who led these compelling classrooms differed from most of our teachers on a number of interrelated dimensions, which we call their stance toward teaching: they saw the purpose of what they were doing as less about covering material and more about inducting students into the work of their field; they privileged depth over breadth; they saw students as creators and not simply receivers of knowledge; they saw failure not as something to be avoided but as a necessary part of learning; and they tried to create an atmosphere of rigor and joy rather than compliance.

Jal Mehta and Sarah Fine

From *In Search of Deeper Learning* (2020)

Reflect at every moment to change the lenses with which we are seeing, and analyze if our gazes are correct. I must have spaces for constant reflection, even more so if we think that the dynamics of communities are changing due to circumstances and context. In that line, all the time we must enter and understand the realities of the community. We must know how important it is to have the student's vision to understand the change they want and what is really important for them.

Ricardo

Bolivia

I adjust the lenses to my own reality. They allow me to look into my daily challenges from a different perspective. This allows me to change my actions.

Juliana Canastra

Alumna of Teach For Portugal

I think that to a large extent I had some ideas or mentalities that are promoted in this space. What has changed is the level of awareness, keeping it present and visible since many times due to the sense of urgency, we overlook our deepest convictions.

Frederick

Panama

The lenses are not something that you have or do not have, they can be adjusted or “cleaned.” There are processes that you had to go through to later realize, learn, and grow in a broader or deeper perspective. Not all of the above is bad.

Jaira Alencastre

Enseña Perú

TEACHERS AS LEARNERS

I am also very aware of the “spectrums of leadership” that we saw (with the extremes of individual leadership and collective leadership); and I leave with the intention of positioning myself in a more conscious and fluid way from now on.

Jaffid

Chile

Teaching is first and foremost learning, and egocentric as it may sound, the teacher's chief area of study is herself or himself. Only as I discover my own prejudices, face my own fears, give play to my own strengths, and compensate for my deficits rather than denying them can I help my students do the same. It is both the blessing and the curse of teaching that the learning never ends. Every day, I must confront what I am as a teacher and what I hope to be. To do less is to be less of a teacher.

Author Unknown

People say that the teacher is an eternal learner, I learn from him and he learns from me.

Emmanuel Alexandre

Teacher-leader Anseye Pou Ayiti

That I can face my own mistakes from the past to see them as lessons and learnings and not as moments that I must hide so as not to face them. Before, I had never seen the opportunities that I lost when I was a PEP like this and I felt very frustrated because of that, it was something that constantly accompanied me and now I see it differently; it does accompany me but under a different lens.

Andrea
Perú

My mistakes are part of the process, as long as I reflect on them and get a result that allows me to continue moving forward.

Greta
Bolivia

U-School For Transformation by Presencing Institute: <https://www.u-school.org/>

STUDENT AS LEADERS INPUTS

In the program, we have three mandatory human development conversations across the two-year program: at the start, in the middle, and before they graduate. The human development conversations are spaces for our teacher fellows, not only to raise wellbeing concerns, but at the same time check in on their personal growth and development or personal leadership competencies, such as their self-awareness, their self-management, and their self-regulation skills. I just recently had my third human development conversation with a graduating cohort. So basically that conversation entails us stepping back and looking at their overall growth and development in their plan, in their perspective. That space is for us to really or for me to hear their perspective of how they've grown and changed the most in the fellowship program.

We really anchor our training on three focus areas, namely human development, transformational teaching, and teacher training. For teachers to really start with themselves and to really be able to lead themselves before they can lead their classrooms and then lead their community. We look at it as a ripple effect.

It's really like striking that balance, or having that equilibrium, and learning to manage themselves first before they can manage their students and manage their classrooms. Because from the stories that I heard from their year One, they tend to get overwhelmed easily. They tend to get stressed.

Vina Leonardo
Teach For The Philippines

I used to think I had solutions for my students' crises. But even though we live in the same city, they experience very different crises. I shouldn't walk into my classroom with answers, I should walk in with questions. I am not a superhero, they are. This is where the idea of student leadership comes from. I should walk into the classroom and ask my students, "What is your superpower? What do you want to do with it?" First step is their understanding they do have superpowers.

Sara Kassab
Educational Mentor at Teach For Lebanon

Every single big issue we solved in our country has been solved by young people. The civil rights movement, the peace movement, the LGBT movement, the women's movement—the young have always done it. They can be the change makers. They have the power to do it. We have to face history to make history.

Dolores Huerta
Leader in the Farmworkers' rights movement, U.S.

I think the most important thing has been to highlight the power of communities and students. We do not have nor are we the solution, we only accompany them and encourage them to generate positive change, respecting their roots, customs, and knowledge. At the same time, be receptive, listen and learn from the other.

On the other hand, how do we train our fellows; do we really show them this? How much autonomy do we provoke with our system? What should we focus on more?

Melisa
Chile

COMMUNITY AS POWER

I had this goal that I am going to make my students have more income, take care of their parents, have a stable job, have everything that city people have. I was so young and naïve. But then when I went up there, and I talked to villagers and students, I unlearned that this is not what they want. It's not my job to define what they need to be. It's not me who can tell them what they should do.

Pao
Teach For Thailand

My perception of how to interact with communities has changed a lot, the importance of seeing beyond the participants and making the focus stronger on the students and everything that they can strengthen the organization.

Anahí
Bolivia

OUR WORK AS SYSTEMIC

It's this system that was not designed for us, our people were never at the table when it was created, but it still exists and it's all we know. We're trying to redefine that. Our hope is what we do here will unite other communities to do the same.

Kayla Begay
Navajo Nation

*This [workbook](#), from *The Society for Organizational Learning* and the leaders behind *Theory U*, leads you through a three-part journey of sensing, presencing, and realizing to achieve profound systems change.*

This toolkit provides resources to create a plan for action mapping, appreciative inquiry, and more.

Systems thinking allows individuals and organizations to understand the complex relationships and contexts surrounding social issues in order to best influence and navigate the system. [FSG's Systems Thinking Toolkit](#) features helpful resources to create a plan for action, and to learn and refine as you go.



Contribute to our “Digital Bulletin Board” by sharing your thoughts, questions, challenges, validations, illustrations, and links by creating a note in our Co-learning Padlet ([here](#)).