RESEARCH ARTICLE

The power of introspection: A collaborative autoethnography reflecting on group dynamics when working with students as partners

Nikita Kalwani, Faculty of Education, Western University, Canada. Amanda Kelly Ferguson, Lori Goff, MacPherson Institute, and Kim Dej, Office of the Provost & Vice President (Academic), McMaster University, Canada.

Contact: nkalwani@uwo.ca

ABSTRACT

This article presents the results of collaborative autoethnographical (CAE) research that investigated the group dynamics and processes of an undergraduate student, a post-doctoral fellow, and two senior administrators engaged in a students-as-partners (SaP) project. The CAE methodology allowed us to systematically, collaboratively, and iteratively analyze reflections on key takeaways from our experiences. We identified empowerment through learning and support and putting values into practice as essential components of working with SaP in mixed-role groups. This CAE research also substantiates the importance of negotiating existing power dynamics, as we identified a hierarchical structure within our group that we did not address during the actual project. Based on our group's dynamics, we suggest that active reflection and communication regarding intersecting identities, shared and individual values, and an openness to learning and growth for all group members are critical components of working toward equitable partnerships with SaP.

KEYWORDS

group dynamics, students as partners, collaborative autoethnography, student empowerment, power dynamics

This research article uniquely contributes to the students-as-partners (SaP) literature by focusing on a partnership where an undergraduate student worked in collaboration with both staff and senior administrators in a group setting. We, the co-authors of this article and the four partners comprising the research partnership team, specifically investigate how our different roles relate to the team dynamics of partnership. Employing collaborative autoethnography (CAE), we evaluate our experiences of partnership to examine the impact of our specific group configuration on facilitating connections within an inherently hierarchical group structure.

The Student Partners Program (SPP), run by the Paul R. MacPherson Institute for Leadership, Innovation and Excellence in Teaching (MI), provides undergraduate and graduate students who are interested in pedagogical research with the opportunity to form meaningful

partnerships with faculty, senior administrators, instructors, and staff on projects that enhance teaching and learning at McMaster University. The program follows an award-based model that provides funding to compensate student partners for their contributions to the partnership and project work.

This project involved a 2-year partnership that included an undergraduate student, two senior administrators, and a post-doctoral fellow who was introduced to the project 6 months after it had started. The goal was to introduce student perspectives to advancements made to student evaluations of teaching (SET) at McMaster University. The undergraduate student partner, Nikita, was recruited to the project by senior administrators Lori and Kim through the SPP in June 2020. During this first semester, Lori and Kim identified the original directions and goals of the project, and Nikita collaborated with them to help shape the project's focus and her involvement. Nikita was still in the final year of her undergraduate degree when Amanda, the post-doctoral fellow, was brought onto the project in January of 2021. Nikita remained a partner on the project after graduating that June. She continued to develop project activities and work with Lori, Kim, and Amanda until July 2022.

Nikita reviewed literature, analyzed student response data, collaborated with post-doctoral fellow Amanda to co-design project processes and materials, conducted interviews with a variety of stakeholders, and used results from her analyses to propose recommendations for how the end-of-term course evaluation tool could be revised to reflect students' learning experiences and to promote a more engaging process for both students and instructors. Lori, Kim, and Amanda were all directly involved in editing, revising, and consulting on project materials, directions, and timelines, as well as recruiting potential participants for quality improvement research and knowledge mobilization.

Nikita is now a master's student at a different post-secondary institution. Lori has been the director of the MacPherson Institute since 2019 and remains in this role. As director, Lori has worked with student partners on several projects. As a professor, program director, and vice-provost, Kim has also worked with student partners on various projects. Kim was vice provost (faculty) for most of this project and has recently taken on the role of vice-provost (teaching and learning). Amanda has a background in early and elementary special education as an Ontario certified teacher and registered early childhood educator. After joining MI as a post-doctoral fellow, she was both new to the university and the project. In her role as a post-doctoral fellow, she was considered staff.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The study of group dynamics, based on the concept proposed by Cartwright (1951), explores patterns in the interactions of individuals within groups and is relevant to reflection on the development and processes of small groups. Group dynamics theory describes a five-stage model that highlights the distinct roles and behaviours individuals adopt when collaborating to achieve goals (see Bonebright, 2010; Tuckman, 1965; Tuckman & Jensen, 1977). The forming stage marks a group's inception, storming involves interpersonal conflicts and aligning with like-minded individuals, norming establishes informal behaviour rules, performing denotes task execution, and adjourning signifies a group's termination after accomplishing its objectives.

Regarding group dynamics in work with SaP, it is important to note that while the concept of SaP includes pre-determined roles (e.g., students, staff, faculty), partners' roles and identities may not be as rigid and can change over time and throughout the project (Bell et al., 2020). With groups comprising individuals with different roles, a sense of in-betweenness can be experienced by partners (Meacham et al., 2013). When working within SaP projects, for example, students who are contributing to academic work that aims to help other students may feel as though they are in an in-between or liminal state, where they can access and contribute to insights from both the inside and outside (Bell et al., 2020; Cook-Sather & Alter, 2011; Meacham et al., 2013). In these mixed-role partnerships, it is critical to note that power operates in complex ways, where some participants may be newcomers to specific communities (e.g., academia) or have substantial power in some communities and less in others (Meacham et al., 2013).

The SaP literature discusses the importance of rethinking traditional power dynamics in partnerships between students and staff or students and faculty in higher learning settings. However, the goal of rethinking these traditional power roles and sharing power does not necessarily remove power dynamics within these partnerships (Cook-Sather et al., 2018; Matthews, 2017; Matthews et al., 2018). The literature has identified challenges associated with power relationships in these partnerships, including negotiating existing power dynamics between students and staff and combatting existing power structures (Acai et al., 2017; Harvey et al., 2022; Marquis et al., 2016; Mercer-Mapstone, Dvorakova, Matthews, et al., 2017). Sharing power and control is important, as is a balance between the guidance provided by faculty/staff to students and students' self-direction in SaP projects (Harvey et al., 2022; Marquis et al., 2016). SaP projects can lead to meaningful outputs and relationships between students and staff while simultaneously recognizing and highlighting challenges associated with negotiating power (Matthews, 2017; Matthews et al., 2018).

When considering power dynamics in partnerships, intersectionality is a critical framework. Intersectionality is a term originated by professor Kimberlé Crenshaw and developed within Black feminist theory to explicate the social, political, cultural, and economic system that facilitates and benefits from privileging whiteness, racialized sexism, and gendered racism (Crenshaw 1989, 1991). Intersectionality posits that social positions lie on a hierarchy of social power and that individuals' experiences of oppression are jointly shaped by interrelated cultural, structural, sociobiological, economic, and social contexts (Crenshaw, 1991; Howard & Renfrow, 2014). A broader understanding of the meaning of intersectionality allows us to recognize that power relations shape all social relations (Collins, 2019). Applying an intersectional lens to analysis relies on the understanding that social inequalities are interdependent and must thus involve identifying the intersecting power relations that influence social relations and individual and collective experiences of social inequality (Collins, 2015; Collins & Bilge, 2020). Despite attempting to challenge existing power structures, SaP inherently differentiates between students and academics, which are roles associated with different levels of social power (Mercer-Mapstone, Dvorakova, Groenendijk, et al., 2017).

The SaP literature recognizes that power is an inherent factor of SaP interactions (Bovill et al., 2016; Matthews, 2017). It is critical to recognize that power structures and inequities are likely to be related to authority, expertise, and institutional status and that institutional and

socially constructed roles (e.g., of staff, faculty, and students) can change and are often overlapping (Kehler et al., 2017; Weller et al., 2013). Researchers within this field have described power in SaP relationships as a concept that can be understood and shared through communication in partnership (Cook-Sather et al., 2018; Cates et al., 2018; Matthews, 2017). Verwoord and Smith (2020) developed the P.O.W.E.R. framework, a tool for ongoing reflective practice that theorizes power in student, staff, and faculty partnerships from an intersectional approach. This framework involves: considering the (P)ositionality of partners; being (O)pen to reflecting on and learning from multiple perspectives and ideological assumptions; having the (W)illingness to invest time to engage in partnership and relationship building while reflecting on past experiences with partnership; rejecting (E)thnocentricity while reflecting on assumptions; and engaging in (R)eflexivity to understand the limitations of knowledge and how individuals shape and are influenced by their environment.

We aimed to engage in a reflexive process, not directly following but similar to that of the P.O.W.E.R framework, that focused on examining our group dynamics in the context of our inherent power dynamics, roles, and identities. This article also takes a novel approach to reflecting on the group dynamics in a mixed-role SaP project by considering how the in-between states of some group members may have helped translate some aspects of partnership across a clear power hierarchy.

METHOD

In order to systematically reflect on experiences within this partnership, we chose to engage in collaborative autoethnography (CAE). This approach involves autoethnography, a reflexive research process that positions the researcher within the study as both author and subject (Coffey, 2002). Autoethnography (AE) "uses personal experience to describe and interpret cultural texts, experiences, beliefs, and practices" (Adams et al., 2017, p. 1). Collaborative autoethnography "extends the reach of AE" (Lapadat, 2017, p. 590) and involves a team of two or more researchers who work together to reflect on personal experiences and interpret autoethnographic data systematically (Chang et al., 2013). All partners in CAE reflect on experiences within the partnership, placing value on personal experiences and relationships with each other, combining this with systematic analysis to identify broader sociocultural experiences (Ellis et al., 2011) while working with SaP.

To begin the process of systematic reflection and analysis in our research project, Nikita created an initial framework for reflective questioning, which we adapted from Mercer-Mapstone, Marquis, and McConnell (2018), who adapted a critical incident analysis framework from the University of Brighton (2011). Nikita and Amanda worked together to modify and edit this initial framework. Subsequently, Nikita, Amanda, Lori, and Kim met to edit and finalize the reflective questions further (see Table 1). This framework created a guide for our narrative reflections within the context of our learning, professional positionality, and factors influencing our behaviour, perspectives, and interactions with each other.

Table 1. Collaborative autoethnography framework for reflective questioning

CONTENT AREA	QUESTIONS
Describing/Framing	Phenomenon: Describe in detail your partnership practice without interpretation or judgement.
	Context: What were the significant background factors to this experience? Why did it take place, and what was its purpose?
Reflection/Positionality (Who/What)	What identity(ies) were you consciously aware of at the time? What identity(ies) do you believe were at play during this interaction in hindsight? If multiple, which identity was most salient? How were they interacting?
	What were you trying to achieve? Explain your goals going into the experience (related to the topic, the partnership).
	Why did you behave as you did? Explain the role you played/how you approached the partnership. ○ What were the outcomes of your actions for yourself and others?
	How did you feel about the experience when it was happening?
	To what extent did your actions realize your understanding of partnership?
Analysis: Influencing Factors (Why)	What factors influenced your behaviour in interactions with other partners? Please speak to your identity(ies) and other considerations: e.g., prior experiences, societal expectations/ideologies/assumptions, context
	What was the dynamic of the partnership(s) and what factors influenced this? ○ How did you perceive your role and the role of others?
Learning & Action (How)	How do you feel about this experience now?
	Has this experience changed your way of understanding yourself and/or your perception of partnership? ○ What new questions, challenges or issues has it raised? Given the chance, is there anything you would do differently next time? ○ How will you follow up on this experience in order to put your learning into practice?

All partners individually wrote reflections on their experiences, beliefs, assumptions, and perceptions during the partnership using this agreed-upon framework. Individual reflections

were sent to Nikita to review for the first phase of analysis. Nikita analyzed reflections from all partners using the method of thematic analysis, which is the process of identifying patterns or themes within qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Employing the guide developed by Maguire and Delahunt (2017), based on Braun and Clarke's (2006) framework, Nikita followed a six-phase plan for thematic analysis to code and identify themes and sub-themes across the personal reflections (Table 2).

Table 2. Six-phase plan for thematic analysis

STEP	TASK
Step 1	Become familiar with the data
Step 2	Generate initial codes
Step 3	Search for themes
Step 4	Review themes
Step 5	Define themes
Step 6	Discuss

Note: Adapted from Maguire and Delahunt (2017).

After Nikita applied the six-phase plan for thematic analysis, she met with Amanda to discuss and revise her work. The group then followed a process of collaborative and iterative thematic analysis that allowed all partners to be involved in analyzing and identifying key takeaways from their experiences in this partnership (see Figure 1).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The reflections and collaborative group discussion allowed for the refinement of a thematic framework. Table 3 outlines key themes and related sub-themes we identified based on our analysis of reflections and group discussions.

Empowerment through learning and support
We identified autonomy and agency, skill development and growth, and guidance and support as integral thematic elements of our reflections that contributed to developing our working relationships during the initial stages of our partnership. These thematic elements align with previous findings in SaP literature, which have reported similar positive outcomes for students, including increased ownership of learning, critical skill development, and increased confidence (Mercer-Mapstone, Dvorakova, Matthews, et al., 2017).
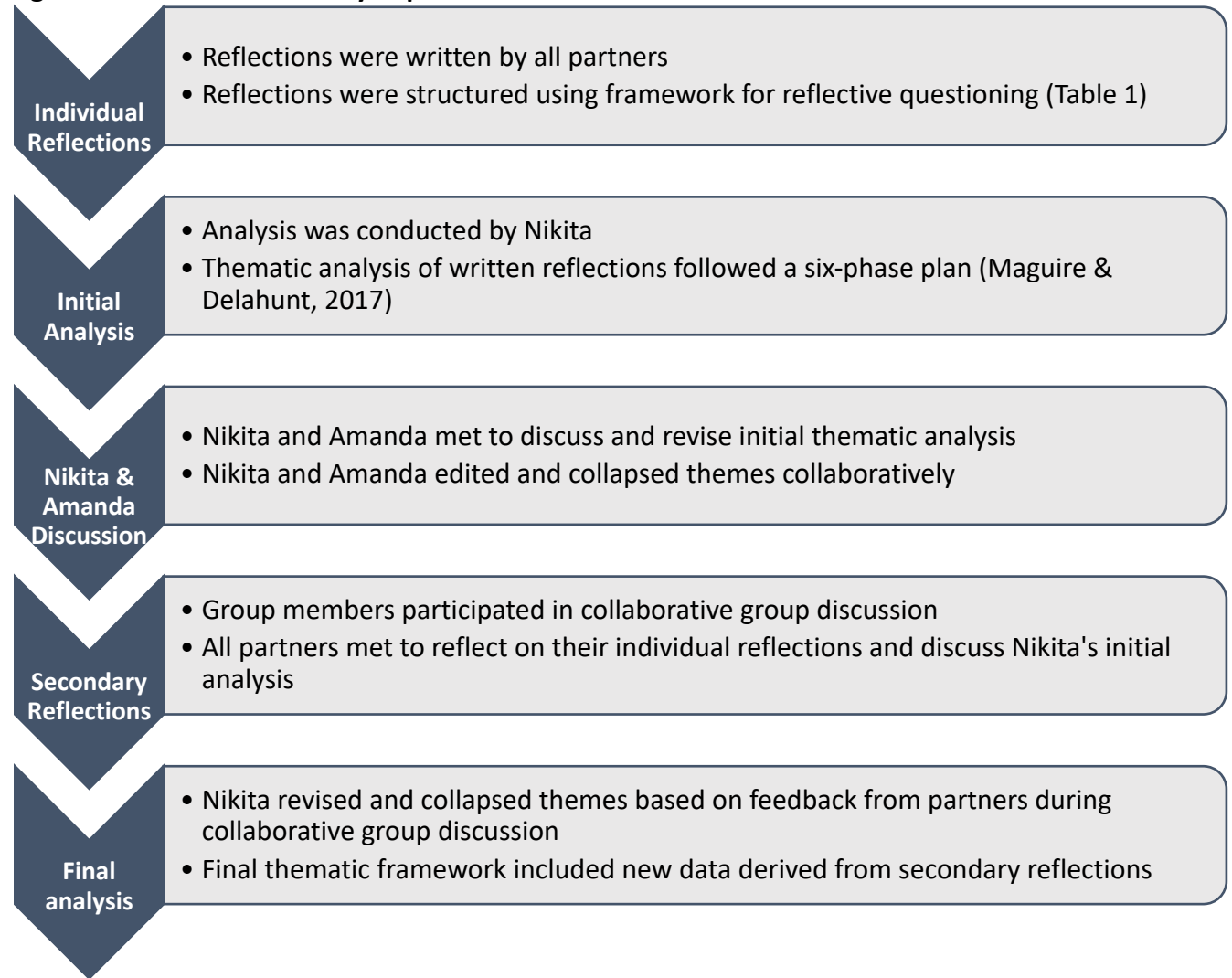
Figure 1. Reflection and analysis process

| Individual Reflections |
| • Reflections were written by all partners |
| • Reflections were structured using framework for reflective questioning (Table 1) |

| Initial Analysis |
| • Analysis was conducted by Nikita |
| • Thematic analysis of written reflections followed a six-phase plan (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017) |

| Nikita & Amanda Discussion |
| • Nikita and Amanda met to discuss and revise initial thematic analysis |
| • Nikita and Amanda edited and collapsed themes collaboratively |

| Secondary Reflections |
| • Group members participated in collaborative group discussion |
| • All partners met to reflect on their individual reflections and discuss Nikita's initial analysis |

| Final analysis |
| • Nikita revised and collapsed themes based on feedback from partners during collaborative group discussion |
| • Final thematic framework included new data derived from secondary reflections |

Table 3. Refined thematic framework

THEME	CHARACTERISTICS
Empowerment through learning and support	• Autonomy and agency of student partner throughout project • Recognizing student partner's skill development and growth over the course of the project • Providing guidance and support to student partner
Intersecting identities	• Lack of discussion regarding personal and professional identities • Recognized power dynamics within group
Putting values into practice	• Shared values, including mutual respect, transparency in communication, and collaboration • Changing dynamics and evolving roles and relationships throughout the partnership

Kalwani, N., Ferguson, A., Goff, L., & Dej, K. (2024). The power of introspection: A collaborative autoethnography reflecting on group dynamics when working with students as partners. *International Journal for Students as Partners*, *8*(1), 89-107. https://doi.org/10.15173/ijsap.v8i1.5682

Lori reflected on her perspective of agency in student partner projects, sharing that "many students thrive when given the opportunity to share their perspectives." Nikita, Lori, and Kim reflected that, early on during the forming stage of the project, Nikita played a role in refining project goals. As the project progressed, Nikita was recognized by all team members as playing a larger role in developing project goals, building on her previous work to contribute to research questions, and taking the project in new directions. According to Nikita, "playing an active role in the project was empowering, as it allowed me to develop research-related skills and develop confidence in my ability to work independently and make recommendations." Amanda, who worked closely with Nikita during the project, emphasized the importance of supporting Nikita and "wanted to make sure that Nikita had the opportunity to have her needs addressed." Lori also reflected on the importance of providing support and encouragement to student partners, especially at the beginning of a partnership, with both Kim and Lori discussing the importance of providing the student partner with agency to a greater degree.

Nikita's empowerment seemed to manifest differently depending on the working relationship (either with staff or senior administrators) and the skills she developed. For example, Nikita talked about how her relationship with Lori and Kim helped her feel empowered to become more independent when working on project activities and gain confidence in her skills (e.g., increased confidence in conducting thematic analysis). Lori and Kim discussed the importance of providing Nikita, and student partners in general, with increasing autonomy and agency relating to the project's direction and activities. Throughout the project, Nikita suggested ideas and worked with partners to execute project activities, including independently conducting interviews with students, educational developers, and instructors to inform course evaluation resources and dissemination plans.

Amanda's addition to the team reintroduced a stage where Amanda, Nikita, Kim, and Lori's working relationships with each other and as a group were developed. Nikita and Amanda began to work more closely together, and meetings with Lori and Kim moved to a monthly frequency. In the student–staff relationship with Amanda, Nikita discussed feeling empowered to share ideas comfortably and to have collaborative conversations during their meetings. Amanda discussed the importance of ensuring Nikita was heard and had her needs addressed. The differences observed in the nature of student–staff and student–senior-administrator relationships—where Nikita gained confidence in her research skills through her dynamic with Lori and Kim while gaining confidence in her value as a collaborator through her work with Amanda—may be due to variation in the levels of direct involvement in the student partner's work. The fact that all partners were in different stages of their career development may have also influenced these relationships. This influence relates to intersecting identities and power dynamics, which we will discuss further as a theme identified within our reflections.

Each team member spoke about Nikita's growing confidence, skill development, and agency throughout the project. Based on our reflections and discussions, we argue that collaborating with staff and senior administrators can empower student partners and give them an active role in their education. Empowering students may improve motivation, participation, and problem-solving skills (Bonney, 2018), suggesting the potential lasting impact of collaborative relationships between faculty and/or senior administrators and student partners.

Intersecting identities

Our intersecting personal and professional identities and how they related to power dynamics within the group were a common theme in our reflections, perhaps emerging during what Tuckman (1965) identified as the storming stage. Rather than the interpersonal conflict that characterizes the storming stage in Tuckman's (1965) model, this stage of our partnership was characterized by the existence of hierarchical power structures that led to the avoidance of conversations about personal and professional identities and intersectionalities. While Nikita, the student, had as much power and agency within the group to meaningfully shape the project as Lori, Kim, and Amanda, sharing this power did not eliminate the power dynamics associated with our social positions and identities (Cook-Sather et al., 2018; Matthews 2017; Matthews et al., 2018). Our roles at McMaster were inherently associated with different levels of social power (Mercer-Mapstone, Dvorakova, Groenendijk, et al., 2017), which impacted our dynamics with each other.

We did not often discuss our personal and professional identities during the project. Upon reflection, we identified the missed opportunity to explicitly discuss the impact of our identities and positionalities on our motivations and the project's goals. Lori reflected on a "missed opportunity to talk about personal identities, positions, [and] privileges, even though there has been opportunity to do so in the context of the project." Partners reflected on their identities and positionalities when writing individual reflections after completing the project. In retrospect, many of us discussed the impact of our personal, professional, and social identities on our goals related to the project. For example, Nikita discussed her identity as a second-generation South Asian immigrant as a factor that, in hindsight, informed the value she placed on making learning accessible. She commented that while she did not recognize this during the partnership, her project activities and ideas often related to encouraging inclusive and accessible teaching practices by facilitating transparency between instructors and students. Kim discussed her previous experiences as a professor and researcher in traditional supervisor/student contexts. She shared that while she was intentional in adopting a partnership relationship when beginning to work with SaP—entering with the intention of assuming a different attitude, identity, and behaviour as a partner—it took time to "move away from the supervisor role" she had previously held when working with students. Amanda shared that her identity as an educator informs not only her teaching philosophy but also her values and understanding of partnership. She reflected on her commitment to "intentional relationship building, collaboration," and "taking an emergent and iterative approach to all of [her] work."

We all discussed power dynamics in the partnership. Given the differences in our social, professional, and academic roles, we acknowledged the existence of a perceived or inherent hierarchy in the group. Amanda, Kim, and Lori knew that their personal and professional identities and social locations, as Amanda stated, "afford privilege and voice in settings where the student partner may experience less voice or power." In this case, Lori and Kim recognized that their roles and titles (i.e., director and vice-provost) have influence and can impact how others approach and interact with them. Nikita, the student partner, acknowledged a power imbalance due to this perceived hierarchy, although she perceived less power imbalance in her partnership with Amanda, the post-doctoral fellow. She thus felt more comfortable directly

collaborating with Amanda (e.g., co-designing processes and materials and meeting more consistently). This lessened power imbalance may be related to the frequency with which they worked together directly and to Amanda's role in the middle of the group's hierarchy (i.e., holding less social and professional power than Kim and Lori). Considering the SaP literature, Amanda reflected on being in an in-between or liminal state, where she felt as though she was still in a transitional space between student and staff (e.g., Cook-Sather & Alter, 2011; Meacham et al., 2013).

Perceived hierarchies or power dynamics when working with student partners may be inherent based on the varying social positions and identities of students, educators, and administrators. We all discussed the factors in our dynamics that may have worked to mitigate—not eliminate—power imbalances. Student partnership projects, in general, attempt to acknowledge and challenge this power dynamic. In this case, Nikita joined the project independently through MI rather than through a course where a project would impact her grades. We agreed that we all had voice, agency, and autonomy in shaping the project, including the student partner. Nikita and Amanda also perceived less power imbalance in their dynamic, resulting in more collaborative work and conversations.

Putting values into practice
In our conversations, we reflected on the importance of mutual respect, and we have recognized this as a necessary component of building trusting relationships within partnerships—especially during the norming stage (Tuckman, 1965)—where all partners feel valued for their ideas and contributions. Lori and Nikita discussed the importance of being comfortable sharing ideas and their vulnerabilities in a partnership setting. Amanda discussed the influence of her core philosophy that "centers on a strong belief that every person has value and deserves to be treated with compassion and respect." Similar to the foundations of community-engaged work, Kim reflected on the importance of "building trusting relationships, committing to mutually beneficial and respectful partnered work, valuing lived and diverse experiences, and a commitment to enact change with the work done." With the value of mutually beneficial and respectful partnered work in mind, we have also identified collaboration as an important facet of relationship building. In our reflections, we discussed the importance of collaboration in leading the team and the project in new directions, learning from one another during team meetings and brainstorming sessions, and determining the impact of our work.

The shared values we identified regarding communication and transparency involved checking assumptions and communicating ethically. Checking assumptions underscores the importance of open communication with all partners. Lori and Kim specifically mentioned their intention to check in with Nikita throughout the project regarding her needs and to clarify roles and expectations regarding student partner projects at the beginning. When checking assumptions, we reflected that it is essential to recognize that partnerships between students and senior-administrators or staff are expected to have differing dynamics, responsibilities, and working relationships from traditional supervisory or mentor/mentee relationships. Kim discussed that in future work, she will "aim to talk more explicitly with all partners to ensure that there is understanding of the premise of the student partners program" as "initial conversations are important to show that the student partners program is more than just a name, but the core principled approach." Communication was another value we identified as integral to our

partnership. Kim reflected on the impact of language and that "students who enter into an explicitly partnered relationship may come in with different attitudes or may develop these over time." Lori discussed a strategy of checking in with students to see what she may do to support them better and employed this in her partnership with Nikita, Kim, and Amanda. Based on our reflections, communication ethics within our group involved identifying preferences in communication styles, setting up consistent methods of communication, respecting different perspectives, and being open to discussion. These shared values were significant factors influencing our group cohesion and functioning during the norming stage of our team's development.

Our roles, responsibilities, and working relationships during the partnership were dynamic and often evolving, especially as the partnership progressed. Most of us reflected on acclimatizing to new roles when entering the partnership and throughout the project. As we discussed values and found ways to put them into practice, we acknowledged the importance of changing dynamics that represented a shift in responsibilities as the partnership evolved and thrived in Tuckman's (1965) performing stage. Nikita reflected on the shift from being a new student to the project to fully becoming a student partner—from working on assigned tasks at the beginning of the partnership to playing a significant role in the project's direction, activities, and goals by the performing stage. Amanda reflected on the experience of joining an established team and becoming a staff member at a new institution, namely taking on the role of working closely with and providing support and guidance to a student partner. Based on our reflections, we perceived the project as initially being led by Lori and Kim and then becoming student-led by Nikita with Amanda's direct support. According to Lori, "the project scope evolved several times, with Nikita weighing in significantly on its evolving directions. The project team evolved to include Amanda and other areas of post-doctoral research. Together, Amanda and Nikita elevated the quality of the project."

Equally important to this shift in responsibilities was a shift in our attitudes regarding our changing roles and dynamics. Kim reflected on her history of working with students in traditional supervisor relationships. In her experience, it took time and intentionality to shift from the supervisor/student mentality to "reimagine the relationship" when working with SaP. When entering partnered work, especially with SaP, an awareness of attitudes towards partnership and working with SaP is necessary. Amanda, the post-doctoral fellow, was also in a unique situation where she was adapting to her new role as a staff member after being a PhD student. In this case, adapting to the circumstance and mindset of no longer being a student was an active process. Nikita recognized that although she graduated halfway through the project, her role and agency within the project remained the same, as did her perspective and mindset as a student partner. Throughout the project as a student partner, she learned to recognize that her contributions had value, and she gained increased confidence in the skills necessary to carry out her ideas. During the group analysis and reflection meeting, we discussed that developing the student partner's independence, initiative, and skill-related confidence is key in student partner projects and may be distinct from other experiences (e.g., thesis or capstone projects).

During our secondary reflection meeting, Lori wondered whether the alignment of values and actions may signify a successful partnership. When working with SaP, can we quantify success in this way? Autonomy was a value we identified in partnered work through reflection and group discussion. We identified the importance of equitable partnerships where all stakeholders—

especially the student partner, who historically has less autonomy and relational power in academia (Kehler et al., 2017; Weller et al., 2013)—have the agency to work both collaboratively and independently to impact the project's direction, goals, and deliverables. We recognized that our team dynamic had shifted throughout the project to reflect this value and that Nikita had adopted a significant role, contributing ideas and taking the project in new directions.

We diligently coordinated group meetings involving all four partners to advance the project. Nikita and Amanda also met as a dyad to work on project tasks, while Lori, Kim, and Amanda also met with each other regarding other projects and would touch base about this one. We recognize that as the project advanced, Nikita took on more of a leadership role, rather than participating in a fully equal partnership between all group members. In their reflections on partnership, Mercer-Mapstone, Dvorakova, Groenendijk, et al. (2017) recognized that they "were thinking about partnership as an ideal or aspiration" (p. 6) and had intrinsically linked leadership and power, in their case resulting in a lack of leadership within their partnership. Reflecting on our group's dynamics, we may have also approached partnership as an ideal, but not in the same way as Mercer-Mapstone, Dvorakova, Groenendijk, et al. (2017). SaP research has been found to be student-centric, as it heavily values and emphasizes positive student outcomes rather than staff or faculty outcomes (Mercer-Mapstone, Dvorakova, Matthews, et al., 2017). In our case, placing a heavy emphasis on empowering Nikita and providing her with power through autonomy was a driving factor of the leadership role Nikita took on as the project developed, which she perceived as empowering.

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

Concluding the project

Engaging in this collaborative autoethnography may have served as the beginning of adjourning this group. According to Healey, Flint, and Harrington (2014), partnership is a relationship in which all involved are actively engaged in and gain from the process of learning and working together to foster engaged student learning and teaching enhancement. The focus of partnership should thus include the process of working with and learning from each other rather than solely on the product of the project. By this definition of partnership, all partners should be learning. In our reflections, we all touched on the project as an opportunity to support the skill development of Nikita, the student partner. Amanda wanted to give Nikita "the chance to shine and develop confidence and skills in meetings." Nikita herself discussed how the partnership allowed her to understand the value of her contributions, increasing her confidence in her abilities.

It is important to note, however, that what Lori, Kim, and Amanda learned from the partnership was not initially discussed in detail within their individual reflections. Kim brought this up during the collaborative group analysis meeting, which brought about the interesting question—why was this not considered or explicit in their reflections?

Our initial lack of consideration regarding Lori, Kim, and Amanda's learning and growth during the project may reflect our identified power imbalances. In a systematic review of SaP in higher education, Mercer-Mapstone, Dvorakova, Matthews, et al. (2017) identified that student outcomes are reported considerably more in the literature than staff outcomes, which may indicate the perception of SaP work as a "strategy to enhance student experience" (p. 29). SaP literature has also found that student partners often bear a double burden of justification, where

they must continually justify their engagement in the scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL) while they are simultaneously expected to produce high-quality work in the area (Wilson et al., 2020). This phenomenon may have influenced Nikita's role in leading the project toward the end as, collectively, we viewed this as an opportunity to support her and demonstrate that she produced quality work and was justified in her role, rather than viewing it as an equal partnership where every group member could develop their skills.

Although Kim, Lori, and Amanda focused on empowering Nikita and providing her with the autonomy to develop skills and independence, in our group discussion, we acknowledged that it is equally important that senior administrators and staff partners learn and grow from the partnership. We agreed that this should be a recognized and clearly communicated expectation of partnerships with students, senior administrators, and staff—which is in line with Healey et al.'s (2014) argument that working with SaP "is a way of doing things, rather than an outcome in itself" (p. 7). Kim suggested that this is a necessary aspect of equitable partnerships, to be mindful that "we're all learning—not the same skills, but important skills." The group recognized that power dynamics played a role throughout the project, given that it took intentional moments of reflection from Kim and Lori to recognize their own learnings, as they were more focused on supporting Nikita's development and overlooked reflecting on their own.

During the group discussion, Lori shared that her learning during the project and from partners resulted in a growth in perspective and a new way of thinking about partnership. This learning encouraged her to invite feedback along the way to ensure her actions supported the other partners. She expressed that taking moments to pause like this in a partnership context differed from her perception of supervision relationships. Amanda recognized that she built on her negotiation and communication skills to navigate the project and considered this ongoing learning. Kim shared that she has come away from student-partnered work with much more learning, citing an openness to learning as an essential starting point for all partners in this work. Overall, we all agreed that learning should be an expected and active process for everyone in the partnership and that an openness to learning is necessary among all partners.

Implications

The following table outlines takeaways from this project that may inform relationships between partners in other mixed-role SaP projects (Table 4). The major takeaways are grouped based on the project's stage (i.e., at the beginning, during the partnership, and at the end). While these stages do not directly follow Tuckman and Jensen's (1977) model, the structure outlined below better suited the configuration and setting of our group. This structure can align with Tuckman and Jensen's (1977) stages while being more general and potentially more applicable to different group configurations in SaP projects.

Collaborative autoethnography as a methodological approach facilitated the systematic and iterative analysis of our experiences collaborating on a SaP project. Contextualizing these takeaways through different stages of the group has allowed us to identify how key experiences from this SaP project may be applicable to other mixed-role group projects with SaP.

Table 4. Recommendations for practice

STAGE	INTEGRAL BEHAVIOURS
Beginning of Partnership (Forming stage)	• Active reflection on shared values • Partners discuss positionality and the potential influence of intersecting identities on goals and processes
During Partnership (Storming, norming, and performing stages)	• All partners (student, staff, senior administrators) reflect on potential learning, growth, and perspectives (individually and collaboratively with group) • Reflect on structure of group (potential hierarchical relationships, power dynamics)
Ending of Partnership (Adjourning stage)	• All partners reflect on actions, perspectives, and potential learning (which can be compared to earlier reflections during the partnership) to assess growth

Allowing for autonomy and providing necessary support are both important considerations when working with SaP. In this partnership, the student partner received involved support and early guidance from the post-doctoral fellow. The findings from our group highlight the unique roles that the senior administrators and post-doctoral fellow played in this project. It is important to note, however, that not all SaP projects will have the benefit of an intermediary, such as a post-doctoral fellow. When working with SaP, faculty and/or senior administrators must be mindful of their capacity to take on these roles and understand the fine line between providing support and promoting autonomy. Active reflection on shared values at the beginning of the partnership may facilitate the communication and flexibility of group roles that are needed during task performance and completion.

When working with SaP, our experience suggests that group members should discuss positionality or the potential influence of their intersecting identities on group goals and processes during the initial forming stage of group development. The impact of intersecting identities and power dynamics should be considered both at the level of partnership and within the context of the work being done. By the nature of our roles, where some were associated with greater inherent social power, we perceived a hierarchy in our group that may have hindered our ability to truly engage in partnership, as defined by Healey et al. (2014). The structure of our group both reinforced the perceived hierarchy and mitigated power dynamics. In this case, the addition of Amanda, the post-doctoral fellow, reinforced the hierarchical structure where Amanda was in the middle—a direct point of contact for Nikita. This structure, however, also allowed Amanda and Nikita to work much more closely and resulted in less of a perceived power imbalance between the two. During SaP projects, paying particular attention to the structure of the collaboration and potential differences in power dynamics between partners may provide insight into what propagates and mitigates inherent power imbalances. These findings related to power dynamics are consistent with other SoTL research. For example, similar to Mercer-Mapstone et al. (2018), our group identified a perceived hierarchy in partnership based on a

dynamic of positional power. Positional power refers to power held through roles and titles. In our project, Lori, Kim, and Amanda recognized their positional power and wanted to make space for Nikita to have power in the group. Over time, Nikita became confident in her skills and took on a more significant leadership role in the project's direction and outcomes. This finding is consistent with Acai et al. (2017), who describe this as a shift in focus from positional power to situational power, where student, faculty, and staff partners have differing levels and types of power within the context of the task. Building on Cook-Sather and Alter's (2011) concept of liminality, we also noted that Amanda was in a more liminal or in-between state as a post-doctoral fellow, where she felt she was in a space between student and staff. Amanda, in this in-between state, may have helped to diffuse some of the more inherent power imbalances across our hierarchy by working at a more collaborative level with Nikita.

At the end of a partnership, it is important to note that "success" is likely defined by more than just the deliverables created by the end of the project. In partnerships with students, it may be helpful to reflect on group members' actions and perceptions intentionally and collaboratively as partners, both throughout the project and during the adjourning of the group. The idea of "success" is relative, but this could be a way to compare intended values with actual behaviour within the group or to better understand the nature of dynamic partnership within the context of stable values.

Overall, the findings of this collaborative autoethnography indicate that active individual and group reflection is necessary throughout the life of the group—at conception, during the project, and at the group's conclusion. While power is intended to be shared when working with SaP, it is integral to recognize that power dynamics still exist. When working with SaP in a group configuration at a post-secondary level, hierarchical power dynamics may exist due to intersecting personal and professional identities. Openly recognizing and reflecting on potential hierarchical power dynamics as a group may be one step towards positioning power as a concept that can be shared, reimagined, and shaped through communication.

NOTE ON CONTRIBUTORS

Nikita Kalwani *is an M.A. candidate in School and Applied Child Psychology at Western University. She holds a B.Sc. in Psychology, Neuroscience & Behaviour (Mental Health Specialization) from McMaster University. Her graduate research focuses on trauma-informed interventions supporting the mental health outcomes of historically marginalized youth who experience systemic barriers to accessing care.*

Amanda Kelly Ferguson *is an Educational Developer and Pedagogical Research Specialist currently serving on the McMaster Research Ethics Board. She has a Ph.D. in Developmental Psychology and Education and has focused her teaching and research on ways of knowing and doing that are collaborative, community-engaged, safe, and accountable.*

Lori Goff *is currently serving as the Director of the MacPherson Institute at McMaster University. She has a doctorate degree in Educational Leadership and Policy Studies and has focused much of her research on quality assurance in higher education and ways in which quality is conceptualized by university leaders.*

Kim Dej *is the Vice-Provost (Teaching & Learning) at McMaster University, and an Associate Professor in the School of Interdisciplinary Science. She is an award-winning educator whose pedagogical research focuses on interdisciplinary and community-engaged teaching and learning. She also leads the Intersession Learning Initiative, which engages students in flexible learning.*

REFERENCES

Acai, A., Akesson, B., Allen, M., Chen, V., Mathany, C., McCollum, B., Spencer, J., & Verwoord, R. E. (2017). Success in student-faculty/staff SoTL partnerships: Motivations, challenges, power, and definitions. *Canadian Journal for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning*, *8*(2) Article 8. https://doi.org/10.5206/cjsotl-rcacea.2017.2.8

Adams, T. E., Ellis, C., & Jones, S. H. (2017). Autoethnography. In J. Matthes, C. S. Davis, & R. F. Potter (Eds.), *The international encyclopedia of communication research methods* (Vol 1, pp. 1–11). John Wiley & Sons. https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118901731.iecrm0011

Bell, A., Barahoma, S., & Stanway, B.R. (2020). On the edge. In L. Mercer-Mapstone & S. Abbot (Eds.), *The power of partnership: Students, staff, and faculty revolutionizing higher education* (pp. 123–136). Elon University Center for Engaged Learning. https://doi.org/10.36284/celelon.oa2

Bonebright, D. A. (2010). 40 years of storming: A historical review of Tuckman's model of small group development. *Human Resource Development International*, *13*(1), 111–120. https://doi.org/10.1080/13678861003589099

Bonney, K. M. (2018). Students as partners in the scholarship of teaching and learning. *International Journal for the scholarship of Teaching and Learning*, *12*(2), Article 2. https://doi.org/10.20429/ijsotl.2018.120202

Bovill, C., Cook-Sather, A., Felten, P., Millard, L., & Moore-Cherry, N. (2016). Addressing potential challenges in co-creating learning and teaching: Overcoming resistance, navigating institutional norms and ensuring inclusivity in student–staff partnerships. *Higher Education*, *71*, 195–208. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-015-9896-4

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, *3*(2), 77–101. https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa

Cartwright, D. (1951). Achieving change in people: Some applications of group dynamics theory. *Human Relations*, *4*(4), 381–392. https://doi.org/10.1177/001872675100400404

Cates, R. M., Madigan, M. R., & Reitenauer, V. L. (2018). 'Locations of possibility': Critical perspectives on partnership. *International Journal for Students as Partners*, *2*(1), 33–46. https://doi.org/10.15173/ijsap.v2i1.3341

Chang, H., Ngunjiri, F. W., & Hernandez, K. C. (2013). *Collaborative autoethnography.* Left Coast Press. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315432137

Coffey A. (2002). Ethnography and self: Reflections and representations. In May T. (Ed.), *Qualitative research in action* (pp. 313–331). SAGE.

Collins, P. H. (2015). Intersectionality's definitional dilemmas. *Annual Review of Sociology*, *41*(1), 1–20. https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-soc-073014-112142

Collins, P.H. (2019). *Intersectionality as critical social theory.* Duke University Press.

Collins, P. H., & Bilge, S. (2020). *Intersectionality* (2nd ed.). John Wiley & Sons.

Cook-Sather, A., & Alter, Z. (2011). What is and what can be: How a liminal position can change learning and teaching in higher education. *Anthropology & Education Quarterly, 42*(1), 37–53. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1548-1492.2010.01109.x

Cook-Sather, A., Matthews, K. E., Ntem, A., & Leathwick, S. (2018). What we talk about when we talk about students as partners. *International Journal for Students as Partners*, *2*(2), 1–9. https://doi.org/10.15173/ijsap.v2i2.3790

Crenshaw, K. (1989). Demarginalizing the intersection of race and sex: A Black feminist critique of antidiscrimination doctrine. *University of Chicago Legal Forum*, 139–168. https://chicagounbound.uchicago.edu/uclf/vol1989/iss1/8/

Crenshaw, K. (1991). Mapping the margins: Intersectionality, identity, and violence against women of color. *Stanford Law Review*, *43*(6), 1241–1300. https://doi.org/10.2307/1229039

Ellis, C., Adams, T. E., & Bochner, A. P. (2011). Autoethnography: An overview. *Historical Social Research*, *36*(4), 273–290. https://doi.org/10.12759/hsr.36.2011.4.273-290

Healey, M., Flint, A., & Harrington, K. (2014). *Engagement through partnership: Students as partners in learning and teaching in higher education*. The Higher Education Academy. https://www.advance-he.ac.uk/knowledge-hub/engagement-through-partnership-students-partners-learning-and-teaching-higher

Harvey, K., Do, E., Zhu, J., Lidstone, N., Lin, C., Evanovitch, J., & Zeadin, M. (2022). *Student partners program guidebook*. MacPherson Institute. https://mi.mcmaster.ca/app/uploads/2022/12/SPP_Guidebook_2022_.pdf

Howard, J. A., & Renfrow, D. G. (2014). Intersectionality. In J. D. McLeod, E. J. Lawler, & M. Schwalbe (Eds.), *Handbook of the social psychology of inequality* (pp. 95–121). Springer.

Kehler, A., Verwoord, R., & Smith, H. (2017). We are the process: Reflections on the underestimation of power in students as partners in practice. *International Journal for Students as Partners*, *1*(1), 38–52. https://doi.org/10.15173/ijsap.v1i1.3176

Lapadat, J. C. (2017). Ethics in autoethnography and collaborative autoethnography. *Qualitative Inquiry*, *23*(8), 589–603. https://doi.org/10.1177/1077800417704462l

Maguire, M., & Delahunt, B. (2017). Doing a thematic analysis: A practical, step-by-step guide for learning and teaching scholars. *All Ireland Journal of Higher Education*, *9*(3) 3351-33514. https://ojs.aishe.org/index.php/aishe-j/article/view/335

Marquis, E., Puri, V., Wan, S., Ahmad, A., Goff, L., Knorr, K., Vassileva, I., & Woo, J. (2016). Navigating the threshold of student–staff partnerships: A case study from an Ontario teaching and learning institute. *International Journal for Academic Development*, *21*(1), 4–15. https://doi.org/10.1080/1360144X.2015.1113538

Matthews, K. E. (2017). Five propositions for genuine students as partner practice. *International Journal for Students as Partners*, *1*(2) 1-9. https://doi.org/10.15173/ijsap.v1i2.3315

Matthews, K. E., Dwyer, A., Hine, L., & Turner, J. (2018). Conceptions of students as partners. *Higher Education, 76*, 957–971. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-018-0257-y

Meacham, M., Castor, M., & Felten, P. (2013). Partners as newcomers: Mixed-role partnerships as communities of practice. *Teaching and Learning Together in Higher Education, 1*(10), 5. https://repository.brynmawr.edu/tlthe/vol1/iss10/5

Mercer-Mapstone, L., Dvorakova, S. L., Matthews, K. E., Abbot, S., Cheng, B., Felten, P., Knorr, K., Marquis, E., Shammas, R., & Swaim, K. (2017). A systematic literature review of students as partners in higher education. *International Journal for Students as Partners, 1*(1), 15–37. https://doi.org/10.15173/ijsap.v1i1.3119

Mercer-Mapstone, L., Dvorakova, L.S., Groenendijk, L. J., & Matthews, K. E. (2017) Idealism, conflict, leadership, and labels: Reflections on a co-facilitation as partnership practice. *Teaching and Learning Together in Higher Education, 1*(21), 8. http://repository.brynmawr.edu/tlthe/vol1/iss21/8

Mercer-Mapstone, L. D., Marquis, E., & McConnell, C. (2018). The 'partnership identity' in higher education: Moving from 'us' and 'them' to 'we' in student-staff partnership. *Student Engagement in Higher Education Journal*, *2*(1), 12–29. https://sehej.raise-network.com/raise/article/view/Mercer-Mapstone

Tuckman, B. W. (1965). Developmental sequence in small groups. *Psychological Bulletin*, *63*(6), 384. https://doi.org/10.1037/h0022100

Tuckman, B. W., & Jensen, M. A. C. (1977). Stages of small-group development revisited. *Group & Organization Studies*, *2*(4), 419–427. https://doi.org/10.1177/105960117700200404

University of Brighton. (2011). *Critical incident analyses.* University of Brighton.

Verwoord, R., & Smith, H. (2020). The P.O.W.E.R. framework. In L. Mercer-Mapstone & S. Abbot (Eds.), *The power of partnership: Students, staff, and faculty revolutionizing higher education* (pp. 29–42). Elon University Center for Engaged Learning. https://www.centerforengagedlearning.org/books/power-of-partnership/section-one/chapter-1/

Weller, S., Domarkaite, G. K., Lam, J. L. C., & Metta, L. U. (2013). Student-faculty co-inquiry into student reading: Recognising SoTL as pedagogic practice. *International Journal for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning*, *7*(2), Article 9. https://doi.org/10.20429/ijsotl.2013.070209

Wilson, S., Phillips, J., Meskhidze, H., Lockard, C., Felten, P., McGowan, S., & Bloch-Schulman, S. (2020). From novelty to norm. In L. Mercer-Mapstone & S. Abbot (Eds.), *The power of partnership: Students, staff, and faculty revolutionizing higher education* (pp. 43–60). Elon University Center for Engaged Learning. https://www.centerforengagedlearning.org/books/power-of-partnership/section-one/chapter-2/