



Grad & Faculty Research Partners Day 2025

Conference Program

Faculty of Education, Western University

Friday, April 25, 2025, 8:30 am – 4 pm

Welcome!

The Research Office at the Faculty of Education warmly welcomes participants from local school boards, partner organizations, and researchers from Western University to the 2025 *Faculty Research Partners Day*.

This one-day conference aims to foster future research collaborations among local school board members, representatives from partner organizations, and researchers from the Faculty of Education. Our programming will include presentations and discussions focused on both current research initiatives and the development of future partnerships. We are excited to feature a keynote address by **Dr. Jacqueline Specht**.

Complimentary coffee, lunch, and parking will be provided. For parking details, please refer to the map available on the conference webpage.

To confirm your attendance, kindly complete and submit the [online registration form](#) by **March 17**.

We look forward to a day of insightful discussions and collaboration, and we welcome any feedback you may have.

Dr. Nicole Neil,
Associate Dean – Research
Western University Faculty of Education

FRPD 2025– Schedule for The Day

Time	Room	Presentation
8:30–9:00	Auditorium	Registration Participants arrive and check-in.
9:00–9:15	Auditorium	Welcome, land acknowledgment, and Opening Remarks Dr. Nicole Neil , Associate Dean-Research & Associate Professor, Faculty of Education, Western University
9:15-10:15	Auditorium	Keynote Presentation Name: Dr. Jacqueline Specht <i>Partnerships for Inclusive Education: Reciprocity is Key</i>
10:15-10:35	Community Room	Break
10:35-11:05	<p>FEB 2036</p> <p>FEB 2038</p> <p>FEB 2054</p>	Presentations: 1- Seema Hooda (Education, Western) <i>Riding the waves of COVID-19: Mental health outcomes in children and youth who experienced polyvictimization</i> 2- Lynn Seward (TVCC), Nicole Neil (Education, Western), Pa Lemon, Bethany Dinsmore (TVCC), Colin King, Katelyn Bryant (Education, Western) <i>Understanding and Navigating Pathways to Support Autistic Youth</i> 3- Perry Klein (Education, Western), Dilrukshi Troup, Carolyn Mussio (LDCSB) <i>Who Benefits from The Syntax Project-Foundations? An Analysis of Moderator Variables.</i>
11:15-12:00	Community Room	Poster Session: 1- Zahra Heidarian, Rachel Heydon, Zheng Zhang (Education, Western), Pamela Malins (Wilfrid Laurier University) <i>Beyond the Page: Revealing Gender Representation in Silver Birch Award Nominees through Critical Discourse Analysis</i> 2- Michelle Saltzman, Debbie Chiodo (Education, Western) <i>Examining the Experiences of Newcomer Youth Participating in the Supporting Transition Resilience of Newcomer Groups (STRONG) Intervention</i> 3- Carly Zylak, Colin King (Education, Western) <i>Evaluating the Impact of a Family-Based Early Intervention Program for Supporting Youth Mental Health Challenges and Building Mental Health Literacy</i> 4- Roya Karimli (Education, Western)

		<p><i>Admission to Higher Education and Student Socioeconomic Status in Azerbaijan: How does Meritocracy Serve the Students?</i></p> <p>5- Beth Donchai, Katina Pollock (Education, Western) <i>Parent Leadership Aspirations in Public Education in Manitoba: A Secondary Data Analysis of Democratic Education Advocacy</i></p> <p>6- Jessie Fraser (Education, Western) <i>Decolonizing Community First Aid Education</i></p> <p>7- Olivia Butler, Deanna C. Friesen (Education, Western) <i>Teachers' Perceptions of Ontario's Right to Read Report: Applying Recommendations to French Instruction.</i></p>
12:00 – 1:00 PM	Community Room	Lunch
1:00-1:30	<p>FEB 2036</p> <p>FEB 2038</p> <p>FEB 2054</p>	<p>Presentations:</p> <p>4- Karin Kermani (Education, Western) <i>Supporting Indirect Trauma in Female Muslim Refugee Youth Living in Canada</i></p> <p>5- Brandon Dickson, Donna Kotsopoulos, Jovan Groen, Stephanie Chyn, Jasmine Nitsotolis (Education, Western) <i>Quality Assurance Best Practices from Across Canada</i></p> <p>6- Paul Tarc, Jiayue Jiang (Education, Western), Tasha Ausman Catherine James, Nicholas Ng-A-Fook, (UOttawa) <i>What is life and 'world' affirming in teaching and being a teacher in difficult times?</i> <i>Educator perspectives across the k-12 to teacher education continuum</i></p>
1:40– 2:00	Community Room	Western Research Engagement Collaborative Alliance with Partners (RECAP)
2:00- 3:00	Community Room	<p>Round Table Networking Sessions</p> <p>Table 1: <i>Collaborative Approaches to School Mental Health</i> Dr. Nicole Neil (Education, Western)</p> <p>Table 2: <i>Building Inclusive Classrooms for Diverse Learners</i> Dr. Deanna Friesen (Education, Western)</p> <p>Table 3: <i>Equity-Driven Leadership and Policy for Educational Transformation</i> Dr. Paul Tarc (Education, Western)</p>
3:00-3:15	Community Room	<p>Closing Remarks</p> <p>Dr. Nicole Neil, Associate Dean – Research, Faculty of Education, Western University</p>

Partnerships for Inclusive Education: Reciprocity is Key

By: **Dr. Jacqueline Specht**

Western University, Faculty of Education April 25, 2025

Auditorium, 9:15-10:15 AM



Dr. Jacqueline Specht is a professor and the director of the Canadian Research Centre on Inclusive Education at Western University. The centre aims to empower educators with the knowledge they need to be effective with all students in the K-12 schooling system. Jacqui's research expertise is in the area of inclusive education with a focus on educators, leaders, and parents, and their roles in developing effective schools for all students. She has worked with schools nationally and internationally to support their transition to inclusive education. Her recent book "Inclusion of Learners with Exceptionalities in Canadian Schools" is a textbook that is used in initial teacher education programs across Canada.

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Abstracts:

Oral Presentations

1- Seema Hooda (Education, Western)

Riding the waves of COVID-19: Mental health outcomes in children and youth who experienced polyvictimization

COVID-19 has affected children and youth in several aspects of daily living, including mental health and well-being, with global increases in children's anxiety, depressive symptoms, anger, irritability, inattention and hyperactivity, and sleep disturbances. During COVID-19 and the resulting lockdowns, children were also at an increased risk of experiencing maltreatment, specifically domestic violence. Exposure to traumatic events stemming from child maltreatment plays a significant role in children's development and can negatively impact the healthy development of their emotional and behavioural regulation systems. It is thus important to understand both the short-term and long-term ramifications of the pandemic to mitigate the potential negative health effects children may face and provide timely intervention and service provision. The primary aim of this study is to describe the differences in mental health outcomes, specifically the presentation of internalizing and externalizing behaviours, between polyvictimized, victimized, and non-victimized clinically-referred children and youth during the distinct waves of COVID-19 in comparison to pre-pandemic levels and determine if polyvictimized children experienced a more significant increase in these behaviours. Additionally, the study will assess the characteristics of polyvictimized children across the different waves of the pandemic, with a particular focus on age, sex, family functioning, and median household income.

2- Lynn Seward (TVCC), Nicole Neil (Education, Western), Pa Lemon, Bethany Dinsmore (TVCC), Colin King, Katelyn Bryant (Education, Western)

Understanding and Navigating Pathways to Support Autistic Youth

Our presentation will provide an overview of autism service pathways and navigation while outlining a collaboration between Western Education, The Mary J. Wright Child and Youth Development Clinic, and TVCC. Funded by two rounds of an MCCSS workforce capacity grant in the innovation stream, these organizations have worked together to extend clinical expertise, engaging students and community professionals across southwest Ontario to foster interdisciplinary collaboration and skill development in autism services.

As part of this initiative, we coordinated and delivered a free education series covering mental health in autism and virtual service delivery. Additionally, the partnership established a Service Integration Committee, which will continue beyond the grant's timeline to collaborate with the Ontario Autism Program and community professionals to enhance service accessibility and integration across the southwest region.

Participants will leave with a deeper understanding of autism services, common barriers to access, and actionable strategies to assist individuals and families in navigating complex care systems. By strengthening professional knowledge and advocacy in autism service navigation, we aim to improve the support available for autistic individuals in our communities.

3- Perry Klein (Education, Western), Dilrukshi Troup, Carolyn Mussio (LDCSB)

Who Benefits from The Syntax Project-Foundations? An Analysis of Moderator Variables.

The Syntax Project: Foundations is a teacher-created resource that uses explicit direct instruction to teach Grade 1 students about sentence writing and grammar. It teaches students to add meaning and interest for readers by elaborating their sentences with words, phrases, and clauses. The Syntax Project largely aligns with the 2023 Ontario Language Curriculum, and is becoming widely used in the province. Researchers from Western University and the London

District Catholic School Board collaborated to test the effectiveness of the Syntax Project—Foundations with 109 students in 10 Grade 1 classrooms. In a recent Faculty Seminar talk, we reported that students made significant gains on most measures of sentence correctness and complexity, as well as quality and length of written composition. In this FRPD presentation, we will report on our further analysis of students' initial skills as possible moderator variables. The research questions are: Did students initial skills in handwriting, spelling, sentence writing, and written composition interact with instruction in the Syntax Project? To what extent did students with a range of skill levels, including students who struggle with various literacy skills, benefit significantly from instruction?

4- Karin Kermani (Education, Western)

Supporting Indirect Trauma in Female Muslim Refugee Youth Living in Canada

Canada welcomed 146,825 refugees in 2024, many of whom experience indirect trauma—psychological distress from exposure to traumatic events through family or community ties. Female Muslim refugee youth face unique mental health challenges due to systemic barriers such as acculturation stress, financial hardship, housing instability, language barriers, Islamophobia, and cultural stigma. Despite these vulnerabilities, little research explores how mental health practitioners address indirect trauma in this population. This qualitative study, using a Participatory Action Research (PAR) approach and a critical theory framework, includes semi-structured interviews with 10 mental health practitioners and focus groups with 20 female Muslim refugee youth. Thematic and content analyses, supported by NVivo software, will identify recurring patterns and key themes. Findings will inform inclusive mental health interventions and policy recommendations. This research has significant implications for mental health, social integration, and policy, contributing to initiatives like the National Housing Strategy and resilience-focused programs. By addressing the overlooked experiences of female Muslim refugee youth, this study fosters resilience and enhances culturally responsive mental health care. Findings will be disseminated through academic publications, a master's thesis, and community partnerships to improve service provision.

5- Brandon Dickson, Donna Kotsopoulos, Jovan Groen, Stephanie Chyn, Jasmine Nitsotolis (Education, Western)

Quality Assurance Best Practices from Across Canada

Academic quality is a consistent commitment and goal in higher education and for instructors specifically. Reputational impacts of academic quality can be seen in enrolment trends and even in international rankings. Definitions of academic quality can vary depending on the stakeholder. Academic quality is often assessed internally and, in some instances, externally by government or arm's length agencies. Much research has noted that effective Quality Assurance (QA) to oversee academic quality involves guidance from regional bodies (Bejan et al., 2015; Bokayev et al., 2022) and institutional ownership tailoring QA to the university (Bendermacher et al., 2017; Parvin, 2019). Our guiding research questions are: (1) How do QA processes vary across Canada? (2) What are the potential best practices that should be considered at the institutional-level? We describe findings from a study that examined the national landscape of QA. Findings include significant variations in requirements for reporting, student engagement, and the inclusion of an assessment of program resources. This research will be of interest to educators in higher education organization, practitioners in QA, and researchers in higher education.

6- Paul Tarc, Jiayue Jiang (Education, Western), Tasha Ausman Catherine James, Nicholas Ng-A-Fook, (UOttawa)

What is life and 'world' affirming in teaching and being a teacher in difficult times? Educator perspectives across the k-12 to teacher education continuum

This presentation-workshop asks attendees to consider the heading that schooling and school teaching ought to take in our time of considerable local-and-global challenges and crises. From the focus on individual (AI-mediated) learning for accumulation and consumption fueling ecological catastrophe, to global conflicts and mass violence (and post-truth politics), we seem to be at a critical juncture to reconsider existential questions of human meaning, significance and what it means to live a (good) life with others, and across generations. Sadly, at the same time, current conditions press for increasing instrumentality and a lack of 'publicness' in schooling. In this workshop we attend to the (potential) life and 'world' affirming qualities of teaching and being a teacher that might counter the heightened stressors and instrumentality of teaching. We will point to: David Hansen's (2024) framing of teaching as vocation and witnessing teachers' praxes, to our recent pilot study of two secondary school teachers' 'transformative' pedagogy, and to teacher educator reflections on pedagogy in an international education cohort specialization. Following this brief presentation, we will move to workshop mode to collectively consider the question we pose: What is life and 'world' affirming in teaching and being a teacher in our current times?

Poster Presentations

1- Zahra Heidarian, Rachel Heydon, Zheng Zhang (Education, Western), Pamela Malins (Wilfrid Laurier University)

Beyond the Page: Revealing Gender Representation in Silver Birch Award Nominees through Critical Discourse Analysis

This study investigates the representation of gender identities in children's literature through a critical discourse analysis (CDA) of Silver Birch Award nominees from 1994 to 2024. The research aims to uncover how gender identities are portrayed in these texts, the language used by authors, and the socio-political contexts influencing these representations. By employing Fairclough's three-dimensional CDA model, alongside queer theory and reader-response theories, the study seeks to analyze the evolving portrayal of gender in Canadian children's literature over three decades. The research addresses the implications of these representations for young readers, particularly in shaping their understanding of gender diversity and inclusivity. The study also highlights the importance of diverse and equitable gender representation in fostering empathy, challenging stereotypes, and promoting inclusive educational environments. By examining the intersection of text, society, and culture, this research contributes to ongoing discussions on the role of literature in shaping children's identities and offers recommendations for creating more inclusive literary landscapes. The findings aim to inform educators, authors, and policymakers about the significance of diverse gender representation in children's literature, ultimately advocating for a more inclusive and equitable literary canon.

2- Michelle Saltzman, Debbie Chiodo (Education, Western)

Examining the Experiences of Newcomer Youth Participating in the Supporting Transition Resilience of Newcomer Groups (STRONG) Intervention

Canada's growing immigrant and refugee population face compounded pre- and post-migration stressors, such as trauma, discrimination, and acculturative stress, which impact their mental health, academic success and social-emotional development. To address these challenges, the Supporting Transition Resilience of Newcomer Groups (STRONG) intervention was developed. STRONG is a 10-session trauma-informed, manualized program rooted in cognitive-behavioural therapy principles that is designed to enhance resilience and well-being. The sessions teach youth to regulate their emotions, problem-solve and provide coping mechanisms for stress. To

expand the evidence-base of STRONG, this study examines the experiences of participating newcomer children and youth in school and community settings, focusing on perceived benefits and challenges, social-emotional resilience, well-being and learnt skills (coping and relaxation). Four semi-structured focus groups were conducted, two school-based groups and two community-based groups with a total of 20 participants. This qualitative design provides youth an opportunity to share their recommendations for improving STRONG for future newcomer youth as research infrequently includes perspectives of minoritized youth. Newcomer youth's perceived experiences and recommendations will be examined using Braun and Clarke's six-step process for conducting a thematic analysis. We hypothesize that self-reported social-emotional resilience will increase which will allow for greater integration, socialization, and improved well-being.

3- Carly Zylak, Colin King (Education, Western)

Evaluating the Impact of a Family-Based Early Intervention Program for Supporting Youth Mental Health Challenges and Building Mental Health Literacy

The M.I.friends program (www.miunderstanding.ca/m-i-friends) is a free, creative program to support the mental health and well-being of children and their parents. Using an interactive website with practical resources, support videos, and an accompanying plush animal toy, families are supported with tools to build effective collaborative strategies, start challenging conversations, and bridge the gap to accessing further mental health care by increasing mental health literacy (MHL). The current study evaluates the impact of the family-based early intervention program, M.I.friends, on supporting youth mental health challenges and building parental MHL. Secondary objectives include gaining a better understanding of family experiences with participating in this early intervention program and their key learnings, reflections, and feedback. A mixed-methods analytic approach, including paired sample t-tests as well as thematic analysis of semi-structured interviews, is utilized to evaluate the effectiveness and short-term impact of the family-based early intervention program. If M.I.friends is deemed to be an effective early-intervention program, the current study will work to promote it to a wider audience. The increased awareness of M.I.friends could contribute to improving outcomes for children by providing families with easily accessible tools to raise resilient youth while waitlists for affordable, quality care continue to increase.

4- Roya Karimli (Education, Western)

Admission to Higher Education and Student Socioeconomic Status in Azerbaijan: How does Meritocracy Serve the Students?

This research focuses on the meritocratic system of accessing higher education in Azerbaijan. Admitting students into higher education institutions in Azerbaijan is executed through higher education admission examinations. However, what this system fails to consider is that it is not fair for students to compete in one examination if they do not come from the same, or at least similar, backgrounds, especially in terms of the socioeconomic statuses (SES) of their families. Thus, the meritocratic system of the country raises concerns about the access to higher education of students from low socioeconomic status.

Drawing upon *Forms of Capital* by Pierre Bourdieu (1986) and *A theory of Justice* by John Rawls (1971), I argue that students from less privileged families should be located well before the university admission examinations and provided the support they need to be able to reach their highest potential. Consequently, this study seeks to gain more insight into the experiences of less privileged/low SES students and how they are different from those from more privileged/high SES families, as well as in what ways they can be supported better.

5- Beth Donchai, Katina Pollock (Education, Western)

Parent Leadership Aspirations in Public Education in Manitoba: A Secondary Data Analysis of Democratic Education Advocacy

This study highlights the importance of diverse parental voices in education management roles by focusing on already engaged parents serving as trustees in Manitoba. Through a secondary data analysis of 18 interviews conducted by Dr. Katina Pollock and her team as requested by the Canadian School Board Association, this study will investigate the leadership aspirations of these already engaged parents, how they have used their leadership position for democratic education advocacy and the critical voices they identify as missing from this context. This inclusion and improved representation is vital for adapting public education to Canada's changing demographics, ensuring equitable access to involvement for historically-equity-deserving groups, and positively impacting student achievement and informing future educational leadership roles.

6- Jessie Fraser (Education, Western)

Decolonizing Community First Aid Education

Community education is intended to serve the community; however, embedded in that goal is an assumption that all community members are served by education designed by the privileged. Canadian community education tends to universalize Western normative ideologies, reinforcing colonial power structures. While healing knowledge is an area in which Indigenous and Western worldviews have potential to share space, first aid programs are based on Western knowledge and practices. In response to the TRC Calls to Action to integrate Indigenous knowledge and practices in educational spaces, this literature review considered Indigenous health care and teaching philosophies and practices in relation to Western pedagogies and evaluated the possibility of incorporating Indigenous knowledge and ways of knowing into Canadian first aid education. This inquiry examined existing evidence and prioritized Indigenous voices, concluding that Mi'kmaw Elder Albert Marshall's Two-Eyed Seeing offers the best opportunity to bridge the gap between Indigenous and Western worldviews. Next steps for this research will involve partnership with Indigenous knowledge-keepers to co-create a first aid program using Two-Eyed Seeing that combines Indigenous and Western epistemologies and pedagogies.

7- Olivia Butler, Deanna C. Friesen (Education, Western)

Teachers' Perceptions of Ontario's Right to Read Report: Applying Recommendations to French Instruction.

An update was released in 2024 by the Ontario Human Rights Commission (OHRC) on how successfully the Ontario education sector has responded to 157 recommendations from the Right to Read Report (R2R, 2022). The initial report outlined the need for reading instruction in Ontario Elementary schools to shift from balanced to structured literacy practices. Recommendations were made for several stakeholders (e.g., Ministry of Education, Faculties of Education, School Boards & Teachers). Unfortunately, while some progress has been made (e.g., an updated English language curriculum), some areas have received little to no attention. One such area is the French context. Here, there has been minimal guidance on how to adapt the report's recommendations for French educators. The current study used a mixed methods online questionnaire to survey French teachers about how easily they could implement the R2R recommendations in a French Immersion context or Core French context. Results present the relative perceived importance of factors that are unique to a French immersion context (e.g., teacher training in French, the French curriculum, and students' willingness to speak French). By identifying both barriers and facilitators, the study can shed light on factors that are impeding the implementation of key R2R recommendations in French settings.

