CHOOSE YOUR OWN ADVENTURE? THE EXPERIENCES OF
OCCASIONAL TEACHERS IN THE REPRODUCTION AND/OR TRANSFORMATION
OF EDUCATIONAL SYSTEMS


AMMA OFORI



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# Abstract

This research looks at the experience of occasional teachers (OTs) in the reproduction and/or transformation of teacher roles and forms of education in schools. I examine if, how, and to what extent the experience of OTs provides opportunities for professional learning, applying teaching innovation, and exerting creative agency or, alternatively, mechanisms for deskilling and the induction into institutionalized patterns and routines. This project looks at three elements that can cause deskilling or transformative change: (1) institutional experiences and social interaction with others in the OT role; (2) experiences with curriculum, day plans, and pedagogy; and (3) teacher evaluation and professional learning opportunities. In the introduction and literature review, the project uses a narrative inquiry approach to compare my OT/LTO experiences to the research and literature on OT experiences in schools. Then I take the experience of the occasional teacher from the research literature and put them in a digital gameplay simulation form for occasional teachers (research participants) to play. Participants are invited to identify or disidentify with the avatar (OT) experience during the gameplay experience and to tell their own stories concerning gameplay events and the research questions. In my findings, I analyse the participants' responses to the *OT Simulator* game and reflect on how they speak to research questions.

# Acknowledgements

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# List of Abbreviations

PT – Permanent teacher
OT – Occasional (or substitute) teacher
LTO – Long-term occasional teacher
STO – Short-term occasional teacher

## Definition of Key Terms

OT Occasional Teacher

In Ontario, the term occasional teacher means being a substitute for a permanent teacher and/or being assigned to a classroom temporarily and employed by the board as a part of the school environment.

STO- Short Term Occasional

A sub-class under occasional teacher that works in a temporary substitute role with an assignment that does not go beyond 10 days.

LTO- Long Term Occasional

A sub-class under occasional teacher where the occasional teacher is assigned to work in the same school and same classroom(s) for more than 10 consecutive days.

# CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

As I began my career as a certified teacher, I started as a short-term occasional teacher (STO). This role is often the start of a career path for many teachers in Ontario before they become a permanent teacher (PT), or even a long-term occasional teacher (LTO). Depending on job markets and other variables, it could take several months or even years before the OT becomes a permanent teacher (Pollock, 2012). An STO is a supply teacher that replaces the absent PT (Brock & Ryan, 2016). My first assignment as an STO was a one-day assignment for grades three and four. I was nervous and excited. Teaching in a new school and the feeling of meeting the school staff and students was thrilling. I remembered having thoughts of engaging students with an inquiry-based and critical-oriented pedagogies. I wanted to be an agent of change in the school environment. I wanted to activate many of the pedagogical innovations I engaged in teachers college. To accomplish this, one must see teaching as a moral profession, and one must be willing to meet individual students' needs and support deeper learning (Fullan & Langworthy, 2014). Despite my enthusiasm, that was not my experience of being an STO.

On my first assignment as a STO, I was excited and ready to help make changes in students learning. I reviewed all the new ideas and practices I learned at York University just to find out that my job was to mechanically follow the day plans of the permanent teacher. The day plans, and my job, felt monotonous throughout the whole day. I wanted to change the plans, but as a new OT, I felt that this could cause issues with the permanent teacher, so I continued with what was expected of me and followed the directions. Not much intellectual or pedagogical skill is needed as an OT: only 'class management'. Class management, in my experience, is the most-valued skill looked at when one is an STO. To gain respect in the school or be noticed (or avoid being noticed negatively), one must have strong class management

skills. Sadly, class management usually translates as the STO trying to "control" students' behaviour instead of engaging students in their learning or supporting meaningful learning activities.

Classroom behaviour can often be based on or predicted by the type and quality of the learning tasks left for the students who engage the tasks (Garrett, 2008). Even today, when I work as an STO, I can always tell from the students' behaviour if the permanent teacher took time with the day plan, and if the activities were continuous with what's being learned in the class (as opposed to being 'filler' work). The students would either tell me, "We've done this work already", or the students would become bored and then class management becomes an issue. Usually, the plans consist of handing out worksheets and turning on YouTube videos. This task makes me feel like a robot reinforcing the old traditional schooling style of content consumption (Apple, 1998). This brings me back to Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1972), where the "students become the depositories, and the teacher the depositor" (p. 163) of predetermined knowledge. The OT continues to be 'the depositor' when the permanent teachers leave plans consisting of passing out worksheets to the students.

During my continuous journey as a short-term occasional teacher, a new school was always intimidating. Many thoughts circulated of ensuring the students are successful and in building a strong learning community. I always felt that occasional teachers play an essential role in the school ecology. According to the National Education Association (NEA), an occasional teacher is brought to the school to ensure the continuity and efficiency of student *achievement* (National Education Association, 2012, italics mine). I usually do not feel like I am being asked to contribute to the continuity of student achievement, especially if I am just 'the depositor'. It's when one becomes an LTO (long term occasional) that you may have some agency in the classroom.

My first stop is always the office. When you first enter the building as an STO, you must sign-in to the office. Sometimes, you get to meet the Principal and Vice-Principal. But

most of the time, you meet with the administrative assistants. Occasionally the administrative assistant will have conversations about the school and where to find the staffroom. A key and attendance documents are given to you after you sign in.

The feeling of being part of the school environment, and interacting with office staff, such as the office administration, can set tone for the OTs' school experience (Chalikakis, 2012). When I enter a school and no one acknowledge my presence, I often feel ignored by staff members until I ask questions. The indifference of the staff sets an 'anonymous' tone for me. The same feeling usually continues in the office. Usually, the administrative assistant is the first interaction with someone in the school. However, because the office can the busiest area in the school, especially in the morning, the office administrative assistant will not have time to interact, so I am given a key and attendance and told the room number of the class. Not all schools set an 'anonymous' tone. There are some schools where I felt a warm welcome and the staff would acknowledge my presence and ask about my teaching experience. The same schools will ask for my information so that I can supply another day. The welcoming from the staff creates a feeling like I am part of the school environment. Furthermore, contributing to the day plan, by adding my own pedagogy or creative input, makes me feel like a teacher ready to go to the next teaching stage as an LTO.

The transition from STO to LTO was interesting. In Ontario, an occasional teacher becomes a long-term occasional (LTO) after 10-consecutive teaching days in the assigned classroom (Pollock, 2012). On the 10th day of being an OT, the principal asked if I could continue teaching the class until the end of the school year. I accepted the offer; I was excited that I would be 'the teacher' of the class. The degree of familiarity and respect changes as you become an LTO. I felt like I was part of the staff. Still, the teachers would pass prepackaged curriculum to me and provide class management advice. The experience was quite different from the days I was an occasional teacher. No longer was I simply following the classroom teacher's plans. I became the 'main' teacher of the classroom (Chalikakis, 2012). I finally felt

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that I could start to bring in the inquiry-based and 21st-century learning skills that I wanted to bring to the students.

Getting your own class for the first time is an exciting experience. The most exciting part is implementing new projects and activities to get the students to learn—especially the ability to use 21-century skills with the students to advance digital literacies in creative ways. The excitement only lasted for a few months until some permanent teachers disagreed with how I taught the class. Many experienced teachers in the school environment were firmly set in the old traditional schooling culture. I was surprised by the reactions from the teachers. They would indicate that the new pedagogies that I wanted to implement were wasting the students     time, and the students will not be ready for tests. They felt that we should teach the students the way everyone else does, using textbooks. I remember a teacher coming to the classroom, watching my teaching practices, and advising that I was wasting my time. The teacher felt that the students would not learn because of their own expectations about learning in schools. This teacher would pass out worksheets, used continuously in the school, to help students progress. I listened to the teacher because I thought that senior teachers must know. After all, they are experienced, and I did not want to ruffle any feathers. Slowly, I lost confidence in and control over my pedagogy, becoming 'deskilled' and simply implementing the curriculum traditionally (Apple, 2013). My motivation for becoming a teacher decreased as I continued only to implement the pre-set curriculum using the techniques modelled by PTs and helping colleagues.

I had access to professional development (PD) and staff meetings; I felt this was an opportunity for upskilling. Surprisingly, some of the teachers' attitudes towards professional development were unhappy. Some teachers felt PD was a waste of time because they felt there was not enough time to implement innovative ways of teaching, and the students would not learn. Some of the teachers and I felt differently about PD, and I was certainly glad to get the information provided from the PD sessions to engage the students in their learning.

It was then time for teacher evaluation. The process of teacher evaluation for occasional teachers is different from the PT. The preparation of the evaluation was quite lengthy. I got advice on how to pass the assessment from the other teachers. I did not have the opportunity to show the essential skills that I wanted for the evaluation. I just played it safe by making sure the class was managed. I did receive feedback from my principal that did help improve my performance. But since it was a brief performative evaluation, I did not get the proper review that was needed. I did not receive any PD after.

The transition from STO to LTO changed the relationship in the school environment. When I first arrived at the school as an STO, I felt lost and alone. Some teachers hardly spoke to me. The administrators briefly had conversations. I was the lowest in the hierarchy. What made me 'recognized' was my class management and the relationship I built with the students. When I became an LTO, my status was higher. I was more of an agent in the environment. At first, at least, I felt like I was part of a community of people willing to work together for a common goal. However, I never knew that there would be so many different and conflicting opinions on goals and how they will be reached to achieve student learning. This also highlights a wide gap between what I was engaging in my teacher's college (York University) about teaching and learning and what I experienced about teaching and learning as an OT.

In my experience, the OT 'deskilling' process I describe above is much worse in inner-city schools. According to TDSB school documents, many urban/inner-city schools are often located in low SES neighbourhoods (4m Model Schools List, 2011). My experience of being an STO in an inner-city school is different from a non-inner-city school (or school in a higher SES neighbourhood). From my experience, the OT day plans are mostly about keeping the students busy using worksheets, with low academic expectations. Only class management is vital in urban schools (Yeo, 1997). If a teacher talks to me, it's about offering advice on how to "handle the students" and less about the students' learning expectations or creativity. The expectations for students are very low, and it seems that most teachers pass out or teach to the

pre-set curricula (Apple, 1992). This is a problem, as I started to become inducted into the school environment, and a kind 'deskilling' process was happening, altering my expectations, and impacting my pedagogy. These experiences informed my research questions, which I discuss below, about how the experience of being an OT might contribute to system reproduction rather than system transformation and deeper learning (Fullan & Langworthy, 2014) pedagogies.

To examine OT experience, this MA thesis uses a narrative and simulation game (that is played by research participants who are OTs) to look at the experiences of OTs. Using this game as a research instrument, I examine the reproduction or transformation of teacher roles in schools, and if, how, and to what extent the experience of OTs provides opportunities for professional learning and creative agency or, alternatively, mechanisms for 'de-skilling' and the induction into institutionalized routines.


## Research questions

There is very little research done on the experience of the occasional teacher in relation to questions of deskilling, teacher identity, and system reproduction. This gap may be because it is just common sense that OTs are there just to maintain order until the PT returns. Regardless, what effect does this have on OTs as newly qualified teaching professionals? The greatest gap in research is on the attitude towards occasional teachers when they are trying to make changes or be creative in the school system, as well as how they are treated by the permanent staff and administration, and what they learn through that process. This research aims to answer the following questions:

(a) What is the role or 'function' of OTs in possible institutional reproduction, (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990) or in possible system change (Fullan, 2014; Thumlert, Owston, & Malhotra, 2018))?

(b) Can occasional teachers shape and apply critical and creative pedagogies in Ontario's elementary and secondary school classrooms? If not, why not? If so, how do they react to the challenges and obstacles from my own narrative (above), and the literature review (below)?

(c) How does a digital game (based on my story above and the lit review), designed for OTs to play as research tool, enable occasional teachers to speak to questions about teacher identity, 'deskilling', or system reproduction? Do participants identify with the avatar's (OT's) experience? Or do they see tensions between gameplay and their own experience in institutions? In my methods section, I have specific research sub-questions based on the simulation game design.

## CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

Occasional teachers play an essential role in the educational institution. According to statistics, students spend 5–10% of the school year with an occasional teacher (Authier, 2012). Occasional teachers therefore have a significant impact on the school environment. There is minimal research however examining occasional teachers' experiences, especially long-term occasional teachers, working in schools while they await permanent employment (Chalikakis, 2012). The experience of the occasional teacher is unique and is quite different from the permanent teaching staff. Most educational research is on the experience of the permanent teacher (Thompson 2014). There is not enough research or analysis on the occasional teachers and the impact of being an OT on professional identity. Occasional teachers are not given recognition for their labour (and are perhaps not researched) because they are not seen as "real teachers". However, the role of the occasional teacher is to provide continuous support for student success and academic accomplishment (Skaff-Schumaker, 2018).

This chapter will look at the experiences of the occasional teacher, such as the skills and identities they bring to the learning environment and what happens to the skills, attitudes, and identities. Are OTs deskilled? Or do they go through a process of transformative practice and professional learning where they are given the chance to apply innovative methods, and bring change to learning practices, such as 21st century skills, inquiry and/or deeper learning practices (Fullan and Langworthy, 2014), and critical reflection on their worlds and lives (Freire, 1972)?

**The Standardized school model**

Boschken (1994) states, "schools are part of a system that allocates scarce resources to competing constituencies or stakeholders" (p. 310). The model of the school environment determines the interests and priorities in what goes on in the school. A significant issue that has been discussed in many articles is that of standardized testing. For many years now standardized tests are used to measure students' achievement and teacher accountability. According to the document "Growing Success", from the Ontario Ministry of Education    (2010), "assessment is the process of gathering information that accurately reflects how well a student is achieving the curriculum expectations in a subject or course" (p. 34). Teachers are pressured to get student achievement scores high within a particular subject, especially math and language. The process of assessment in the school environment causes stress among teachers and students and impacts the methods we use, which affects the school system as a whole (Green et al., 2007) This can cause less creativity and innovation in the classroom and, according to (Giroux, 2011): "Today, in the age of standardized testing, thinking and acting, reason and judgment, have been thrown out the window just as teachers are increasingly being deskilled and forced to act as semi-robotic technicians good for little more than teaching to the test" (p.126). Teaching to the test is one way the deskilling process becomes part of the school system, in which new teachers and occasional teachers are impacted, along with students and permanent teachers.

**Deskilling and practice shock**

The term 'deskilling', in the school system context, is a term that is not written about in much of the research. In general terms, the process of deskilling happens when a teacher loses control over their decision-making about what is best for learning environment or the school (Apple, 1986, p.179). In deskilling, teaching actions are pre-established by others who control the work process. The deskilling of the teaching profession produces a "considerable loss of autonomy…[and] there is a decrease in the intellectual work associated with curricular construction" and the design of pedagogical activities and assessments, and a "reduction in [teacher] capacity" (Gandin & de Lima, 2015, p. 667). In education, a new teacher could come into a school environment with 21$^{st}$ century pedagogies, a growth mind-set, and new ways for students to direct and collaborate in their own learning, with new tools. Depending on the school or situation, the new teacher could be an agent of transformative change or conform to the 'old' or traditional schooling model as Fullan and Langworthy (2014) define it: 'old' pedagogies mean the students reproduce and master pre-given content such as prepackaged curriculum activities, and the teacher is the transmitter of the content to the students (Fullan & Langworthy, 2014).

There are many factors that can cause deskilling of new teachers. According to Wong (2006) a centralized school environment can have one of the major deskilling effects on new teachers. In a centralized educational system, the government and the administrators have a majority control over the school, while teachers indirectly have some level of control over classrooms but no control over curriculum and fiscal responsibility (Wong 2006). Standardized tests and standardized curriculum also can contribute to the deskilling process (Giroux, 2011). The level of teacher agency is diminished through a process in which the teachers' professional skills become lost due to the managerial routines which decrease their professional importance (Ballet & Kelchtermans, 2009). The occasional teacher that becomes an LTO in their first year

of teaching may bring many personal skills, fresh perspectives, and teaching practices taught in the university (or teacher preparation program). But there may be a gap between the teacher preparation program and the school experience. The skills honed by the university are washed out when entering the school environment. The experience can become a "practice shock" for newly qualified teachers or the OTs (Korthagen, 2010). The studies on teacher education show that the impact of what is learned in the teacher preparation program can have little connection or effect on the practical experiences in the school environment (Korthagen, 2010). In this case, the occasional teacher will more than likely adopt the school environment's instructional practices and old patterns.

**The curriculum and lesson delivery**

Locally, the curriculum is a document developed by the Ontario Ministry of Education that is a guideline used by teachers to develop and deliver lessons to the students. The Ontario Curriculum has key learning expectations of what the student must learn and optional teaching supports that allow latitude for teacher agency. The teacher can use the examples that are given in the curriculum documents, or they can use their own practices in communicating and assessing curriculum goals in their own ways.

The question I pose is what are some of the causes of deskilling in the school system - especially for OTs and LTOs? According to Apple (2013) and Giroux (2011), part of the deskilling process in education comes from prepackaged curriculum. This is usually the case when teachers reuse old materials and pass on the materials and methods to the new teachers and OT's.

There may be a lack of teacher collaboration and not having a curriculum planning process each year which may cause the new teachers to become deskilled.  This process may cause newly qualified teachers and OTs to 'lose control' over developing their skills (Apple 1986; Giroux, 2011). In particular, the OTs are not given a chance to bring new pedagogies

because the day plans consist of prepacked work that does not allow for new implementations of these innovative practices. Part of the reason could be that the permanent teachers of the classroom may already implement worksheets in their classroom due to the stress of measuring the students' academic achievements using standardized assessments. This process of the implementation of worksheets, as a common-sense teaching method, trickles down to the OTs, who continue to be the 'implementors' of the classroom (Gur 2014; Apple, 1989)

Becoming an implementor of packaged or teacher-proof (Giroux, 2011) curriculum does not allow OTs to develop professional identities or become change agents. Instead, the OTs submit to the school culture and merely becomes a 'widget' within the school environment (Weisberg et al, 2009). The 'widget effect' continues when the teachers in the school are not seen "as individual professionals but rather as interchangeable parts" (p. 4). The OT teacher becomes part of system of interchangeable parts when their jobs in the classroom is to just follow the day plans and control behavior. Especially if the day plan work left is just to keep the student busy and not a continuation of meaningful learning tasks and activities (Chalikakis 2012).

According to Washington (2020), "effective lessons plans are like points on a map that move students along a continuum of learning in each subject area, so the lesson plan guides student learning, progress, and achievement" (p18). When OTs are given day plans that allow students to be engaged in their learning, such as innovative project-based work, this type of day plan may allow the OTs to engage with the class and even contribute ideas to student learning.

However, when the OTs are given day plans with limited directions that consist of worksheets and links to YouTube videos, this could cause OTs to be deskilled because of less interaction with the students by just passing worksheets and just following the direction of the plan (Skaff-Schumaker, 2018). Due to job demands, limited resources, and report card deadlines, teachers may have limited time to provide detailed day plans (Hakanen et al., 2006). With teacher pressures due to standardized testing, the "teaching to the test" method, which

consists of worksheets with practice test reviews and the passing out of pre-established curriculum (Herman et al., 2009), may cause a loss of autonomy and deskilling among the teachers in the school environment (Apple, 1992). This may cause a widget effect towards the OTs whose day plan will consist of the same type of instructions passed to the students. On top of this fact, teachers may have lower expectations for the OTs, which adds to a more poorly planned day plan that the OTs must follow (Ulvik & Langorgen, 2012). The OTs experiences change when one becomes an LTO in the school environment.

The experience for LTOs could be quite different. The LTO has more agency in the classroom and has a greater chance of being an agent of change. The issues LTOs face is lack of resources, mentorship, and modelling to help support innovative teaching, and they may be more likely follow the routine and expectations of the PTs in the school because of hierarchical memberships (Chalikakis, 2012).

**Teacher evaluation and mentorship**

The process of professional evaluation and performance assessment is different for occasional teachers and permanent teachers. Permanent teachers' evaluations are called teacher performance appraisals (TPA). Both new and experienced permanent teachers are given this evaluation. The evaluation is different from the occasional teachers' evaluation. The principal or vice-principal accesses both evaluations (Larsen, 2005). According to Ontario Regulation 274/12, Hiring Practices (2013), "part of the requirements for an occasional teacher on the long term occasional (LTO) list to apply for a posted permanent position is to have completed a long-term occasional contract of at least four months or more, of which the teacher has received an unsatisfactory or satisfactory evaluation (p.1). One of the requirements of becoming a permanent teacher (PT) is to have a satisfactory LTO evaluation; however, according to the Ontario College of Teachers Transition to Teaching 2013 report, it can take several years before an LTO becomes a PT. The purpose of the occasional teacher evaluation is to "establish the OT

evaluation requirements and capture some effective practices when conducting an evaluation"
(*Occasional teacher evaluation: Provincial framework and evaluation template,* nd). The OT
Evaluation Template is developed by education partners such as the provincial teacher
federations, principal associations, and board/trustee organizations. The OT Evaluation
Template is developed by education partners such as the provincial teacher federations,
principal associations, and board/trustee organizations.

Occasional teachers (OT) do not receive evaluations during the period. They have to
become LTOs to receive an evaluation. Since pre-service teachers start their careers as an OT
before becoming an LTO, there is no evaluation until they receive an LTO assignment.
However, OTs do not receive satisfactory professional development to improve their
instructional practices (Brock & Ryan, 2016). As noted above, they may be provided with poor
models and lesson plans for future teaching and learning. The process of evaluation for an LTO
consists of several parts. The principal interviews the LTO about their experiences and
feedback on school performance; this process is called the pre-evaluation meeting. The pre-
evaluation meeting is a part of promoting a dialogue between the principal and the LTO. The
other element of evaluation is the principal assessing the LTO in the classroom environment.
The evaluation process does enforce accountability of the teacher's practices. The evaluation
process can also cause stress and anxiety among LTOs because the LTOs spend more time and
energy preparing for the evaluation instead of creatively engaging with pedagogy and
meaningful professional learning opportunities that might transform their practice (Larsen
2005; National Foundation for Educational Research, 2002). The process may result in the
deskilling of LTOs, as LTOs are learning to, once again, 'pass the test', where evaluations are
based on traditional standards (that may appeal to older models and values). Just like students,
LTOs will be more likely not to take risks or engage in transformative practices that go beyond
traditional schooling, which is driven by standardization and accountability, and high-stakes

testing (Giroux, 2011). And in this way LTO's conform to standards and practical metrics that may reproduce business-as-usual education.

According to the Ontario Regulation, 274/12, PT's must complete four or more months of LTO assignments with a satisfactory evaluation. The permanent teachers would have been through the LTO evaluation process before they become permanent on the board. The evaluation of the LTO is quite different from the PT evaluation. The LTO evaluation consists of different components. Each component is unique and requires feedback to promote positive change in the instructional practices of the LTO (Osmun, 2011).

The occasional teacher's evaluation process can 'positively' affect teacher accountability and instructional improvement for student success, as defined by traditional policy and standard systems.

The empirical components are as follows: a set of observable indicators within each performance expectation; pre-observation meeting; classroom observation(s); post-observation meeting; evaluation outcome of satisfactory or unsatisfactory; an evaluation template that documents the result of the evaluation; and recommendations for professional growth. Recommendations for professional development is a component that helps the OT develop and grow their skills.

This method of evaluation itself may lead to LTOs who, to secure future permanent teaching positions, play by the traditional and safe rules of education, rather than act on innovative pedagogies where students are creating knowledge in the world (Fullan & Langworthy, 2014). Instead, to get jobs, teachers perform traditional roles. By conforming to the rules of the (evaluation), the process may results in the "widget effect" (Weisberg al et, 2009, p.4). In an evaluation process, teachers are evaluated individually and given feedback on any improvements, if needed, by continuing professional development (Weisberg et al., 2009). The evaluation should determine which teachers need assistance in a specific area (Kraft & Gilmour, 2017). What sometimes happens in the process is that teachers would pass on previous

evaluation materials from teacher to teacher. So, the evaluation feedback becomes the same for all teachers instead of assessing and addressing the individual needs of the LTOs. The deskilling may happen among the LTOs in these evaluation contexts, and the instructional practices become the same for all teachers in the environment.

**Division of Labour in a school environment**

Instructional practices are an essential element in the educational system (Gershenson, 2011). Which instructional practices get implemented in the schools depends on the organization of the school system, policy, and the culture of learning and leadership, and leadership views on if schools need to be transformed (Thumlert et al., 2018). School organization significantly affects the members of the school (i.e., students, teachers, administration) (Lee, Dedrick & Smith, 1991). Within the school organization, teachers have different memberships. These memberships have a different hierarchy. Among the lowest in the hierarchy are the occasional teachers. Part of this reason for this hierarchy, according to Elizabeth George and Carmen Kaman Ng (2011), is the difference between non-standard temporary work and standard work. Occasional teacher labour is non-standard work. Non-standard work means transient work assignments. There may be negative impacts when the two types of work are in one environment, including a mistrust between the standard workers and the non-standard (Pearce, 1993). The two types of work may cause division among the member arrangement and OTs are seen in their role as doing more basic mechanical work (following plans written by others, taking role, and classroom management) until the PT returns.

Occasional teachers are not treated equally in the school system; they do not have the same rights or identity as permanent teachers, which makes it hard for occasional teachers to assert themselves or new instructional practices in the school, or take risks and try things that can lead to reflection and professional learning. Occasional teachers are an essential, but

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precarious, part of the school system. If they do not do what they are asked, they may not be invited back to the school or obtain LTO status.

According to statistics, students spend 5–10% of the school year with an occasional teacher (Authier, 2012). It is vital to look at the statistics because student learning is clearly affected. The arrangement of the hierarchy of teachers causes a power differential among the teachers. This arrangement creates occasional teachers who may not perform at their full potential (Pollack, 2012). For an occasional teacher to survive in a school environment, or move to LTO status, the occasional teacher must be "invisible," replacing the absent teacher without any disruption and expressing no opinions that would cause confusion among the staff or students in the school environment (Weems, 2003).

Often short-term OTs teachers are viewed as just 'supply teachers, 'the temp', or a teacher replacing, momentarily, the permanent teacher (Chalikakis, 2012). The OTs may be considered strangers in the school by the full-time teachers and the students in the classroom. Part of the reason is lack of ownership of a classroom and the impending return of the permanent teacher in the school (Damianos, 1998). When the OT enters the building, they are expected is to just manage the classroom and follow day plans. Moreover, the OT starts to view themselves as powerless in the school environment and do not view themselves as decision-making teaching professionals (Chalikakis, 2012). The LTO hierarchy is higher than the STO but lower in the school hierarchy. The LTO is considered almost a "real teacher" because of having their own classroom. The LTO becomes part of the school environment and participates in professional development and staff meetings (Pollock, 2008). As discussed, the LTO may be encouraged to play by the rules in order to get a permanent position. In the following chapter, I use my story and my lit review on deskilling and the widget effect to develop a game as a research tool for participants, who are OTs, to play and respond to, as a means of addressing my research questions.

# CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH METHODS

In the introduction, I used an autobiographical narrative approach (Leggo, 2004) to describe my experience as an occasional teacher in the school system. My story provides just a partial view and that is why a literature review helps. In this journey, I spoke about the difficulty of being an occasional teacher and becoming an agent of transformative change in institutions where patterns and routines frustrate meaningful change. This includes the agency of teachers and students alike (Thumlert et al., 2018). My story also highlights a gap between what is taught in university settings and what might be experienced in schools.

My experience as an occasional teacher/long term occasional, and my subsequent research (literature review) led to the development of the simulation and narrative game, *OT Simulator* (which was based on an earlier narrative game I created called *Zombie*). I felt that a better method would be to share my own experience in game form, informed by the literature review, and then get the research participants (practicing OTs and LTOs) to play the game and reflect on the experiences and see how it agreed or differed with their own experiences as OTs.

An interactive narrative game (using the visual novel software, RenPy) that accomplishes this purpose conveys the complexity of being an occasional teacher in institutional settings. The game's explicit premise and rules of play ask: *Do participants identify with the avatar's (OT's) experience? Alternatively, do they see tensions between gameplay and their own experience in institutions?*

The following section explains the importance of having the game system, empathizing with the occasional teacher, and getting a response from the participants. The game (*OT Simulator*) is part of the methodology to get a critical and conversational response from the participants to agree or disagree with the avatar's experience (OT), and then comment. The visual representation and procedural (Bogost, 2011) 'choice' experience allows the participants to respond to and empathise with the avatar's experience.

**Data collection and methods of analysis**

The data from three processes (pre-game survey, gameplay, and post-game interview) were collected and coded on a spreadsheet, based on the key themes from my story and the literature review (Clarke & Braun, 2017; Gibbs, 2012). My findings emerged through the analysis of the data, with findings related to teacher evaluation, division of labour, days plans and standardized curriculum, anonymity, deskilling, the widget effect, colleague and student interactions, and LTO/OT agency. The following section is about the game's design and the type of program used.

**Prototyping a digital game: Towards a game-based research tool**

The original prototype of the game was called *Zombie* (created as a final project for EDUC 5863). Zombie is about an occasional teacher (avatar) who gradually *becomes* an institutional zombie if the choices made follow the script for being a 'good' and compliant OT. The zombie game was based on my story and experiences as an OT in a new school.

The game *Zombie* starts with the shiny red apple avatar. The shiny red apple symbolizes myself, a new graduate and OT with a critical pedagogy, coming into the school to make transformative changes in the school. Depending on the choices the player makes, the avatar continues as a shiny red apple (agent of change) or becomes 'infected' (zombified) by 'the system'. The avatar becomes a zombie shown in figure 1 below.

**Figure 1**



The game *Zombie* uses metaphor to show the deskilling of the avatar if the player chooses to follow the mechanical aspects of the school system. Another example is the gameplay in the staff room. In this scene the teachers speak negatively of the students (based on my experience in staff rooms).

**Figure 2**



Depending on the player's choice, if the player chooses not to engage in the conversation with the teachers, the game continues, and the player stays as a shiny red apple. If the player chooses to engage with the teacher's negative discussion about the students, then the player becomes a zombie and rotten apple ('game over') (Figure 3).

**Figure 3**



The original game highlighted my story and personal frustrations with the OT role and the forms of education that I encountered in that role. It was not a research instrument, just a 'visual novel' to express my story interactively.

With the additional support of the literature review, the *OT Simulator* game takes a different approach, namely, critically looking at OTs' role or function in the institutional reproduction of traditional schooling forms and routines (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990). The scenes from the original game (*Zombie*), such as the teacher turning into a zombie or becoming a rotten apple, were changed based on literature review. I wanted the game to be an open conversation-generating research tool rather than a personal narrative of frustration with didactic outcomes. The software platform used in the original game, Ren'Py, remained the same with the newer game, *OT Simulator*. The explanation of the platform (Ren'Py) is explained in the next section. I then explain why *OT Simulator* is useful as a research tool.

## Platform: Ren'Py

Ren'Py, the open-source (free) visual novel platform, is used for my research purposes. Ren'Py's visual novel engine is similar to 'choose your own adventure' game platforms.

Narrative games provide a nonlinear approach to the storytelling of a situation (McIntosh et al., 2008). The nonlinear approach allows the participants to 'become' the character, or avatar, and make decisions on their path, and choose the different branching pathways they would like to take (Consalvo & Staines, 2021). The player co-directs (Gee, 2003) the story of the avatar based on their in-game decisions. The different episodes in the game *OT Simulator* represent different scenarios that I have experienced and what the research states about the experiences of occasional teachers. Critical research on occasional teachers however is very limited. I therefore decided to redesign the prototype game (*Zombie*) and create *OT Simulator* as a research instrument for my MA thesis in interdisciplinary studies.

In developing this research tool, I follow Thumlert, de Castell, and Jenson (2018) when they ask us to consider "what games do, and what we can do with them at the level of design, and how the procedural mechanics and the narrative and modelling (simulation) affordances of game making tools enable us to do multiplicity of different things: from telling dynamic interactive stories to making empathy games that enable players to feel what it is like, or to be within, the embodied circumstances of others" (p. 710).

I extended the idea of 'doing things' with games (Bogost, 2011) to a research method: to use a game as a means of participant exploration of OT teacher experience within a complex system (schools), captured in the story of a single day of OT work. As James Gee (2003) states, games provide players a multimodal learning environment and a context for them to experience what it is like to be within a complex system. Gee (2003) states that games support players' learning and understanding through the way they provide an empathy for complex systems (like being an 'electron' within a theoretical model, a soldier within a war simulation, or in *OT Simulator*, a teacher within a simulated school and classroom). Gee highlights the relationship between role-taking and complex systems, as the player takes the identity of a character (e.g., electron, soldier, teacher). For example,

Metcalf et al. (2014) describe an educational science simulator (EcoMUVE) where students take the roles of ecologists in a multi-user virtual environment (MUVE) to solve an environmental problem. They interact with simulated objects, measurement tools, and NPCs (non-player characters). In *OT Simulator,* the player takes the role (and avatar point of view) of an OT and interacts with school physical environments, events, 'objects' like day plans, and 'NPCs' (story characters like other teachers, students, and staff). The player interacts with these characters and events within the system of the school over a single day. Apple and zombie metaphors were not included in *OT Simulator.*

Bogost (2011) says that games provide another kind of experience of empathy, as players can take virtual identities to experience the hardships faced by others (e.g., a refugee in *Darfur is Dying* or the lived experience of someone with depression, as in the game *Depression Quest*). The video game allows you to be empathetic to someone's life story. The game can give the perspective of someone's life that is usually hidden from the public. Being in someone else's shoes can teach a player that not all they see or hear is what it seems (Gee, 2011). A game that would feature simulation with narratives, depicting and modeling a person's life with depression, is *Depression Quest* (Quinn, 2013).

As a research object, *OT Simulator* uses both meanings of the word empathy: to create a game where players' have empathy for a complex school system (Gee, 2003) and empathy for OTs faced with daily struggles (Bogost, 2011; Thumlert, de Castell & Jenson, 2018). Thumlert, de Castell and Jenson (2018) state that simulation and narrative work together in interactive games, where story, simulation, choice, and consequences are part of the game experience.

As a game designer, I wanted the players to identify and empathize with the OT experience (based on research and my biography). But used as a research tool, I did not want to force the player to agree with my story, as *OT Simulator* was not meant to 'deposit'

in the banking education way (Freire, 1972). I wanted to give players opportunities to disagree with the story, if they felt it did not speak to them. It almost always did. As a research tool, *OT Simulator* was designed to provoke conversations rather than persuade participants to take a certain view of teaching. With a set of interview questions, the participants (occasional teachers) were asked to play the game and to compare their own experiences to those situations and challenges modelled in the game. In explaining the game rules to the participants, I explicitly asserted they could disagree with any aspect of the game (see Appendix B). I discuss methodology in the following sections.

## Game Development: From Zombie to OT Simulator

Trying to design a game that models the experience of occasional teachers can be quite a complex task. No game or simulation can adequately model the complexity of schools. Some critical games (Flanagan, 2009) have however tried to capture some aspects of schools using satire (*No Pineapple Left Behind* on Steam, n.d.). While my game prototype, *Zombie,* used satire, I decided I did not want my research tool to use satire, but to reflect situations I commonly encountered or found in the research.

Based on the York University graduate course, *Digital Games and Learning*, I used a process that assisted me in generating the ideas for designing the game, *OT Simulato*r. In the game design section of the course, the professor introduced specific game design methods and an iterative process (Flanagan, 2009; Fullerton et al., 2004) to help with the design process. For example, Nussbaum and Flanagan (2011) put values and empathy for others in their critical design method, as well as identify games that help us think differently about social justice, like gender roles or, in my case, teacher roles.

I used an iterative process to plan out the occasional teacher game shown in figure 4. The process helped narrow down my experiences along with the key themes of the research to make the story design less complex and more 'play-centric' (Fullerton et al., 2004) for the

participants. I also used James Gee's 'good learning principles' in games and Ian Bogost's work to consider things like story, identity role-play, 'procedural rhetoric', empathy, and learning from system feedback.

**Figure 4**
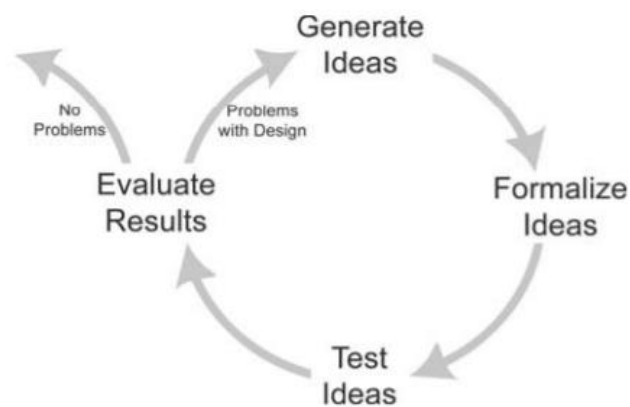


First, in the idea generating phase, I collected my own experience as an occasional teacher, looking at my first assignments as an OT in urban schools in Toronto. This process took some time to narrow down and I mapped out my frustrations and feelings with the OT role, the routine teaching duties I was asked to do. Later, during my literature review and discussions with committee members, I was able to connect my own experience to terms like 'deskilling' and 'the widget effect', and the idea of institutional reproduction.

The terms that came up in the literature review helped me redesign and improve the game alongside themes such as 'deskilling', teacher/OT hierarchy, the 'widget effect', standardized testing, low expectations for OTs, and the 'reproduction' of teaching routines like passing out worksheets or watching videos. My experiences as an occasional teacher helped me select the visual materials I used with the themes and put the themes into a story form (for example, how I felt being an OT was making me follow old methods, like pressing 'start' on a video, rather than bringing change or doing creative work). The game mechanics would be the various 'choices' that an occasional teacher would face when in school. The test ideas were

made using a flow chart shown in figure 5 and the different decision-making an occasional teacher would have to face when working at a school.

After generating the idea phase, the story, images, video, and sound effects were coded in the Ren'Py platform using Python's computer programming language. Original video elements like moving down a long school hallway had to be deleted due to playability issues. The use of sound effects in most of the scenes had to be limited due to loading issues. I wanted to use as many multimodal elements (images and sound effects) as possible to help players feel the experience. Part of the experience is to give the players a branching storyline by providing 'choices' of where they want the story to go based on their experience (Letonsaari, 2019).

**Figure 5**
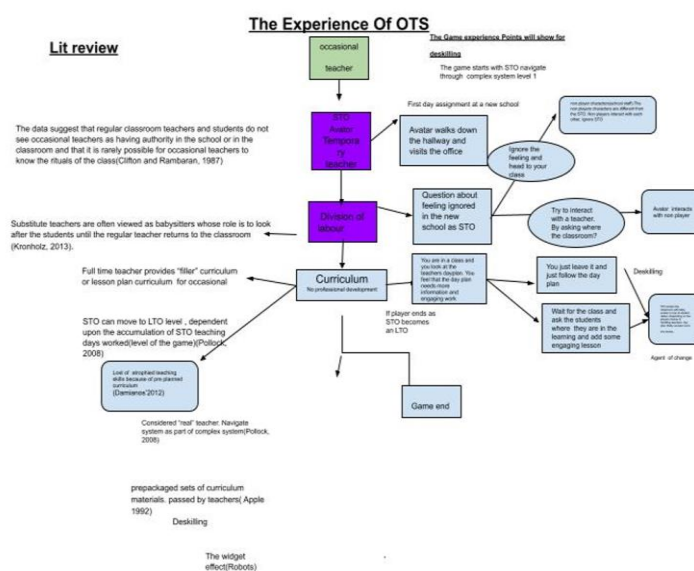


In *OT Simulator*, the players are introduced to the different scenarios that an occasional teacher would experience. The different choices and scenarios constructed for the game are based on my experiences and the literature review. For instance, the curriculum day plan shown in the game is based on an actual day plan that I received while working in a school. Using the actual day plan and the concept from the literature review of deskilling and being a widget is based on the choices that the player experiences during gameplay.

In the design process described by Fullerton, I did many 'playtesting' sessions with my supervisor and the committee to make sure the game was working well as a research tool. During playtesting, I would take notes and then make revisions, and we also discussed when and how to ask questions to participants during gameplay and get 'conversations' started around different game events.

**Research questions associated with the use of OT Simulator**

This study examines the following big question: What is the role or 'function' of OTs in possible institutional reproduction (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990) or in possible system change? This was my original guiding research question. My literature review helped me to narrow related research questions.

- Do occasional teachers (OTs/LTOs) experience deskilling where teachers' professional skills are diminished due to the institutionalized routines that decrease their professional importance (Ballet, 2009; Apple, 1992, Giroux, 2011)?
- A sub-question (related to deskilling) is: do OTs/LTOs experience [or not] the widget effect, where teachers are no longer understood as individual professionals, but rather as interchangeable parts in a system (Weisberg, Sexton, Mulhern, & Keeling, 2009)?
- Do OT/LTOs experience hierarchical division of labour or (seek out) a sense of invisibility and/or anonymity (Chalikakis, 2012)?
- More broadly, what are the impacts on professional identity in the OT experience and how do research participants react to and respond to game challenges and events?

**Data collection:**

I developed a three-part process for collecting data: 1) pre-game survey 2) in-game conversation and 3) post-game debriefing and discussion.

The three-part process started with the pre-game survey (see Appendix A) by getting to know the participants' intersectionality and motivations behind becoming a teacher. I kept this information handy during gameplay. What was revealed during gameplay was the connection the participants had with the game avatar and the subsequent in-depth conversation when playing the game. The digital representations and interactions with the game events stirred many conversations on the key themes from the literature.

**Selection of participants and impact of COVID-10**

Participants were occasional teachers/long-term teachers (OTs/LTOs) working at school boards in the GTA. Due to time issues, the teachers were selected through a non-random technique called convenience sampling (Etikan, 2016). I had met the teachers at various schools and developed professional relationships. When I spoke about the research, they all expressed a strong interest. Before the interview and gameplay, I ensured the participants understood the nature of the research and the game-based method, and they were eager to explore questions about being an LTO/OT. They were all given informed consent forms, which they gladly signed. Initially, I planned to interview each participant in person, but due to COVID-19 and the lockdown of the schools, the individual interviews went online using Zoom and Zoom screenshare. There was a 4th OT that agreed to participate in the study but indicated they were too busy to participate due to the change to online learning.

**Pre-game survey**

First, the participants were asked to conduct a pre-game/interview online survey (see Appendix A). The purpose of the pre-game survey was to understand the teachers' motivations and goals for being an OT/LTO, as well as favorite and least favorite aspects of being an OT/LTO. I wanted to have some basic background information to facilitate conversations during gameplay and see how participants' backgrounds shaped their responses to game events.

The pre-interview survey was produced on Google forms with 15 questions, some of which were open-ended (see Appendix A). Each of the participants was emailed a link to conduct a pre-game survey. They were given a timeframe (several days) to answer before the individual gameplay and interview sessions.

**Gameplay conversation and interview data**

Each participant was asked to participate in a full session of *OT Simulator.* In addition, the game invites players to reflect on situations and events that might lead to feelings of anonymity, to episodes of deskilling and the 'widget effect', and to consider how the OT experience encourages or discourages transformative pedagogies. The game was introduced through a script I wrote to inform participants about the process of playing the game, as well as how I might occasionally interrupt game play to ask a question or see how they felt about a particular game episode. I also invited the participants to speak up at any time during gameplay to comment or reflect upon a particular experience or event (which they all eagerly did). The interview was semi-structured (Appendix B), and I wanted the gameplay and any post-game discussion to be conversational. I also stated that participants did not have to agree or disagree with the experiences of the game, but to use the game to prompt reflection. While key themes (e.g., anonymity, widget effect, deskilling) from the literature review were encoded in the game episodes, they were done so in a way that was not 'depository': the game experience, discussed

in the next section, posed problems (Freire, 1972) in story-simulation form. I tried to avoid making explicit statements of issues. The game works by simply taking the player through a 'typical' day of being an OT, from the moment you arrive at the school to different forms of interaction with the physical environment (hallways and locked doors), the staff team, other teachers you meet, your students, and the day plans provided by the teacher you are OT-ing in for.

After I introduced my interview methods and game procedures using a script (Appendix B), the participants were given a link to the game. The participants (in individual sessions) were asked to share their gameplay screen through Zoom. The game playing and conversational style of interviewing were conducted over Zoom in real-time and recorded due to COVID-19 restrictions. While I felt Zoom might create problems for gameplay and interview experience, it did not, and the participants seemed very comfortable and at ease using this format. The interview was casual, and the participants were invited to react to and speak about their own experiences during the game. During the gameplay, probing questions were asked, at key moments, to better understand the participants' experiences, and if they could relate to the game's avatar. For example, a question (e.g.*, how does this experience compare to your experience so far?)* was asked, followed by a conversation on the participants' experience. The game-playing interview took around 30-40 mins for each of the participants. The whole process was a positive experience for the teachers because of the game's visual representation, and the teachers' desire to tell their stories and reflect on their experiences as OTs.

In the next chapter, I discuss my findings from the pre-interview survey and the interview and the themes and reactions of the participants during gameplay. For this section, I will speak to individual moments of gameplay (what is happening on-screen) and analyse data (like participant comments and responses) and then explore how that data speaks to the research questions, the literature review, and my own story.

# CHAPTER 4: DATA AND ANALYSIS

**Pre-Interview survey**

Based on the survey responses, each participant had very different motivations and goals for becoming a teacher. Like me, the participants were from various racial and gender groups.

Participant 1 identified as a South Asian woman and has been working with a school board as an OT and/or long-term occasional teacher since 2018. She worked as an early childhood assistant educator and 'loves' working with the kindergarten age group; she hopes to become a permanent teacher one day.

Participant 2 identified as a Caucasian male and has worked for the board as an occasional teacher and/or long-term occasional teacher since 2016. He stated that his motivation for becoming a teacher was based on supporting students' growth and confidence. As he put it:

> [Teaching] is the opportunity to work with kids so that I could help them grow confident in their abilities, grow in their understanding of how they can appreciate their own and other people's uniqueness and to celebrate successes alongside my students.

Participant 3, who identified as a black male, has been working with a school board as an OT and/or LTO since 2007. His rationale for becoming a teacher was grounded in social justice, and he stated above all that he wanted "to be a voice for the racial minority."

The teachers expressed different motivations for becoming teachers. Student growth and confidence and "understanding their and other people's uniqueness" was participant 1's motivation. Participant 2 states, "Having previous experiences working with children and the

enjoyment of working with that age group with higher pay was one of the motivating factors."

"To be a voice for racial minorities" was participant 3's key motivation.

Another question that was asked was what the participants' longer-term professional aspirations were in the teaching profession. Two of them expressed the desire to be hired as full-time contractual teachers, with one of them wanting to go further to become a principal. Participant 3 did not want to go further than being a long-term OT because the position requires less "administrative duties and paperwork." The participants were asked what they liked least about being an OT. Participant 1 said, "Not being able to bond with students and staff." Participant 2 stated the many difficulties of being an OT as follows:

> Inconsistent schedule/paycheque; commuting to different locations; stress of having to apply repeatedly and interview for LTOs; difficult to build relationships with staff and students and to feel no sense of belonging because I lack a school community.

Participant 3 expressed that the main drawback to being an OT/LTO was: "wasting too much time on administrative duties and paperwork."

When asked about professional development offered in the schools, two of the participants never had (as OT/LTOs) formal professional development or school board support. However, they took courses outside the school called 'additional qualifications' (AQs). AQs enable teachers to learn and qualify to teach additional discipline areas and teachables. Participant 3 was offered professional development (PD) from his principal. Interestingly, all participants were both OT and LTO. It is expected that OTs do not receive satisfactory professional development to improve their instructional practices (Ryan, Brook 2016) because of being a temporary staff member in the school. As an LTO, you are considered *almost* a 'real teacher' by having your regular classroom and being part of the school environment (Pollock, 2008). However, participants 1 and 2 did not receive PD during their LTO assignments.

**Gameplay, interview and discussion**

In this section I will examine the reactions of the participants during game play, as they moved through the 'day', encountering challenges. Following the path of the simulation game, I will speak to individual moments of gameplay (what is happening on-screen, inclusive of screen shots) and analyse participant comments and responses (as recorded at each game event); I will also explore how that data speaks to the research questions, the literature review, and my own story.

The *OT Simulator* experience starts with 'your' arrival at school in the morning. As this is a story-simulation, the player takes the role and POV (point-of-view) of the avatar (the OT). During gameplay, 'you' (the avatar) make observations and engage in conversations and daily challenges as if you were the OT themself.

I noted that all of the participants were quite excited to start the gameplay. Again, I started with the scripted explanation of how to navigate the game and respond when they felt like it, or address one of my occasional prompts. Each of the participants was given a link to the game to play on their system. They shared their screen of the game on Zoom. As I go over the responses from teachers, I encourage readers of this thesis to play along (the game is accessible here): https://ammao.itch.io/occas

**Entering the school**

The game begins with my first occasional teacher assignment at an urban school (figure 7). I arrived ready and excited at the school in the morning.
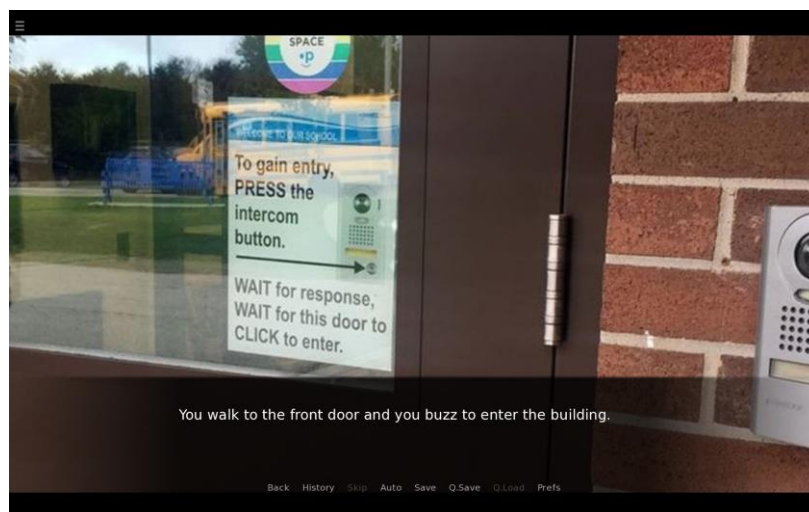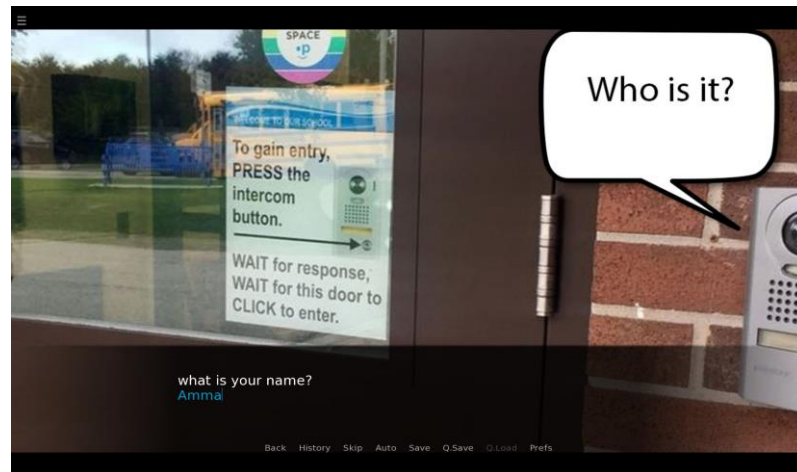
**Figure 7**
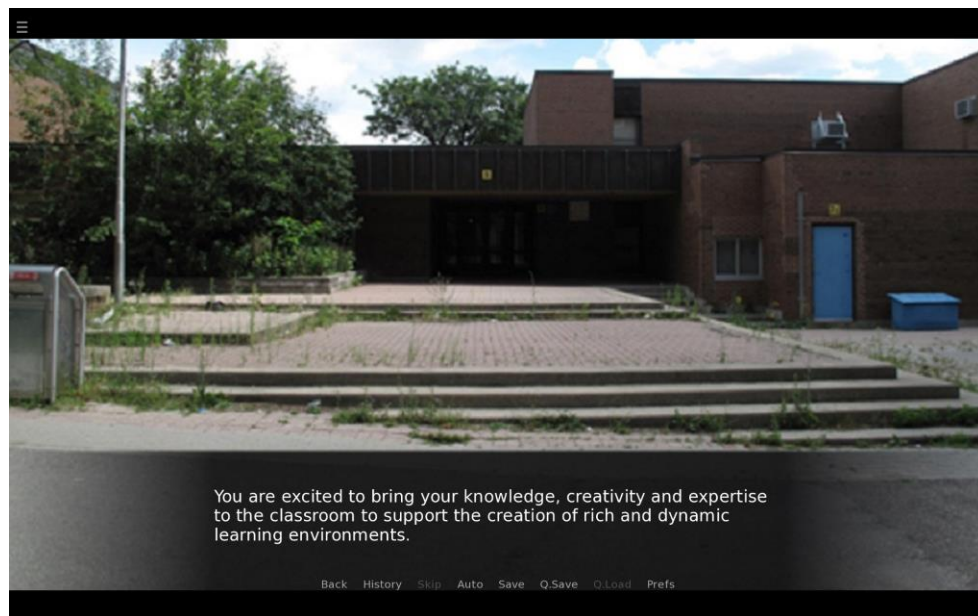


All participants seemed very familiar with the image in the arrival episode (figure 7). Participant 1 asked, "What school is this?" When    I named the school, Participant 1 was quite familiar with the school.   The conversation from the participants led to the experience of working in an inner-city school. Participant 3 preferred to work in an inner-city school because of the motivation in helping racialized students, which he stated as his purpose for being a teacher in the pre-game survey. The other two participants spoke about the difficulties of working in an inner-city school. Some of the difficulties that were commonly spoken about are the interaction with the staff and the feeling of being ignored in the school. Participant 2 felt that inner-city school's staff did not offer help as compared to the other schools. He speaks about the experience of being in an inner-city school as an OT.

> It's a nice school. But people don't offer to help you, even though you look out of place
>
> and confused. I would also say something, when you go to the office, it's very chaotic;
>
> you want to ask the office administrator for help, but they're too busy to help you.

Part of the reason for the chaos in the office that Participant 2 described above is that inner-city schools are faced with multifaceted issues such as at-risk students and low-income communities. This means the office staff might not have the time because of the "additional responsibilities compared to other schools" (Benton, 2017), for example, schools in high-socio-economic neighbourhoods. When an occasional teacher comes to the building, it may often seem that the office staff are too busy and are ignoring the occasional teacher, but in actuality, they may have to deal with many complicated social issues in the school community. Urban/inner-city OT experiences may indicate or reflect wider equity obstacles in those contexts.
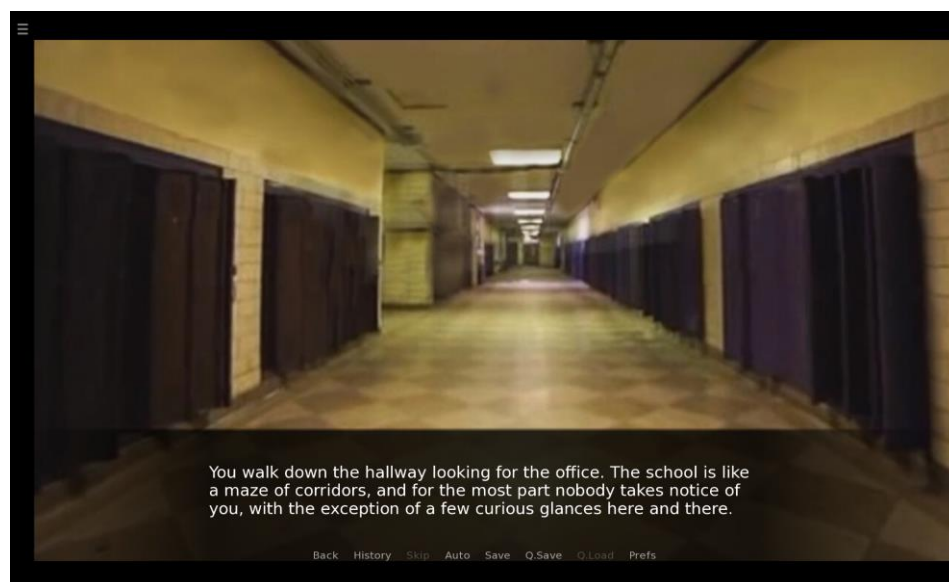
**Figure 8**

Before entering any school there is a buzzer (shown in figure 8). Participant 2 laughed at the images and the sound (figure 8). In response to the encoded sound of the buzzer in the game, participant 2 said, "Yes, this is so true". Participant 2 continued, "I am usually greeted by the secretary of the school [voice] when you buzz…"

It was clear at this point that the players were already getting a feel for the game and recognizing the visual experience and making connections to the episodes. The sound of the buzzer helped bring the familiarity of the school's environment to the participants.

**Figure 9**

When you enter the school, it is clear that you are having an 'overwhelming experience'. As shown in figure 9, the hallway is usually the first place to encounter the rush and looks of faculty and students. The theme of institutions and anonymity comes out of this part of the gameplay. With the halls being either empty or crowded, the feeling of 'invisibility' (anonymity) or being a stranger to the school was the idea of this game episode. Participant 1 expressed the feeling of being "out of place" when she played the episode and agreed:

> That's exactly what I feel... everybody's looking at you. They can tell that you don't belong, but no one offers to help.

Participant 2 had the same experience with the feeling when he played the game passage:

> Yeah, I've definitely felt that way. For sure. And it is kind of how you're feeling that day [laughing]. Are you feeling kind of confident? Are you feeling right? You know, I could probably find my own way if you come into the school and everyone is, kind of, not making eye contact.

The rhetorical question that participant 2 asked in the above statement, 'are you feeling confident?' brings out a good point that Damianos (2014) alerts us to about occasional teachers not developing secure identities (p. 14), and that being an occasional teacher can be an isolating experience. It may be difficult for occasional teachers to build confidence when entering a school environment as an OT.

**Figure 10**



All the participants agreed that being a new occasional teacher in a school is intimidating. The visual of 'the look' in (figure 10) represents eye contact from a passing faculty member. Many of the participants felt the difficulty of speaking to anyone in the schools if you are being ignored or looked at in a way that may feel more alienating than welcoming. These moments of gameplay brought many conversations about faculty member acknowledgement, or lack of acknowledgement, of the occasional teachers. Many of the participants felt intimidated or isolated when going to a new school, which did not bolster their confidence as teaching professionals. Participant 2 felt that he would be too nervous to ask any questions (e.g., find a classroom or office) and would just keep walking because he mentions the feeling of not being a "known quantity":

> You wouldn't know, like, you're not a known quantity unless you went to that school or something... So, people not paying any attention to you is probably what would happen.

According to Chalikakis (2012), participant 2 may have felt like an "unknown quantity" in the school because short-term occasional teachers are viewed as just bodies temporarily replacing the permanent teachers and are often not perceived as 'actual' teachers. Referring to oneself as an "unknown quantity" may also speak to the sense of anonymity discussed by Chalikakis

(2012) and the sense that one is "interchangeable" and "subordinate" in the school hierarchy (p. 41).

**Figure 11**
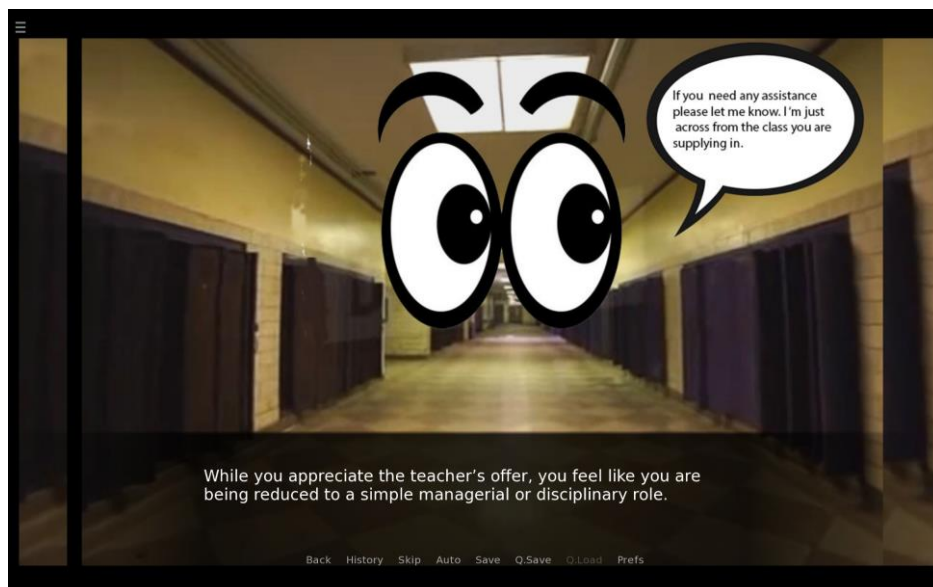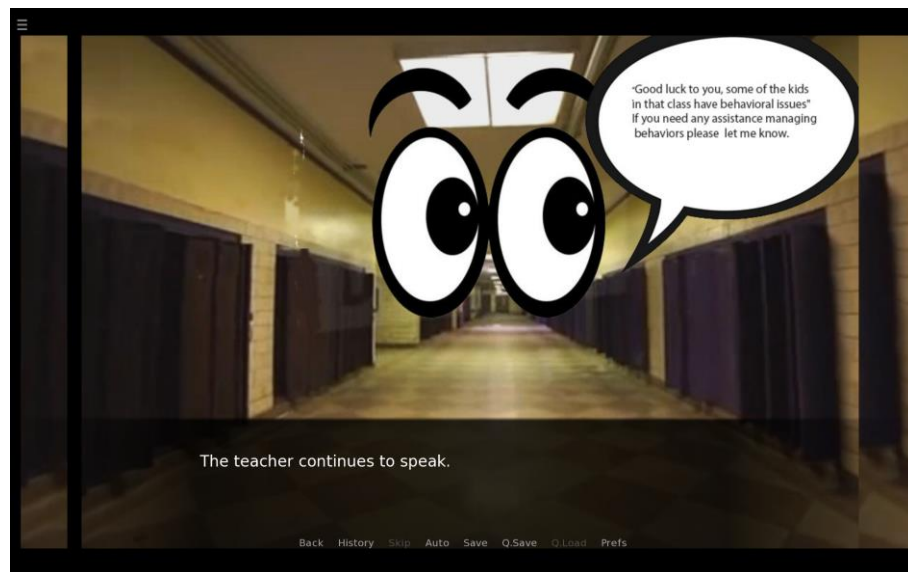




Participant 2 was quite familiar with the permanent teachers' statement, "If you need any assistance." He states that the majority of the time, they say that statement to seem helpful.

> Yes, they [permanent teachers] like saying that... 'Do you need any assistance?' Do they
>
> help… No.

Participant 3 felt it is important to introduce himself to the teacher as part of building a relationship in the school since they (OTs) are seen as strangers in the building. The conversation continued about if the permanent teacher would typically offer help in navigating the school. Participant 3 said "yes," but that the help is minimal because occasional teachers are seen as just supply teachers or temporary replacements for the permanent teacher. Occasional teachers are just brought in to follow the day plans and are reduced to a behaviour management role, rather than a teaching role. Therefore, they may not be seen as professionals (Chalikakis, 2012).

The event depicted above (figure 11) brought many conversations about teachers giving advice about student behaviour. Participant 1 agreed with the statement about "teachers speaking to occasional teachers like they are in managerial roles." She stated:

> Oh, my goodness. So many times, they say that [good luck] to us. Good luck with the students [in a negative or sardonic voice].

Participant 3 also agreed and nodded when played the event about the teacher saying "good luck…" When I asked participant 3, "Do you get the teachers telling you 'good luck' with a class?" The participant said "yes", and the participants saw the 'good luck' as a sarcastic gesture, indicating that their role was mostly about classroom management struggles and control.

**Figure 12**
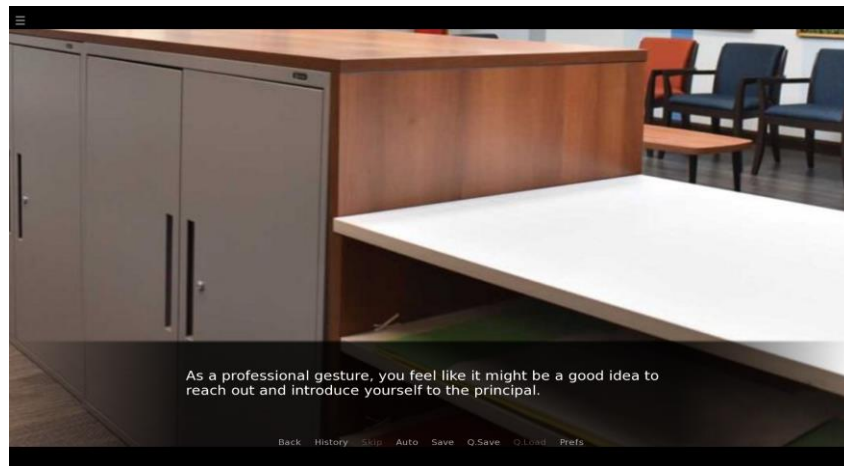


As the participants reported, the sense of trying to belong in a school as an occasional teacher is intimidating. As with figure 12, a sense of anonymity happens first when you enter the school. In figure 12, the image of the office represents a place where you can meet the principal and be recognized as an occasional teacher. Nevertheless, participant 1 stated, in teachers college, the teacher candidates are told to make an effort to go to the office and meet the principal for recognition. In reality, the office can be an intimidating and challenging place to navigate. The office experience may contribute to a sense of anonymity or isolation.

> They're very busy. The office...then you feel like you may pick it [choose to meet the principal option in the game]? Oh, gosh, I know. They always tell us that so many times in Teachers College to introduce yourself to the principal and the VP. What they don't tell you is that it's so intimidating and that they are so busy. And they have no time for you, and they don't want to see you. And also they don't tell you that sometimes they're so busy. They're never in the office.

Participant 3 felt that asking for the principal is difficult. Usually, the principal is not in the office or busy. This signals that there may be big gaps between how a professional teaching role is presented in teachers college and the practical reality of the school. In response, participant 2 said he would instead just go to his assigned class.

Most of the time, they're not in the office. But if the principal is not in the main office, I don't have to see the principal, I will just go to my class.

Participant 2 spoke about his experience of being in a school and the feeling of the office. He uses the term "unknown quantity" a second time to mean a stranger in the school. He felt his number one priority is the class, and meeting the principal should happen later:

I'm talking from my own experiences here. I feel like it is a foreign school that I didn't know and I am an unknown quantity, I probably would not want to ask for the principal. Just because I feel like the responsibilities are more just like getting to the classroom and figuring out what's going on for the day, trying to get that plan first. And then usually you can meet [the principal] at the end of the day or lunch or something like that.

While participant 2 was comfortable bypassing that game choice, it is interesting that the word 'foreign' is used to describe a new school and 'unknown quantity' used to refer to oneself. This may suggest a sense of not belonging or being unknown in an environment.

**Encounters with the day plan and curriculum**

**Figure 13**
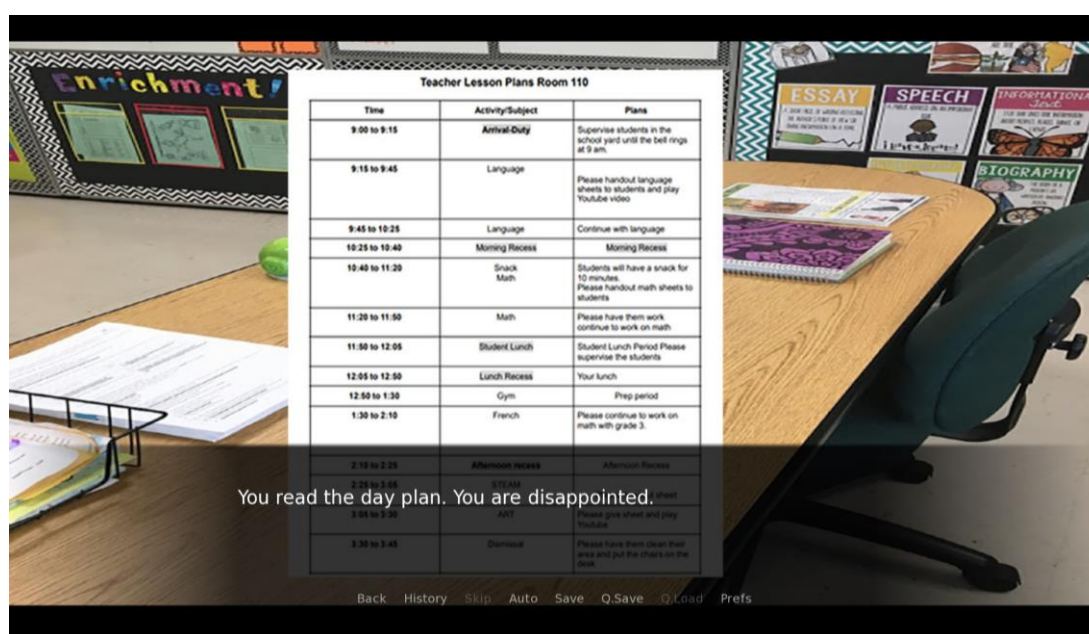
The day plan episode of the gameplay brought many reactions and the most response from the participants, who agreed with the sense of 'disappointment' expressed by their avatar. All of the participants read through the plans of the game presented in detail. There was a great deal of lively conversation spent on this part of the gameplay. They each spoke about their experiences with dayplans in the different classrooms for which they substitute. Most of the conversations were about the type of work given to the students and the limited professional role of OTs. Participant 1 spoke on getting only worksheets to pass out to the students every period in their typical day plan agenda.

> I remember this one teacher, she would leave a different worksheet for every single period, and they would be organized on the desk with a sticky [note] period one, period two, period three, period four, and it was just worksheet after worksheet after worksheet.

The usage of worksheets is part of the deskilling process of the occasional teacher, similar to the kinds of mechanical routines Apple (1992) refers to when he speaks about deskilling. Deskilling has a tremendous impact on the professional identity of the occasional teacher, as suggested by my participants. For these reasons, permanent teachers may not consider occasional teachers professionals, and so they use what Pollock (2008) calls "filler" (p. 26) work to pass on to the students. The occasional teacher is mostly likely to become a 'widget' within the school because of just following the plans the PT leaves. Especially if the lesson plan work is left just to keep the students busy and is not a continuation of learning (Chalikakis, 2012). As stated by participants, the simplicity of work in day plans from the permanent teachers to the occasional teacher is common. The reason for this is that permanent teachers may not see occasional teachers as having the skill to teach the curriculum or manage the classroom so they pass on simple work. One of the participants described his feeling on the day plans supplied in the school as such:

> The majority of the plans that I've been [given] in the past have been, you know, very simplistic in nature, there's no room for creativity.

The simplicity of the day plans participants spoke about brings us back to the research question above. What is the role of the OTs in institutional reproduction? Giving simplified day plans and worksheets to pass down to the students shows that the OT's function or role in the schools is mechanical and the OTs have little possibility of transformative change. And they are not given opportunities to learn about other teaching methods. The negative perception of OTs may create a cycle where permanent teachers provide simplified lesson plans for OTs during their absence from the classroom. According to Glatfelter (2006), the reason permanent teachers provide a simplified lesson for the occasional teacher is that "they [permanent teachers] believe it is easier for them [occasional teachers] to manage" (p. 5). Participant 1 continued her reaction from seeing the image of the desk and the day plan from figure 13 and reminisced:

> It's such hit or miss, you have teachers who leave very detailed plans, right down to their desk being organized according to period with all the photocopies, and then you've got the polar opposite, where you play a game, or take them to the gym, or brainstorm about 'kindness'. A lot is left up to interpretation, and you just have to figure it out. I hate that when they're like, continue working on this next period. Okay, but then what? Does it take two periods [to do the activity]? What am I going to do? You didn't leave me an extra activity?

Participant 1 described the day plan as 'hit or miss' because there are no expectations for the permanent teachers' day plan. Permanent teachers could write the day plan any way they want. Depending on the permanent teacher's views about occasional teachers, the permanent teacher may not spend much time on the day plan for the occasional teacher.

Participant 2 gave a "wow" reaction (below) because he felt he could relate to the simplicity of the day plan. He explains that these kinds of day plans contain mostly worksheets to keep the students busy. Participant 2 stated:

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Wow...Yeah, exactly. If you have plans like this, where you see worksheet work... you know, kind of busy work, you know that it's not going to go over well [with the class], that they're going to be distracted and not engaged whatsoever.

Participant 2 brings a fascinating point. He states that when students are given busy work, it is harder for the occasional teacher to manage the class because of a lack of engagement from the students. When students are given busy work, or "filler", it is harder to manage the class because they may not be engaged, which leads to class disruptions. For participant 2, the occasional teacher must manage the class to be considered an excellent occasional teacher. If the occasional teacher gets a day plan such as figure 13, this could lead to challenges in the classroom. There could be students misbehaving and disrespecting the occasional teacher (Vorell, 2012). Then, the occasional teacher will not have any control over the classroom. Instead of blaming the day plan, the problems will be blamed on the occasional teacher (Skaff-Schumaker, 2018).

The discussion continued with this part of gameplay. Each of the participants had a story of the simplicity of day plans encountered in schools. The "*how I would handle this type of day plan*" became a highlight discussion. Most of the participants agreed that they would add their own plans or modify things. Participant three states that when the plan is not detailed, adding your own pedagogy is necessary:

I have some of my own ideas for [such] plans, including some discussion ideas that might [lead to] more [intellectual] and creative engagement.

However, participant one felt that if she changed the day plans, it would cause issues with the teacher. She would rather go with the plans and not cause any disruptions:

Let's just go with the day plans [*picks option 1, just go with the plans*]. Let's see, oh, yeah, and some teachers get upset if you deviate. And they won't call you back.

Participant 1 felt that changing the plan could cause the permanent teacher not to call her back to work in the classroom again. This is a feeling that was discussed by others during gameplay. Occasional teachers are in some ways rewarded for simply being invisible, and not causing any 'disruptions' by adding their own input or creativity. Adding your own plans may cause confusion with the permanent teacher, and your 'survival' in the school environment (as an employee) could become problematic (Weems, 2003). Participant 3 said he always has to add his own pedagogical ideas to the day plans he encounters: "Yeah, I don't most of the time, I don't follow the plans…. because they are not detailed."

Both participant 2 and 3felt the importance of changing the plans and making them more engaging but feared consequences. But participant 3 rarely followed the plans. Interestingly, participant 3 said in his pre-game survey that he is not looking to become a permanent teacher in the future. He likes working as an occasional teacher for social justice reasons. Therefore, this shows that he is most likely to take on risks as opposed to the other two participants. Adding your own plans and creativity to the day-plan could result in having less student misbehaviour and more class engagement. Which can lead to a positive perception about occasional teachers. But adding or changing day plans might also lead to not receiving a call back to work from the PT.

**Division of labour: Hierarchy and perceptions of OTs by students**

The simplified lesson left for the occasional teacher brings the theme, division of labour, into focus. According to the participants', the type of day plan left for the occasional teacher indicates that occasional teachers' work is often limited to passing out worksheets to the students, and OTs are considered temporary bodies. The description is of non-standard and temp work because they are expected to simply manage the class and pass on and collect worksheets. While full-time teachers' work is standard and professional because they are, in principle, doing meaningful intellectual work in the school environment (George & Ng, 2010).

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In the first part of the game, the participants felt that they were not always recognized as 'real teachers' by other faculty, and that their main duty was just class management.

**Figure 14**
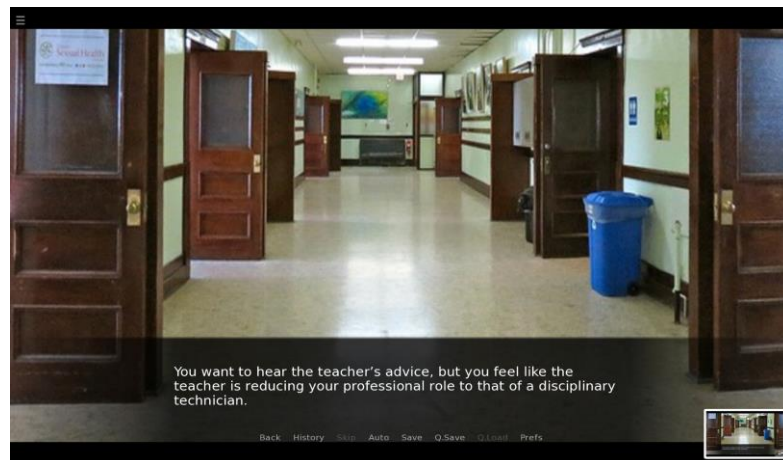


In this episode of the game, the discussion was about the treatment of OTs by students in the class. The participants felt that occasional teachers at times are not treated like real teachers by the students. Participant 2 spoke about his experience with the students and the treatment by students when he entered the classroom:

> Having an occasional teacher in the room - it doesn't really matter what grade or what kind of classroom - the students don't see a teacher...The students would think, 'What do we get away with today?

This view was common among the participants. When entering the classroom, no matter what grade the class is, the students' attitude of "what can we get away with today" brings a powerless feeling that an occasional teacher often experiences when entering the classroom. Occasional teachers are often perceived as 'babysitters' within the school system and classroom: the result leads to a negative teacher-student relationship in the classroom (Chalikakis, 2012)

Participant 3 feels that students sometimes treat him like he is not a real teacher. He feels that, in order to gain the respect of the students, appearance is an important part of respect. Supply teachers should dress professionally.

Yeah, I sometimes experience this later. But the problem is it depends on how you introduce yourself to the students, and how you carry yourself. Yes. And also your appearance matters. Yes. Most important. Yeah, the way you look, the way you dress, the way you carry yourself, the way you introduce yourself. Yeah, it enables the students to begin to have a different view about you.

Participant 1 felt part of the reason occasional teachers get treated differently is because the work left for the students is busy work. The busy work influences the student's behaviour, and the students feel OTs "don't matter" because the permanent teacher leaves them with pointless work and the occasional teacher gets treated badly because of the work.

It's true. It also is the fact that some teachers [permanent] leave busy work and the kids know it's busy work, if they're old enough. And, so then, they know it doesn't matter. And, so then, therefore you don't matter, this day doesn't matter.

Participant 1 brings up the same point previously mentioned on the connection between the day plan and student behaviour. There is a correlation between class management and what type of day plan the occasional teacher receives. Also, when the permanent teacher leaves busy work for the students for the occasional teacher to pass on to the student, this is part of the deskilling process that the occasional teacher has to experience, and therefore they become 'widgets'. The students would see the occasional teacher as not "real teachers," and the respect towards the occasional teacher by the students decreases.

**Figure 15**
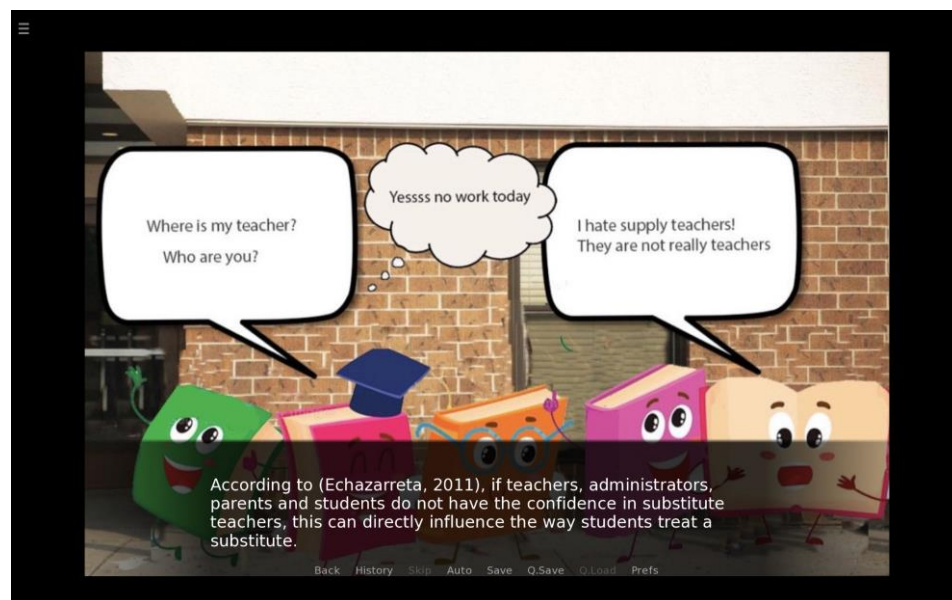


The participants all nodded their heads as they read the passage in figure 15. They felt it is crucial for the permanent teacher to let the students know to maintain respect for the occasional teacher. As participant 2 expresses:

> Yep. 100% [nodding] You know, how the main teacher in the classroom talks about supply [teachers] by phrasing them as guest teachers. And how do you include students in that discussion on treating the occasional teachers, in that kind of decision-making and planning for that day as well.

Participant 3 believes it is up to the occasional teacher to *tell* students that the occasional teachers are real teachers, too. Besides dressing, appearance, and acting the part, to build confidence in the students, participant 3 stated that the occasional teacher should explain to the students the professional role of the occasional teacher.

> You just have to tell them [students] who you are. The school you went to, and all teachers supply teachers are also qualified teachers. The only difference is that they are not permanent. All of them went to the same school [university] and they have the same qualifications.

Participants 1 and 2 believed it is the primary teacher's responsibility to speak to the students about respecting occasional teachers. Part of the problem participant 2 stated is that permanent teachers refer to occasional teachers as "guest teachers" instead of real teachers. The respect to the occasional teacher should be an ongoing discussion set by the teacher in the classroom. According to Chalikakis, using the term guest teacher implies that occasional teachers are powerless and do not understand the rules of the classroom (p. 42) However, the contradiction in the matter is the prescribed busy work in the day plan (for the occasional teachers to pass on to the students) that shows that the permanent teachers also do not actually have professional respect for the occasional teacher.

Participant 3 felt the responsibility should be on the occasional teacher to convince the students that they are real teachers. The challenging part of trying to achieve such respect is that occasional teachers are viewed as babysitters within the school environment and given mechanical work. With this school culture, the babysitter description, and having a lack of power, it may be difficult for the occasional teacher to show students that they are real teachers and deserve respect.

**Ending of the game**

The game ended with figure 16, the occasional teacher avatar being called to the office by the principal asking the occasional teacher to become an LTO. The picture of the principal office door provides the visual metaphor of the principal asking the occasional teacher to become a long-term occasional teacher.

The participants enjoyed playing the game. They felt the scenarios were similar to their experiences, especially with the day plan episode. After gameplay the participants were invited to a post-game interview to answer select questions in regard to the game and to reflect on their experience with the game's avatar.

**Post-game discussion**

The post-game interview was conducted right after the gameplay over zoom. The purpose was to obtain further observations and reflections from the participant's experiences. The methods investigated whether the participants identified with the avatar's (OT) experience and whether they saw tensions between the gameplay and their own experiences in institutions. Although questions were scripted, the primary goals were probing and conversational style. For example, questions such as "Did you find the experience or story (game) reflecting your own experiences as an OT?" brought up many lively conversations about the participants' experiences as OTs. Further probing questions were asked when the participants mentioned the themes of the literature review, such as standardized curriculum or spoke about deskilling in other terms. The post-game interviews lasted 10 to 15 min. I organize responses by theme below.

**'Unknown Quantities': OT anonymity and isolation**

In the post-game interview, one of the biggest conversations from game play was the feeling of 'invisibility' among the participants. As noted above, one participant referred to themselves as 'unknown quantities', and others worried that faculty and students were not perceiving them as real teachers. When asked in the interview about their own experience, and the feeling of anonymity as an OT, all the participants indicated they often felt like 'strangers' or 'unknown quantities' in the school. Participant 1 had the same feeling when first entering the school:

> You enter the school, and people ignore you...people don't generally take you seriously, typically, unless it's a 'nice' school. People don't offer to help you, even though you clearly look out of place and confused.

With participant 1, we spoke about the different schools that would offer help. The "nice" schools he stated were a few schools that would provide support or people actually engaged you.

Participant 2 stated:

> As a new person in the building, no one speaks to you...There's definitely been some staff where you go into a school and they are not engaging you whatsoever, even if you're a new face... sometimes you're just completely ignored. And that's almost a safety concern if you're thinking of it that way.

According to the article, "Building Supportive and Friendly School Environments: Voices from Beginning Teachers," (Ferguson & Johnson, 2010) there could be many reasons why some school environments, according to participant 1, are considered "nice" schools. One of the factors could be that schools that embrace equality among staff would see occasional teachers more as professional teachers. School size can also influence the relationships in the school— the bigger the school, the fewer relationships within the environment. The school's leadership may influence occasional teachers' respect, such as the principal or vice-principal. If communication, collaboration and innovation are encouraged in the school, this could reflect on the type of day plan left for the occasional teacher to pass on to the students (Ferguson & Johnson, 2010).

**Deskilling and the 'widget effect'**

During the post-game conversation, the day plans episode was seen as where deskilling most often occurs. Speaking about the simplicity of the day plan and the busy work (textbook or worksheets) left for the students was seen to cause the most 'deskilling' among the participants. As stated during the gameplay, the busy work left from the permanent teacher for

the occasional teacher to pass on to the students can be shown to impact the occasional teacher's professional identity because the occasional teacher's skills get lost due to routines, and they become widgets for just passing the work to the students (Ballet & Kelchtermans, 2009). These routines and repeated motions may contribute to the lack of confidence and the reproduction of poor teaching methods, making it difficult for the occasional teacher to become an agent of change, or try out ideas and methods learned in colleges or in PD. Participant 1 felt if she added her ideas to the plan, it would cause a setback for the teacher and mean that she wouldn't be invited back. She stated:

> It makes me nervous [the day plan]. You are thinking, I don't want to make changes, I don't want to deviate because I don't want to set this teacher back a day.

Because of class management concerns, the other two participants felt it was important to add their ideas to the day plan. When they are faced with a simplistic day plan, it is harder to engage the students, and this may disrupt the class. Participant 2 believed that it is vital to add your ideas to the day plan for better class management and to gain respect from the students:

> When you need a solution like that [not having good plans], you want to create something by yourself, to engage them. The plan that I see might give me a lot of problems. Students might be disturbing the class, so I should have the latitude to change it to suit my own [methods].

Participant 3 felt that there are low expectations that are communicated to the occasional teacher and the students when they are given a simple day plan based on maintaining behavior, worksheets, and pressing play: "They [permanent teachers] don't really want us to teach them anything: it's kind of like babysitting."

The central fact that participant 3 feels like the job is like babysitting – and that permanent teachers "don't really want us to teach" – is in some way evidence of a deskilling process that may lead to a lack of creative professionalism in their career, or a lack of a professional identity.

**Division of labour, hierarchy**

Division of labour between staff members is quite evident in terms of intellectual teaching roles vs mechanical, and through the kinds of simplified expectations left for the occasional teacher (as represented in the day plan episode). Participant 2 states that plans left for the occasional teacher are done with low expectations that indicate little confidence in the OT, and this may not only model poor pedagogy but also impact OTs sense of professional identity: "I think plans for occasional teachers are often just, you know, the bare minimum."

Participants 2 continues with the conversation of the day plan. He states that the plans are so mechanistic that it is difficult for him to even add his own ideas or contribute in any way.

> The majority of the plans that I've been [receiving] in the past have been, you know, very simplistic in nature, and there's no room for creativity. The day plan says to do this, then next period, do that.

The central fact that participant 2 feels the plans are so simplistic that he cannot add his ideas is evidence that there are low expectations set for the occasional teachers. Also, if participant 2 feels there is no room for creativity, or intellectual work, this may lead to a deskilling process and the habit of routine methods.

According to participant 1, the ages of the permanent teachers can determine how occasional teachers are treated. She states that she gets better treatment with the younger permanent teachers as opposed to the older:

Permanent teachers [differ] especially between the younger staff and older staff. Because I'm young, the younger staff can be more welcoming.

It is difficult to draw conclusions from this statement. However, younger permanent teachers tended to look at OTs differently (less hierarchical), and give them more agency in their classrooms. This may reflect changing trends in education among younger teachers, or it may indicate that older teachers have a more fixed way of conducting their classroom.

## Curriculum and standards

Pre-packaged activities such as worksheets and videos (DVDs, YouTube videos), are typical for day plans. The curriculum became the most crucial topic in the gameplay and the post-game discussion. The participants and I shared familiar stories on the type of day plans received in the classroom, especially those that were not detailed. Does the packaged nature of the day plans reflect the standardized nature of teaching in schools? But in the post-game interview, participant 3 described his experience of being in the classroom with no plans left for him to engage the students. The lack of the plan required him to add his own ideas for creatively engaging with the students. In this case, no plans (while challenging) enabled him to act as a teaching professional. Later, he stated

I go to school; [sometimes] there are no plans; they did not leave any plans. Moreover, most of the time, even if there is a plan left, the plan is not up to date, and the plan is not engaging. I add my ideas.

Participant 3 felt the agency to make changes and be creative to transform the day plan because he felt the need to be a "voice for the racial minority." It is not surprising that he was more motivated to make changes to suit what he perceived as the students' learning needs.

The work given to the students, by the OT, is disengaging and passive (in the case of watching videos) and the student learning is placed on hold for the day (or for consecutive days). Furthermore, he did not feel pressure to follow a poor day plan because he did not want to go further than being a long-term OT, and he seemed willing to take more risks than the other participants. It is interesting that teachers who wanted to obtain full-time permanent status were less likely to take risks or add their own ideas (i.e., more likely to be a 'widget').

Participant 2 felt that the higher the grade-level the teacher was supplying in, the greater the number of worksheets were encountered, and the greater the difficulty in expressing creativity or adding to the learning environment. He states:

> There are always worksheets, especially as you get into the higher grade[s].… I am more comfortable with it. It is not that I am not comfortable being creative. It is that I can sense when they [permanent teacher] do not want you to add to the day plan.

In this case, the OT has learned to be "comfortable" with the idea of following instructions and avoiding input that might disrupt things for teachers. While he makes a good point, what are OTs through this process learning about learning and teaching?

As opposed to the lower grades, such as JK/SK, fewer worksheets and more hands-on, inquiry-based learning are involved. Participant 1 stated during the interview that her grade preference is kindergarten, and she felt it was easier to engage with the students in the kindergarten classes. She speaks about her experience as an occasional teacher in a kindergarten class: "It is a kindergarten class; you are more involved in terms of walking them to and from classes….. sanitizing… cleaning materials."

Interestingly, participant 1 mentions walking with the kindergarten class, sanitizing areas and cleaning materials as being "involved" with the students.

Participant 2 felt the day plans consisted mostly of reading textbook pages and doing textbook activities in subjects like language and math. Nevertheless, there are often no plans for the OT to follow in subjects like music or arts, leaving room for creativity: "I have had some day plans, it just says, language page 52, or math, this, and it's like, completely simple but in music it just says music." Participant 2 pointed out that core curriculum like math and language are left with specific instructions and busy work. But a non-core curriculum such as music that appears to be less academic and have less value, is left more open for the OT to bring their own pedagogy.

Participant 3 spoke confidently about adding his pedagogy to the classrooms. As stated in his pre-survey, Participant 3 is willing to take on more risk because of the purpose of helping racialized students and not wanting a permanent position with the board. Participant 3 states,

> The plan that I see might give me many problems. Students might be acting out; they might be disturbing the class, and I will have the latitude to change it to suit my own. I have some of my own ideas [for] the plans, introducing including some discussion ideas [and ideas] that might invite more creative engagement.

There was an agreement among the other two participants, that adding your creativity to the plan is sometimes necessary to engage the students and manage the class. However, the other two participants were worried about consequences, about not being invited back to the classroom if they do not follow the plans precisely. Which brings us back to the point in the literature review where the occasional teacher must be 'invisible', replacing the absent teacher without any disruption and expressing no opinions that would cause confusion among the staff in the school environment (Weems, 2003).

Inquiry-based learning and projects where a task is included in the classroom and incorporated in the plans help the OT engage and involve the students.

It is true if they have already been working on that inquiry project….they can play off of your expertise. Because if they are engaged, then there is going to be fewer problems for you.

Participant 1 felt that plans with inquiry-based learning makes the job easier for her (but such projects were not the norm).

**Teacher evaluation**

For teacher evaluation, none of the participants had ever received an assessment during their OT assignments. Two of the participants indicated not receiving a teacher evaluation during their LTO assignment. The participants were asked if they had received an evaluation as an OT or LTO. Participant 1 said that even after being with the board for 3.5 years, they had not received an evaluation as an OT or LTO. They did not know an assessment was needed to obtain the proper professional development (PD) to hone their skills. Participant 1 became worried during the interview, "Now you are making me nervous. I am now thinking about this, should I have been evaluated this year?" Participant 2 had received an evaluation but had to request it from the principal. They received constructive feedback but did not receive any follow-up PD recommendations based on the evaluation. One participant had attended PD seminars in literacy and numeracy in the school because of general recommendations from their principal. None of the teachers indicated that they had received PD based on their professional performance.

## CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION

This study has been an interesting journey. The research started from a narrative inquiry approach with many questions about the difficulty of trying to contribute to transformative changes in the institution. Comparing and contrasting my experiences with the literature review

was the most challenging and exciting part. The literature review theorized and gave me the language to express ideas about deskilling and the widget effect. The creative part of the journey was taking my experience with the literature review and building *OT Simulator*. The participants felt the game and the interview was an eye-opening experience. One participant commented that other people should play the game, such as permanent staff and students, to understand the complexity of occasional teachers' experiences.

The experience of OTs is under researched, and research is not asking questions about OTs since they may be 'invisible'. Or maybe we just expect that they should perform as widgets. This study contributes to a focus on OT experience and asking possible inconvenient questions about the impacts of being an OT on professional identity. The awareness of the deskilling of teachers is part of a more extensive problem (Giroux, 2011), to which this study has brought awareness.

Furthermore, most of the participants did not receive any teacher evaluation, which was not surprising but posed another problem. This study helps us with understanding the OT journey and provides awareness of today's institutional hierarchy and the ways new teachers are "taught" in schools. This study is problem-posing and gets us to consider issues rather than come to easy answers or solutions.

In relation to the question of OT's engaging in possible system change, participants 3 made efforts like changing the content of the day plan for student engagement even if it could cause problems with the permanent teacher. However, he had no aspirations to be a permanent teacher, which may have empowered him to make changes based on his social justice motivations.

To the question of OT's function in institutional reproduction, the other two participants, 1 and 2, would take fewer risks, such as making changes to the day plan even

though they are aware of the issues in the plan (i.e. passing of worksheets, turning on a YouTube video). But because of trying to become permanent teachers, they tend to follow the plan. Given the nature of the day plans, we should be concerned about how the OT experience may lead new teachers down the wrong path.

Motivation and career paths can be related to the amount of agency or deskilling from the findings. A motivation to advocate for the student's learning came up in the findings. When the occasional teacher advocates for the students, regarding social justice, part of the process is to change the plan and provide more engaging work: less deskilling happens.

Another key finding is the correlation between difficulty in class management and a less detailed or mechanical day plan. Inquiry projects led to more engagement, and less need for class management. Teachers could "play off their expertise" and experience professional importance.

## Limitations of the Study

There are limitations to this study. The sample size of participants was limited to three occasional teachers due to the time constraint and the COVID-19 restrictions. However, the game-based and conversational interviewing methods brought rich insights in addressing the research questions about        occasional teachers' deskilling and the question of a decrease in professional importance (Ballet, 2009). The insightful information from the three participants outweighed the sample size limitations. The other limitation was to address OT's and LTO's experiences. Initially, the game's planning stage was for the participants to experience the OTs avatar and become an LTO once they navigate the OTs experiences. Because of time constraints and the amount of coding involved in producing the game, I could only focus on the OT's experience of the game. Teacher evaluation was a limited topic in the discussion because of the

lack of game focus on LTOs. Teacher evaluation usually happens when one becomes an LTO, but as the interview showed, evaluation and PD are uneven.

There is also a risk of using simulations that force people to identify with the character. In my study, I ensured that participants were free to disagree or disidentify with the story episodes if they did not reflect their experience.

Last, this study should not be seen as a research project that answers questions about problems but instead as a study that asks new questions using a new methodology: a problem-posing simulation and game-based research tool mobilized to generate reflection.

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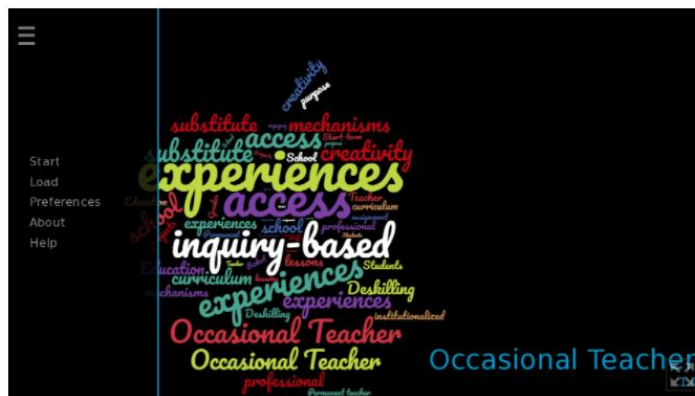
# Appendices

Appendix A
Pre-Game Survey

What is your age? (approx.) *

○ 18-24 years old

○ 25-34 years old

○ 35-44 years old

○ 45-54 years old

Race (self-identify)

Short-answer text

Gender

Short-answer text

Race (self-identify)

Short-answer text

Gender

Short-answer text

When did you get your teaching certificate/degree?

Short-answer text

Why did you become a teacher?

Long-answer text

Are you an OT or LTO?

◯ OT

◯ LTO

How long have you been an OT or LTO?

Short-answer text

What are your longer-term professional aspirations (e.g., full time/permanent teaching position; continue in OT/LTO role; other professional goals, etc)?

Long-answer text

How many School Boards do you work with?

Short-answer text

Public or Private? Other?

☐ Public

☐ Private

☐ Both Public and Private

☐ Other...

Would you describe your school-board community as urban, suburban or rural?

○ Urban

○ Suburban

○ Rual

○ Other

As an occasional teacher, what do you believe your role to be?

Long-answer text

What part of the OT experience do you like best?

Long-answer text

What part of the OT experience do you like the least?

Long-answer text

Have you had PD opportunities? What kinds of professional development activities have you undertaken in the last three years (if any)?

Long-answer text

**Appendix B**

<u>**Game play script**</u>

<u>Script on the start of the interviewing.</u>

This simulation game is based on my research (and my own experiences) on common challenges facing OTs and how schools, as institutions, shape our identities and roles as teachers. As you play this game, I would like you to reflect on the situations and stories … and respond (out loud) to the parts of the game that seem familiar, or reflect your own experiences, as well as experiences you may have that are different from the simulation.

**Part 1:** I will ask you to respond to the game as you play - just let me know if the story or situation is familiar, or if it is different from your own experiences.

The purpose of the game is to start a conversation about being an OT.

At certain points in the game, you will be asked to make choices and I might, now and then, also ask you questions about the story.

**Part 2:** I will ask you some follow up questions after the game to address some research questions I have.

**Note :** Document the responses of the teachers' reaction to this slide.

**Ask the teacher if they identify with the scenario of the slide.**

**Note**: feel free to speak up at any time, about their experiences in relation to the game. And if you want, you can read aloud, or silently.

**Questions that Respond to the Survey (WARM UPS)**

e.g., in your survey, you said your <u>favorite</u> thing about being an OT was X, can you tell me more about y?

e.g., in your survey, you said your <u>least favorite</u> thing (or being challenged) about being an OT was X, can you tell me more about y?

Is this experience or situation familiar?

In my experience, people tend to look at me a bit curiously when I walk down halls?

**Optional Prompts to Facilitate In-Game Responses (if necessary)**



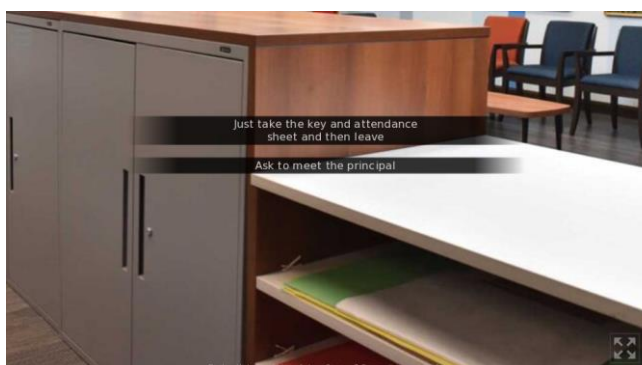How does this experience compare to your experience so far?

How do you feel when teachers are giving you advice about students in your class?
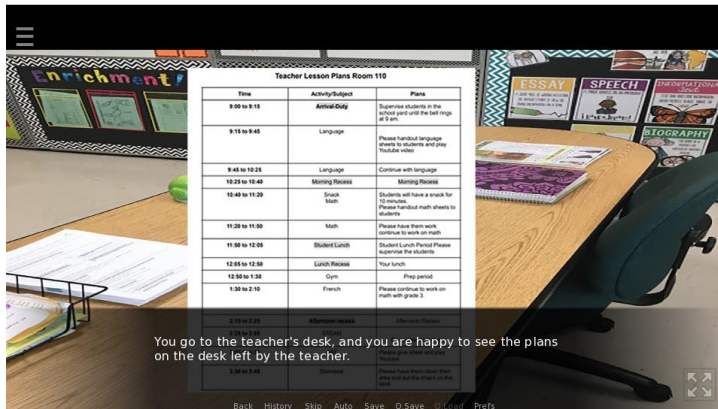


Ask the participant why they made that decision?

If picked " Should you ask a staff member? How easy is it to speak to staff members in the school?
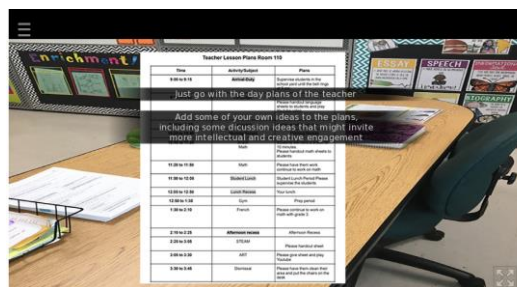


Ask why they made the decision?

Ask generally how you are treated in the school ?

This is a real plan given to me in the grade ¾ class.

Talk to teacher about the dayplan in the game: The picture shown is an actual dayplan.



This is a real plan given to me when I was supplying for grade ¾ class.

If not, can you give examples of a day plan that you were happy with and why did you find the day plans of the school efficient for student learning?
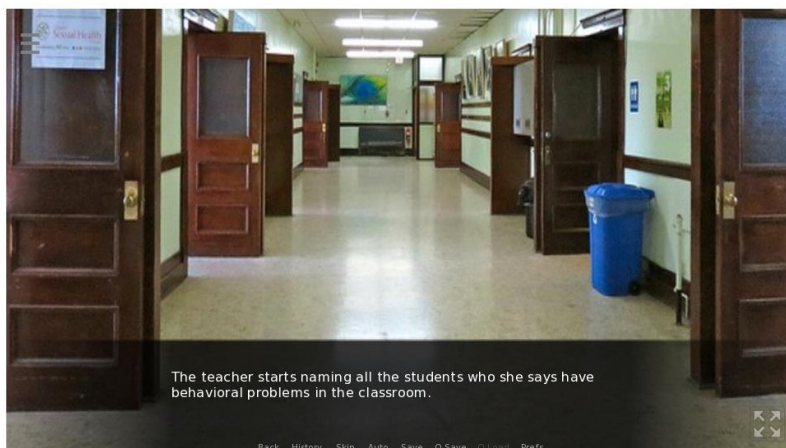


Have you ever had this experience?

How is your conversation about a student's achievement in the school with permanent staff?
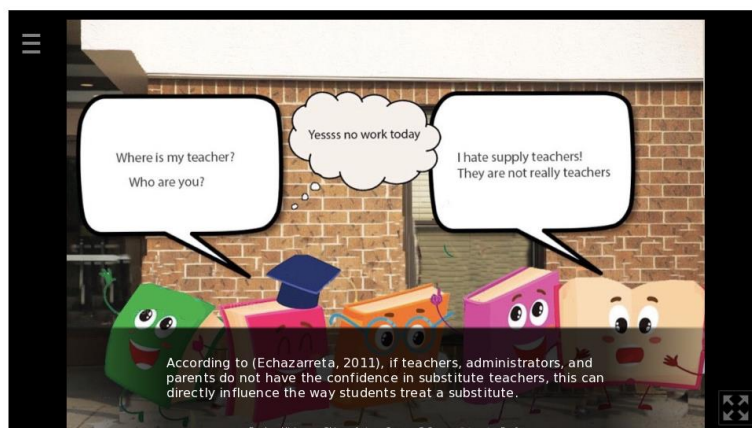


Could you describe some of your experiences with your first interaction with students in your class as an occasional teacher?

After the bell sounds, ask the participants if they experience anything in the game?



What is your sense of professional identity? (in terms of respect by permanent staff or assumptions about your capacity as a teacher)?

Do you feel like you are treated differently or than full time teachers within a school when you are doing daily occasional teaching compared to LTO teaching?



**Appendix C**

**<u>Post-Game Interview Questions</u>**

Q 1: In playing the game, did you find the experience or story to reflect your own experiences as an OT? If so, what experiences were similar to your own? If not, how is your experience of being an OT different?

Probe: Respond to themes and develop conversation / similarities or differences?

Q2: In my own experience, I sometimes feel anonymous in schools in my role as an OT (for example, at the office during check-in) and disconnected from other faculty and administrators in the school. Do you sometimes feel unacknowledged in your role as an occasional teacher?

Probe: Respond to themes and develop conversation / similarities or differences?

Q3: As an OT, our day plans are typically organized for us. In the game, I highlighted experiences where we are often asked to follow instructions and where our role is mostly constrained to taking role, passing out hands-outs, or turning on and off media, or working with pre-packaged curriculum. Is that similar to or different from your own experiences?

Probes: develop conversation / share similarities or differences? >>>

> Q3(a): How often do you feel day plans are engaging for students? How often do you find them mechanical and routine for both you and them? Do you ever modify or improve the day plan?

> Q3(b): Do you feel like you have some latitude for creative input? Or do you feel changing the plans is risky or problematic?

Q4: Do you find being an OT to be a valuable professional learning experience for being a full-time teacher? For example, in terms of witnessing or learning about innovative pedagogies?

Q5: In the game, the full-time teacher names the students with behavioural problems, then advises you to manage the class well. How often do you feel like you are being assigned an administrative and managerial role as an OT?

Q6: In the game, colleagues and students alike treat you differently than a full-time teacher. Can you comment on that experience? And the impact of that experience?

Q7: Is there anything that you would like to add or anything you feel was not asked regarding the OT experience?

Q8: Have you ever been evaluated as an OT or LTO? If so, please tell me your experience when you were evaluated? And how were you evaluated and by whom, using what criteria?

Q9: (If LTO): Can you compare your experience of being an OT with an LTO? How different are these roles and experiences in relation to our discussion?

## Appendix D

# Informed Consent Form

**Date**: May 10th, 2021

**Study Name**: Exploring the Experiences of Occasional Teachers

**Researcher name**: Amma Ofori ,York University in the Interdisciplinary Master's program. Principal investigator of this research. Email yu142183@my.york.ca

**Purpose of the Research:** The purpose of the research is to explore the experiences of Occasional Teachers in schools, and examine how school systems and OT experiences shape, inform and constrain teaching practices and roles. Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, the research will be conducted through online using zoom. Participants will be invited to play a short simulation game and then respond to the game (based on research and the primary investigators own stories). The objective is to bring awareness of the challenges of occasional teachers, possible constraints on OT creativity in schools, as well as possible opportunities for professional learning.

**What You Will Be Asked to Do in the Research**: As a participant, you will be invited to play a short digital game/simulation (online). During game play, you will be invited to talk about the game experience as well as comment on if the game represents your own experience, or if you have different experiences as an OT in school. After the short game play, you will be asked additional questions about being an OT (challenges and opportunities for learning).

The total estimated game-play and interview time will be one hour. The interview will be audio recorded for transcription and analysis.

**Risk and Discomforts**: We do not foresee any risks or discomfort from your participation in the research.

**Benefits of the Research and Benefits to You**: The study will give you the opportunity to reflect upon your experience of being an OT in Ontario schools and to co-explore recent research on the challenges and opportunities of being an OT/LTO.

**Voluntary Participation and Withdrawal**: Your participation in the study is completely voluntary and you may choose to stop participating at any time. Your decision not to volunteer, to stop participating, or to refuse to answer particular questions will not influence the nature of the ongoing relationship you may have with the researchers or study staff, or the nature of your relationship with York University either now, or in the future. If you decide to stop participating, you may withdraw without penalty, financial or otherwise, and you will still receive the promised inducement. In the event you withdraw from the study, all associated data collected will be immediately destroyed wherever possible. Should you wish to withdraw after the study, you will have the option to also withdraw your data up until the analysis is complete.

**Confidentiality**: All information you conducted during the research will be held in confidence. Unless you choose otherwise, all information you supply during the research will be held in confidence and unless you specifically indicate your consent, your name will not appear in any report or publication of the research. The interview will be audio recorded, and handwritten for data analyzing. Your data will be safely stored in a password protected laptop with an encrypted hard drive and only the researcher (Amma Ofori) will have access to this information. The data will be archived in this manner for a period of 9 months (February 1 2022) and then destroyed. Confidentiality will be provided to the fullest extent possible by law.

Due to the Covid pandemic, the research will be conducted on Zoom. The researcher(s) acknowledge that the host of the Zoom may automatically collect participant data without their knowledge (i.e., IP addresses). Although this information may be provided or made accessible to the researchers, it will not be used or saved without participant's consent on the researchers system. Further, because this project employs e-based collection techniques, data may be subject to access by third parties as a result of various security legislation now in place in many countries and thus the confidentiality and privacy of data cannot be guaranteed during web-based transmission.

**Questions About the Research?** If you have questions about the research in general or about your role in the study, please feel free to contact me at yu142183@my.yorku.ca or my supervisor, Kurt Thumlert kthumlert@edu.yorku.ca. You may also contact the Graduate Program Interdisciplinary program at undefined gradinst@yorku.ca

This research has received ethics review and approval by the Delegated Ethics Review Committee, which is delegated authority to review research ethics protocols by the Human Participants Review Sub-Committee, York University's Ethics Review Board, and conforms to the standards of the Canadian Tri-Council Research Ethics guidelines. If you have any questions about this process, or about your rights as a participant in the study, please contact the Sr. Manager & Policy Advisor for the Office of Research Ethics, 5th Floor, Kaneff Tower, York University (telephone 416-736-5914 or e-mail ore@yorku.ca).

**Legal Rights and Signatures**:

I_____consent to participate in Skills, Strategies and experiences of occasional teachers conducted by Amma Ofori   I have understood the nature of this project and wish to participate. I am not waiving any of my legal rights by signing this form. My signature below

indicates my consent.

**Signature**_____        **Date**_____
Participant


**Signature**_____        **Date**_____
Principal Investigator


**Additional consent (where applicable)**

    1. **Audio and video recording**

☐  I consent to the audio-recording of my interview.
☐  I consent to the video (Zoom) recording of my interview.


**Signature**                                                                          Date:

_____        _____
      Participant: (name)