

Positionality Statement

Shelby Clark

I come to this work with deep awareness of the histories, power, and responsibilities tied to my identity and institutional affiliations. I am a white woman from an upper-middle-class East Coast background. I trained at and am affiliated with Harvard University and other elite universities. I hold a PhD. I recognize that these identities—and the institutions behind them—offer authority, access, and privilege. They also carry long legacies of exclusion, extraction, and harm. I am mindful of longstanding critiques of academic research in communities, including a question many educators and community members have rightly asked: [*Why am I always being researched?*](#)

This awareness shapes how I approach my work in New Mexico and my partnership with ICLRLT. I strive to come from a place of intellectual humility, curiosity, and accountability. I know that I will get things wrong and that learning is ongoing. I do not enter communities assuming expertise about local histories, cultures, or educational realities. Instead, I see my role as listening *first*. I aim to create structures that support local voices by providing research tools, facilitation practices, and analytical support in the service of community-defined goals. At the same time, I believe the expertise I bring—as a scholar of applied human development, education, and character development—has value. That value matters when it is invited, shared transparently, and used in ways that are useful rather than extractive.

Over my career, I have worked and conducted research with teachers and students in diverse educational settings, including urban charter schools serving students of color and undocumented students, elite independent schools, and refugee-serving schools in Minnesota. Most recently, I have collaborated with educators and community partners in schools of various types across the globe. These experiences compel me to reflect on colonization, power, and privilege, and show how research and professional development can reproduce harm if not grounded in local histories, cultures, and relationships.

Through my work at [Project Zero](#) and [The Good Project](#), I have engaged in ongoing reflection on my positionality, including attending the [Developing Anti-Racist White Educators](#) training. I have focused on whiteness, institutional power, and the responsibilities that come with working at a nationally recognized research institution. As a result, I am committed to critical qualitative and quantitative methods, participatory research designs, and feedback-oriented approaches that prioritize learning, relationship-building, and accountability rather than extraction or evaluation.

In my teaching and research, I center the belief that people learn best when they can bring their whole identities, experiences, and ways of knowing into the learning space. I strive to create classrooms of respect and belonging; particularly, spaces where ambiguity is welcomed, deficit-based narratives are challenged, and strengths-based perspectives guide our work. Across my courses and professional learning partnerships, I aim to openly share my positionality and invite others to examine theirs, recognizing that vulnerability is essential to equitable and inclusive practice.

My commitments to equity and social justice further stem from my experiences as a parent navigating educational systems on behalf of my child. These experiences have sharpened my focus on belonging, dignity, safety, and agency, and reinforced my belief that schools must help all young people develop self, purpose, and possibility—especially in these polarized, uncertain times.

Within the New Mexico context, I approach this work as a learner and a partner, not a savior or a solution-bringer. I am especially attentive to the legacies of colonization, the sovereignty of Indigenous communities, and the importance of culturally-rooted, place-based knowledge. My hope is to work alongside educators and communities in ways that honor local wisdom, support shared leadership, and build genuinely reciprocal research–practice partnerships.

Ultimately, I see this work as relational and unfinished. I am committed to listening, to being challenged, and to repairing when harm occurs. I will continue to ask how research and professional learning can better serve those they are meant to support. I hold both humility and accountability as fundamental to this work. I am grateful for the opportunity to continue learning from and building meaningful professional development with New Mexico’s educators, students, and community members.