

Who Am I? Unpacking My Identity as a Physical Education Teacher

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Submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Education

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## **Abstract**

This research project presents a narrative inquiry and autoethnographic stories that make up my identity that in turn informs my teaching practice. By writing a collection of narratives from my life and analyzing their meaning, I have been able to answer the research question: Do I teach who I am? This has allowed me to demonstrate the impact of teaching who we are. I begin by debriefing the importance of teaching who we are and how this fits into this narrative inquiry. I provide the theoretical framework through the work of Parker J. Palmer (1997) that led me to take this research journey. Then I provide a literature review of identity theory, identity in the school system, and identity as a physical educator, so that I am able to understand and incorporate them into my narrative reflections. In the methodology of the narrative inquiry, I provide justification for the research and display the benefits of being vulnerable in qualitative research. The narratives are then presented and provide a flowing connection of how the story grew and unfolded throughout my life. The emergent themes—perfectionism, people-pleasing, holistic health, and masculine and feminine energies—are unpacked to show my identity and why I teach the way I do.

## **Acknowledgements**

Even with the impact of Covid-19, I would like to thank a number of people for their virtual and in-person support.

To my family: Thank you for letting me turn my childhood room into an office space during a global pandemic and keeping the noise levels down when I asked.

To my partner: Thank you for trading date nights out for nights in, allowing me to work on my research and always encouraging me to pursue my passion for education.

Sutherland Barnett, thank you convincing me that the Master of Education program was for me and guiding me along the way.

Hilary Brown, thank you for allowing me to work with you, guiding me on the right path, asking why I pose questions to the reader rather than myself, and being flexible with my approach.

Nancy Francis, thank you for showing me the value of dance in physical education, and thank you for being a strong female leader who I look up to.

Tim Fletcher, thank you for convincing me that teaching abroad offers valuable career and life lessons; without that, I would not have these stories to share.

Joanne Walsh, thank you for sharing your passion for physical education with me and moulding my identity as a physical educator.

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## Prologue

*Emails were flooding my inbox like a damned waterway that just broke apart. Sitting in the parking lot on my way back from getting groceries, a once carefree activity that I took for granted, I opened the first message. It stated that schools would be closed for an additional 2 weeks following March Break. I had my teacher hat on; I thought about my students and what I had left at the school. I wondered what this meant for my first long term occasional assignment. I questioned if I would I still receive pay?*

*I clicked on the next email with a message from the university. It felt as though we were in a different reality. All classes were being converted to online starting the following day. Relief washed over me. Yes, I thought, I do not have to drive the 2-hour commute to school tomorrow. I had not thought about the future impact; I was not aware that it would change my entire research process. For the better? I now think so.*

*Weeks of quarantine were added on in extended increments and as I finished the last of my course work, a cloud of uncertainty gloomed over my head. I had no idea how I was going to complete my Master's program when no participants were available and the Research Ethics Board was bombarded with Covid-19 related studies. When it was time to face the reality, I hoped that my supervisor would have the answer. We connected virtually over Microsoft Teams with only a few technical errors, and came to a conclusion about the possibility of a narrative inquiry.*

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In times of uncertainty, it is hard to find the silver lining. Writing a narrative inquiry is a vulnerable act, takes practice, is always evolving, and requires time to consider how the narrative comes across to you and your audience. Richardson (2001)

states that “writing is a method of discovery, a way of finding out about yourself and your world” (p. 35). During quarantine there was time to reflect and dig deeper into the embodied knowledge of who I am as a teacher. My task of staying home for the greater good could be put to use to do something that I felt I was always too busy to do. During teacher’s college we discussed our teaching philosophy and our teaching identity, but they were single lessons. Something to check off the list. Usually I would say something along the lines of, “I am a student-centered holistic educator.” There were concepts that I agreed with, but never once questioned why they resonated with me. Although quarantine took a toll on my mental and physical health, I am grateful for the time to figure out how my identity and integrity was woven into the statement “we teach who we are” (Palmer, 1997, p. 15).

## CHAPTER ONE: WHO AM I? UNPACKING MY IDENTITY AS A PHYSICAL EDUCATION TEACHER

During the research process, I was able to continue my morning routine I had developed during my university program. Journaling was one practice that helped me align my goals with my actions every day. The concept of slowing down my breathing and connecting with my thoughts was intriguing to me. Ever since I can remember, I was always in a rush. I was rushing to the brand-new Suburban in which my mom would be waiting to drive me home from school so I could rush again to get to a hockey game. I was rushing to dance practice. Or I was rushing from the fields of tobacco and ginseng where I spent the majority of my summers hoeing, picking berries, and topping the flowers off the tobacco plants, so that I could fit in a run before dark. I always felt as if I needed to be somewhere else and finish the current task quickly, so I could move onto the next one. It felt as if there was never enough time in the day and that being present in the moment was doing a disservice to my productivity levels. I needed to find a strategy to help me work through the speed at which I moved through life. Through journaling I was able to take away that rushing, tense feeling. With some practice, I got into a routine in which I journaled in the morning and also at night to set intentions and to create a positive outlook for the day, while also reflecting on areas of content and areas of improvement.

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### *Mindful Morning*

*I rolled over to stretch my arm out from under the mountain of blankets keeping me warm. I hit the alarm off, I felt the rush of cold wind that came through the crack in*



*the window. I reached around the bedside table as I tried to navigate my headphones. Still not fully awake, I put them in each ear and slid my back up the bed frame to come to a seated position. I pressed play on the morning's guided meditation.*

*I breathed, in through the nose, out through the mouth.*

*As the meditation practices finished to a close, I felt a small smile form as the corners of my mouth curled up on each side. I moved in a state of ease, I gently lowered my legs to the floor and planted my feet on the ground; I felt the connection to the earth. Grounded. I made one big stretch into the air with my arms above my head and I felt the muscles in my back lengthen. I danced from foot to foot as I tried to keep my balance and elongate the feeling. I walked over to my office area, consisting of a desk and two huge book shelves, located at the other corner of the bedroom. I grabbed my journal and purple pen. I titled the page: 5 Things I Am Grateful For:*

*5 Things I Am Grateful For*

- 1. I Am Grateful for Fields of Good Soil*
- 2. I Am Grateful for Being a Member of a Sports Team*
- 3. I Am Grateful for my Family's Health*
- 4. I Am Grateful for the Ability to Run*
- 5. I Am Grateful for the Power of Dance*

*I closed my morning journal and tucked it back onto the shelf with my other notebooks. As I walked downstairs to make my morning cup of coffee, I felt my energy shift into a positive outlook; more "I get to" instead of "I have to." Just the outlook I needed in the time of a global pandemic.*

### **We Teach Who We Are**

When I do not know myself, I cannot know who my students are. I will see them through a glass darkly, in the shadows of my unexamined life-and when I cannot see them clearly, I cannot teach them well. When I do not know myself, I cannot know my subject-not at the deepest levels of embodied, personal meaning. I will know it only abstractly, from a distance, a congeries of concepts as far removed from the world as I am from personal truth. (Palmer, 1997, p. 15)

Palmer (1997) begins by stating that teaching is complex for three different reasons: “first, the subjects we teach are as large and complex as life. ... Second, the students we teach are larger than life and even more complex ... but there is another reason for these complexities: we teach who we are” (p. 15). There is a delicate balance with these three sources of knowledge in the classroom. This autoethnographical study focuses on the source “we teach who we are” (Palmer, 1997), revealing that a teacher’s soul impacts the students, the subject, and the teacher’s way of being (Palmer, 1997). According to Palmer (1997), the soul is made up of two components that are evident in the classroom: identity and integrity—identity being comprised of all aspects that make up the self, and integrity meaning acknowledging who I truly am and portraying the sense of self outwards (Palmer, 1997). When teachers do not stay true to their identity through integrity, there is a phoniness or identity crisis that can be felt by the teachers and the students. As Palmer (1997) notes, teachers can stay true to their identity and integrity through three concepts that are evident, implicitly or explicitly:

1. Intellectual: through the pedagogy and content that we teach
2. Emotional: meaning the feelings of the teacher and the students
3. Spiritual: as the teacher connects to the vocation of teaching.

From an epistemological standpoint the intellectual, emotional, and spiritual way of knowing are prevalent in our education system, but there is a strong emphasis on the intellectual way of knowing. For teachers, there is a focus on pedagogy and the curriculum; for students, it comes down to assessment and meeting the intellectual expectations. Even when students are given freedom to show their work in different forms, it is the method of pen to paper or presentations that are viewed as the most reflective of intellectual superiority, whereas displaying knowledge through song, poetry, or movement are viewed as having lesser worth. The same devaluing of the emotional and spiritual concepts is seen through an ontology perspective.

The education system is focused on the intellectual way of being and sees an emphasis on the emotional and spiritual as an alternative, or different way of being. Miller (2000) relates to this concept when discussing the soul and spirit in education, stating that the traditional form of education focuses on “preparing our students to compete in a global economy” (p. 4) with an emphasis on the intellectual: “We are taught to find the right answer or develop the right argument. By ignoring or denying contemplation the soul is also denied. The soul hides while our minds analyze, memorize and categorize” (p. 29). Miller’s (2000) concept of a spiritual education contrasts this by stating that “we are not anxious about mental development, because what makes a human being a person is the heart, not the head” (p. 3). A spiritual way of being focuses on the unity and connection; for teachers, this could be the calling of their chosen vocation and how they connect with their true selves and others in the classroom. With these connections comes emotional intelligence which covers “sentiment, character, and moral instincts” (Goleman, 1995, p. 7). Goleman (1995) believes that there is a need now more

than ever to teach our students emotional intelligence as both local and broader communities are becoming more divided and uncaring. Focusing on an emotional way of being is difficult because our school systems continue the emotional/rational dichotomy and the distinction between the head and the heart (Goleman, 1995, p. 8). With the emphasis placed on the intellectual, there is a lack of focus and a struggle to portray the spiritual and emotional ways of being and knowing. This could lead to confusion and teachers being unsure how their identity fits in the education system.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study is to answer the question: Who am I, and do I teach who I am? As Palmer (1997) states, identity in the classroom plays a large role in the success of the school year. Identity can show up in the content I teach and how I teach it. The goal of this narrative inquiry is to strengthen my teacher identity and integrity through remembering and re-interpreting (Stephenson & Kippax, 2017) the experiences that shaped the teacher I am today. Through a stream of consciousness, I present stories from my past that depict how my identity has been formed and displayed in my classroom. Some of the stories I share do not show my best side. I think that it is important to include them because although it is hard to admit, I am not perfect and I make mistakes in the classroom. I make mistakes that I am conscious of in the moment, such as correcting a math problem wrong on the board in front of all my students, but I also made mistakes that I was unaware of until I reflected on them throughout this process. As you read my narrative inquiry you may question my narrative and how that shows up in my classroom; this is exactly what Palmer (1997) is referring to. But I created this research as a safe space in which I can reflect on my own identity formation and hope that this prompts you to consider how you “show up” in your classroom. The more opportunities we have to

“tell the truth about our own struggles and joys as teachers in ways that befriend the soul and gives it room to grow” (Palmer, 1997, p. 21), the better our connection to the subjects and our students becomes.

During the narrative inquiry process I related to Higgins’s (1989) self-discrepancy theory. Frings (2018) states that there are three versions of self-representation: “our *actual self* (how we see ourselves in the moment), our *ideal self* (how we would like to be) and our *ought self* (the self we think we should be, often driven by external evaluations such as social norms)” (p. 42). The narrative inquiry process challenges writers to strip away their ought to be self and reflect on their actual self. I found myself wanting to use buzzwords like “student-centered” and “creating global citizens” that I heard throughout teacher’s college and was encouraged to use in interviews. It is my hope that connecting with my actual self will allow me to strengthen my true identity and integrity that Palmer (1997) believes the best teachers infuse into their work, to “honor my true self—not my ego or expectations or image or role, but the self I am when all the externals are stripped away” (p. 19).

I have always been a high achieving student, receiving honour roll each year and becoming a member of the Golden Key International Society held by students in the top 15% of each faculty. But with these achievements came blind-spots in my teaching. I began to think that feedback that others gave was wrong or that they were providing feedback on the smallest details I could improve because they had to. I was unable to receive constructive criticism because I was so focused on my ideal self, that I had no flaws. With the focus on the ideal self, rather than the actual self I was stuck in an outlook that was controlled by my ego (Frings, 2018).

When I decided to do a narrative inquiry, I was the one providing the stories. I was the one providing the feedback and reflection. It gave me the opportunity to improve my teaching practice, and figure out how my identity impacted my classroom, while still protecting my fragile, perfectionist ego from the feedback of others. I took the feedback from others as negative, as I was doing something wrong and I did not want to hear that. By unpacking my own stories, I was able to discover the feedback and ways to improve on my own.

### **Significance of the Study**

The significance of this study is to understand who am I, to determine if I teach who I am, and if in fact I project my identity onto my students. I believe that there is part of my perfectionist self that also wants to understand how I can be and do better. Through the narratives, a small part of me wants to find how I can create the perfect identity, what parts of me I should cling onto, and what parts of me should be retired from my classroom identity. That is the perfectionist in me: the need to ensure that I am being the best version of myself, while also being accepted by others.

I believe that all teachers can relate to wanting to please others in the education system—whether that is administrators, students, or parents. I think that this research is especially helpful for beginning teachers who are conflicted with the desire to be perfect and please others, with the longing to show up authentically in the classroom. I hope that the vulnerable stories I share provoke an emotion, through connection or disagreement, leading towards a better understanding of your own identity. “If we stopped lobbing pedagogical points at each other and spoke about who we are as teachers, a remarkable thing might happen: identity and integrity might grow within us and among us” (Palmer,

1997, p. 21). It is vital to know who you are as a teacher, and how your identity is being portrayed in the classroom. Palmer (1997), when asking students about the best teacher that they have ever had, concluded that “good teachers share one trait: a strong sense of personal identity infuses their work” (p. 16).

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### *Sour Apple*

*I entered the staff room at the end of another school day and looked for my supervisor teacher. She said that tomorrow I would be teaching nutrition to the students and she had some resources to share with me that I could use in the lesson. I took her up on the offer. Having resources to use made lesson planning a lot easier as I was crunched for time. Not seeing my supervisor, I went over to her desk to see a note on a yellow stick note saying: “For Jenna, these will be really helpful.” There was a stack of Canada Food Guides underneath. My heart sank; the Canada Food Guide was outdated, and I knew there was so much more a group of Grade 10 girls would want to know about nutrition. They were dealing with diets and beauty standards and fasting and fast food. After all, it was not that long ago I, too, was once a high school student and pondered questions that explored more than “how many servings of grains should I have a day?”*

*Not wanting to upset my supervisor or suggest that her helpful resources were anything but helpful, I decided to use them the next day against my better judgment. I chose the grade over my integrity. As I stood in front of the class and my supervisor I put on my best fake smile and boasted about the benefits of following the Canadian Food Guide. But inside I was screaming, what about the other facts that go into nutrition; macronutrients, balance, diet, culture, and how each person’s body is unique. I felt like a*

*failure as I suggested to a class of over 20 girls, with different body compositions and needs, that they should all be eating the same thing. And worse than feeling like a failure, I could tell the students felt my lack of passion, as I overheard one student say “Ms. D wants us to believe that we should be eating based on this guide when I know for a fact, she does not eat gluten or dairy” to a friend as she rolled her eyes.*

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Not showing up as my authentic self came across in the lesson, even though I tried to hide it. I was more worried about pleasing my supervisor teacher than providing the students a genuine connection and content that I was passion about and showed up in my identity. As a teacher candidate I felt as if there was a system at play. Say the right things, do the right things, and be the right kind of teacher. I recall a professor during teacher’s college saying “just be who they want you to be until you get a contract, then you can be who you really are.” I remember the head nods in the room in agreeance as other teacher candidates shared their experiences of pleasing their associate teacher. Not wanting to be a sour apple that left a bad impression and received a negative review. It felt like my entire career hinged on the evaluation from the associate teachers, so why wouldn’t I do everything I could to please them?

### **Limitations of the Study**

This research is limited in scope in that it is restricted to my memories and retelling of the experiences that shaped my identity. Over time, these narratives may have shifted and changed based on my audience, but from my viewpoint they are the stories that I believe to be true. With questions posed by my supervisor, I was pushed to unpack the impact of my narratives and own the effects that they had on my identity. These



experiences and narratives are not generalizable; however, this narrative inquiry may allow readers to connect to the stories and provoke emotions in them to understand how their identity was developed and portrayed in the classroom and, if change is needed, they may be able to take action.

### **Organization of the Paper**

This paper is integrating from beginning to end, showcasing a practice that I incorporate into my daily life, and explaining how I replicate this practice into my classroom. Moments, when I share practices from my personal life with my students, is when I feel as though I make the greatest impact as a teacher. In these moments my identity shines through and my authentic self is nourished.

In Chapter 2, I review the literature on identity theory, identity in the school system, identity as a physical educator and embodiment. These concepts are strengthened and connected to the idea that we teach who we are. Chapter 3 follows the journey of writing a narrative inquiry, including autoethnography, framed by the value of being vulnerable. I also justify the research from a methodological, personal, sustainability, and ethical standpoint. In Chapter 4, I share the narratives of experiences, past and present, that have shaped my identity. I weave holistic educational practices and the practice of gratitude throughout this paper, which mimics what I do in both my personal and my professional life with a classroom setting. Chapter 5 concludes this Major Research Paper and looks at the dominant themes that emerged from the narratives. It examines the research questions that ask who I am, and that examine whether I teach who I am.

## CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

This literature review addresses the research questions—Who am I? Do I teach who I am?—I am interested in exploring how my identity is revealed in the classroom. Palmer (1997) believes that to understand the self we must hold a mirror up to the soul. Muncey (2014) takes this account into more detail by stating that “our self image is a combination of whom we see in the mirror and the interactions of our physical, social, psychological and emotional sense of wellbeing in respect of that image” (p. 2). By understanding the self, a teacher’s identity and integrity may be strengthened which may lead to a better learning experience for students. Looking into identity theory, identity formation, and identity versus ego allows me to understand the contributing factors of identity. I then touch on how identity can be shaped, portrayed, and threatened both in the school system and specifically through a health and physical education lens. This literature review aims to understand how identity is formed while uncovering emerging patterns in our lives.

### Identity Theory

What makes you, you? Take five minutes and list whatever comes to mind. What did you come up with? Was it a set of values you hold, or a list of behaviours or emotions? Did you mention social groups you belong to or activities you enjoy? Was it influenced by what others think of you or how positive you feel about yourself? Or maybe who you aspire to be? Is everything on the list representative of our current self, or does it also represent past or future versions of you? (Frings, 2018, p. 25).

Burke and Stets (2009) describe identity as “the set of meanings that define who one is when one is an occupant of a particular role in society, a member of a particular group, or claims particular characteristics that identify him or her as a unique person” (p. 3). Palmer (1997) makes connections to specifics and describes identity as “an evolving nexus where all the forces that constitute my life converge in the mystery of self: my genetic makeup, the nature of the man and woman who gave me life, the culture in which I was raised, people who have sustained me and people who have done me harm...and much, much more” (p. 17). Still needing more detail, I consulted Stillwaggon (2008), who believes identity is shaped by our actions, beliefs, and values, and Scheiern (2011) who states that “identity is influenced by cultural, historical, political and religious beliefs and ideologies (p. 53). The commonality includes that identity is shaped by outside influences and that it is evolving.

Identity can change and be shaped by the experiences and events that we go through both internally and externally. Blackmore (2001) conceptualized the ego theory that explains how our self changes as we go through different experiences in life, staying the same at the core. Relating to Burke and Stets’s (2009) concept that our outer identities change based on our position in society, the self is a continuous entity that becomes unified with every experience, meaning that the experiences of our life have an impact on who we are. Who we are in the classroom is comprised of experiences that had a big impact on our life and experiences that we go through on a daily basis. In ego theory there is a certain level of subjectivity that comes with consciousness based on our personal experiences (Blackmore, 2003). It is our interpretation and take-away from our experiences that impact our identity formation.

Through the life stages there may be what Erikson (1963) refers to as an identity crisis, or confusion of one's role. Erikson's developmental theory puts ego at the center of this critical stage in adolescence where "people first confront the problem of identity versus role confusion" (McAdams, 2001, p. 101). According to Wrightsman (1994), there is a desire to have one coherent self-image and Marcia (1992) claims it cannot be developed before adolescence due to the cognitive, physical, and social expectations that are not yet formed. Throughout my narratives, I share stories of when I struggled at this stage of identity development due to a critical incident of a family member's diagnosis. My identity was changed through the shift in the way I dealt with my commitments, rather than the changes in the commitments themselves (Klimstra et al., 2010).

### **Identity Versus the School System**

As Palmer (1997) notes, "When we listen primarily for what we 'ought' to be doing with our lives, we may find ourselves hounded by external expectations that can distort our identity and integrity" (p. 19). Looking at identity is challenging and examining teacher identity is an even more complex phenomenon. In fact, Scheiern (2011) states that "teachers also deal with their conception of self-as-teacher. This understanding can have significant ramifications on what they do, how they act, how they feel, how they negotiate, and how they function in a school system" (p. 3). As a teacher there is a correlation and balance between the personal and the professional. When discussing identity and integrity in teaching, Palmer (1997), believes that in order to understand the "inner landscapes of a teacher's life" (p. 15), we need to look at all aspects, including intellectual, emotional, and spiritual. Reducing teaching down to just one or two aspects does not give the full picture of how we, as teachers, show up in the

classroom. “Reduce teaching to intellect and it becomes a cold abstraction; reduce it to emotions and it becomes narcissistic; reduce it to the spiritual and it loses its anchor to the world” (Palmer, 1997, p. 15). When we discuss how our identity and integrity show up into the classroom, we are opening ourselves up for judgment because everyone has their own opinions based on the experiences that shaped their identity. The Western culture in which we live and work does not have the room or time to understand each other, as teachers, at a soul level (Palmer, 2003). Palmer (1997) agrees with this conflict and states that

telling the truth about ourselves with colleagues in the workplace is an enterprise fraught with danger, against which we have erected formidable taboos. We fear making ourselves vulnerable in the midst of competitive people and politics that could easily turn against us, and we claim the inalienable right to separate the “personal” and the “professional” into airtight compartments. (p. 21)

Social identity theory developed by Tajfel and Turner (1979) looks at the self between those who are like us (ingroup) and those who are different (outgroup). It uses a group mentality to categorize who we are. “How individuals define themselves, how they interact with others, and how others respond to them all inform what they do and what they think about themselves as teachers” (Scheiern, 2011, p. 13). I find this a popular use of understanding the self in teaching as we relate to others on subject content and pedagogy styles. When going into a staff meeting it is common to find the different departments already sitting together because the teachers in the department identify as part of their ingroup. I believe my desire to be a part of these ingroups may be holding me back from being a good teacher. I may not listen to who I truly am because I am

scared to fall outside of the ingroup and I find comfort in the ingroup as it gives me an identity.

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### *Old School*

*I walked with my Grade 8 class and supervisor teacher towards the gymnasium. This was my first placement as a beginning teacher. I was nervous because I wanted to impress my supervisor teacher, but also confident in the knowledge and skills that I acquired over the past 2 years studying how to become an effective teacher. Even though physical education was my first teachable subject, this placement was for observing, recording, and reflecting on what we liked and did not like about the experience. As we started the physical education lesson it was hard for me to keep this in mind. All I wanted to do was step in and provide a better experience for the students.*

*“Here is a ball,” the supervisor teacher said, as she rolled a soccer ball towards the centre of the gymnasium. “Divide yourself into teams with the pinnies and I want to see everyone playing hard today.” I noticed that the students who were more athletic grabbed pinnies so they could all be on the same team. Throughout the game the athletic students dominated the game against the other team. I felt empathy for the students who were trying but clearly could not match the level of competition. The space was also crowded as more than 20 students were trying to navigate a soccer game in the middle of an average elementary-sized gymnasium. I sat quietly with the supervisor teacher, not wanting to say anything to upset her. How was I supposed to tell her that her teaching style was outdated? Or simply wrong? If I said something it could impact my grade. But could I really sit and watch students be defeated in a physical education setting that I*

*grew up loving? I thought about my position of power and how it lacked in comparison to the supervisor teacher whose job I was hoping to have one day. In the narrative where I wanted to be included in her “circle” of professional physical educators, and in the narrative where I was jealous and thought I was entitled to her position, I was not understanding why she was the full-time teacher when I believed I could do it so much better. I chose to sit with her on the bench, watching a game I did not agree with in order to maintain being a part of the ingroup.*

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Palmer (1997) wants us to break down this taboo, stating “we fear making ourselves vulnerable in the midst of competitive people and politics that could easily turn against us, and we claim the inalienable right to separate the ‘personal’ and the ‘professional’ into airtight compartments” (p. 21). We are doing a disservice to our identity and our students when we conform to the ingroup. Teachers need to bring their true selves into the classroom. Miller (2000) believes that the students in our classes are not immune to the objective society that we live in. Students are expected to perform high on tests, check off boxes of extracurriculars, and be ready to compete in the global economy. As teachers we need to first understand how our identity and integrity is formed so we can help students find their joy and purpose in education.

### **Stereotypical Physical Educator**

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#### *First Impressions*

*I walked nervously through the halls, thinking this school had to be double the size of the high school I attended. Was I wearing the right thing? Would my supervisor*

*like me? What would happen if we did not get along? My career could be ruined! I tried to push the anxious thoughts out of my head and focused on the fact that I was getting the chance to teach Grade 10 girls' physical education. This is what I was hoping for, something that I was so passionate about, feeling the corners of my mouth curl up as I tried not to smile too eagerly. "I hope my supervisor likes me," I had thought, as I rounded the corner towards the physical education department room. I was told when I signed in, I would find her there. SureSure, enough as I opened the door I was greeted with, "You must be Jenna, nice to meet you."*

*"Okay," I thought to myself, "she does not seem terrible, so this is a good start." She motioned me over towards her desk and I grabbed the empty chair in the corner of the room. Wheeling it across the room, I was self-conscious of the amount of noise it made. We had some time before the bell rang so she wanted to discuss the plan for the 4 months that I would be there. I glanced around her desk area, noticing the year plan that was taped to the wall, words like "basketball," "swimming," "volleyball," and "track and field" were scribbled on to the weekly plans. As we had begun to discuss my role, we were interrupted by other physical educators who joined us in the office. One was a taller man with wider shoulders, making me think he had a career in swimming in his younger days, and the other had long hair pulled back into a small pony, definitely a hockey player I had thought to myself. After quick introductions I had realized that all the other teachers were males, and through the overheard conversations they were "playing" rugby and basketball in their classes. Then it became my turn to talk.*

*"Where are you from?"*

*"Norfolk County."*



*“How do you like your last year of teacher’s college?”*

*“Good, time is flying by.”*

*“What do you like to teach?”*

*“I really enjoy teaching dance,” I replied with enthusiasm.*

*“DANCE?” they questioned, almost in unison. I tried to keep my cheeks from going red in embarrassment.*

*“Yes, I love teaching dance for the connection that it brings students back into their body; most of them have never had that experience before.”*

*“So, what? You teach them line dancing and the jive?”*

*“Not always,” I replied with a small laugh, knowing that this is the usual reply I receive. “I prefer movement and interpretive dance, which helps the students connect the mind, body, and feelings,” I shared.*

*“Oh, well good luck.”*

*This response was the usual line of questioning I receive from teachers who are more focused on sports and competition than helping students connect to themselves through embodiment.*

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Take a moment and close your eyes. With a few deep breathes, visualize a physical education teacher. What came to mind? Athletic? Laid-back? Competitive? Male? Dumb jock?

Physical education teachers are described as “socially constructed as a none-too-bright individual, a companionable man [*sic*] of action but not someone with whom to engage in critical conversation” (Ovens & Fletcher, 2014, p. 75). This view of a not so

bright man, combined with the subjective understanding of “physical education, past experiences of schooling, physical activity and sport” (Wrench & Garrett, 2012, p. 2) contribute to the stereotypical image that I visualized. The stereotypical image of a physical educator that has been created has made it difficult for teachers with different views to connect and feel comfortable coming forth with their differentiated identity. Not only does the social, cultural, and geographical context of a physical education teacher make up their identity but there is also a lot of information stored in the body. A discourse of White, middle-class, able-bodied, athletic individuals who have excelled in sports and used it to gain social capital throughout their life has occupied the physical education teacher space (Ovens & Fletcher, 2014).

The perceived notion of physical education teachers not only takes up the space in the staff room and among colleagues but also is reinforced in a curriculum that consists of “objectifying, mesomorphic, anti-intellectual, sexist, homophobic, and competitive jock culture” (Ovens & Fletcher, 2014, p. 107; see also Hunter, 2011; Kirk et al., 1997). Sport is the chosen vehicle of learning, taught through a modern construction of knowledge and learning that is fixed and perpetuating the skills and drills model of the past (Brown, 2014). Students do not see themselves in the content, nor do they see themselves as creators of content. Fisette (2011) states for students “to begin to articulate their embodied identity, each of these constructs may need to be deconstructed and contextualized within the public domain of physical education” (p. 184). The importance of students beginning to understand their embodied identity comes back to the focus on emotional and spiritual ways of being. Students need to understand all aspects of themselves to understand who they are and why they do the things they do.

Understanding the self is the first step in understanding others and building empathy. Therefore, for students to take the steps to understand their spiritual and emotional selves, a change in the curriculum and stereotypical physical educator identity is needed.

### **Embodiment**

Snowber (2012) describes embodiment as a way to in which we teach who we are, saying “as soon as we walk into the classroom, the students know if the teacher feel confident in relating to the class. We teach with and through our bodies. I call it body pedagogy and integrate movement as a way for students to make friends with their bodies” (p. 55). The three components of body inquiry through embodiment are:

- 1) Body Pedagogy: teaching takes place through our bodies with the connection of all the intelligences; experiential, somatic and visceral. When we use body pedagogy in the classroom, we are allowing our lived and learned experiences to come through in our teaching (Snowber, 2018). Students create an understanding about who we are based on our appearance, which is further developed with the stories we share and the way we conduct ourselves.

During the research process, body pedagogy was drawn upon when I reflected on the experiences that made me who I am as an educator. It was as if I was studying myself, like a student trying to figure out how everything fits together. For example, when reflecting on the story of my first dance experience, I began to realize the liberation I felt when I tapped into my feminine energy. I could feel the feel the weight lifted off of me as and the visceral reactions it still causes today, which I can now name as embodiment and more specifically, body pedagogy.

- 2) Body Inquiry: asking a question through our bodies and being open for the response (Snowber, 2018). To receive a response from our bodies rather than just our mind, we must stop and be open to listening.

The research process allowed me to take the time to stop and ask the questions. For example, while writing I questioned if the experiences on the farm growing up was a positive or negative experience. It was a complex question as I wrestled with the idea that working on the farm as a child hindered my development because it forced me to become outcome focused. I took time to think and listen through my body by playing a song I used to listen to while working in the tobacco rows. While pondering the question of how this experienced played out in my life, I felt uplifted and joyful movements come through me. Realizing that those tough childhood memories helped to create the person, and teacher, I am today brought me to the realization that I would not want to change my past and instead appreciate the lessons it taught me.

- 3) Research Practice: connecting the physicality and literacy of the writing process. I found this most helpful in research when I danced through my thoughts (Snowber, 2018).

During my research process, I recall getting stuck on the heavy topic of my childhood and how I felt during my father's cancer diagnosis. I got up from my computer, cleared some space in my room and allowed myself to move. I danced and let myself express the feeling. The movement heavy to start and I found myself on the floor by the end of the song. The embodiment and memories went through me and I was able to come back to the computer with a clear mind ready to write again. Listening to my body, cleared the way to find answers to questions I was asking myself,

I will draw on all three components—body pedagogy, body inquiry, and how they played out in my autoethnographic research—to understand how the connection of mind and body is more than just listening to your feelings.

### **Conclusion**

Throughout the literature review there is a consistent theme focusing on conflict—conflict within the self, with others and within the structures of the environments, places and experiences that shaped me. The conflict within the self comes from the question of this research paper and discovering who I am. The conflict with others involves wanting to fit, to be liked, to achieve a certain grade or a higher status. First, as a new educator I always felt like I was being compared to others. I was being judged by my associate teachers and supervisors, but I also felt the pressure to perform and be the best student teacher that the school had received.

Second, I felt like I wanted to fit into the physical education culture. Chatting with the colleagues about sports games that were on TV the night before and funny sports memes on Instagram—this was part of the experience in the staffroom. As much as I participated in those antics, I always felt like I was just on the outside. Being torn between conforming to the stereotypical physical educator to fit in and staying true to my identity and integrity by exposing my passion for dance, health, and holistic education.

Finally, through the writing of this autoethnography, I have come to the realization that the experiences that shaped me growing up had very strict structures in place; from the ways I acted, to the ways I dressed. It was not until the reins of structure were loosened within my first dance experience which allowed me to listen to myself within rather than who I outwardly molded myself to be in a particular environment.

Hence, the conflict between my previous identity and my identity while in an embodied state, bubbled to the surface of this research and will be explored further through the sharing of my stories.

### CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

*In my first email I had asked my supervisor, “Can I include any stories that I think impacted my teaching identity or should I narrow it down to a specific topic? I continued, “How broad or streamlined should I be?” I desire control. The kind that comes from checking off the boxes, completing section by section of research. But this is a narrative inquiry; I did not choose what to write, it chose me as the outlet. Putting pen to paper I begin. (Journal Entry)*

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The goal of my research is to strengthen my teacher identity and integrity through re-membering and re-interpreting (Stephenson & Kippax, 2017) the experiences that shaped the teacher I am. Using narrative inquiry as both the method and the phenomena of the study, I was able to analyze the stories that were lived and shared in the research (Clandinin, 2007). I started out by focusing on the autoethnography concept of qualitative research but through the process I began to focus more on the experiences and what the stories told me about who I am and if my identity shows up in my classroom. Through the writing process I began to notice the reciprocal relationship that formed between the places, people, and narratives I told. Before the writing process, I felt as though I had agency over my own life and the direction that I chose to take. But as the process unfolded and I began to think critically about the narratives of my life and I came to realize that the outside factors of people, places and experiences had control over me. The focus on the stories being the fundamental account of knowledge through the human experience (Clandinin, 2007) is balanced with the autoethnographic components of the social, cultural, and psychological factors that are woven through with a connection to

theory. By shifting to the use of narrative inquiry with aspects of autoethnography, I was able to reflect on how my research question of: who am I, and do I teach who I am by displaying my authentic identity in the classroom? Taking a look at the methodological, personal, and sustainable considerations for my research validates the shift towards narrative inquiry as research. As Clandinin (2007) stated, there is a deeper connection between the research and researched; there is a shift from numbers to words as data, a focus on the specific rather than universal understanding and a wider acceptance of epistemologies. With the value of narrative inquiries in the research field being apparent in recent years, I then show an understanding of the vulnerability and ethical factors that contribute to a narrative inquiry so that I am able to explain the factors that I took into consideration to strengthen the importance and legitimacy of the research method.

### **Narrative Inquiry as Research**

As Muncey (2014) noted, “We are observers and participants of our own experiences: you cannot separate who you are from what you do” (p. 8). When conducting my research, I realized that I was focused on the narratives I told and how they contribute to understanding who I am and the connection to my teacher identity that shows up in the classroom, thus making the focus of my research through narrative inquiry. Clandinin (2007) describes narrative inquiry as “the researchers usually embracing that assumptions that the story is one, if not the fundamental unit that accounts for human experiences” (p. 5). With the emphasis on the narrative, the stories become both the method and phenomena of the study. “Through the attention to methods for analyzing and understanding stories lived and told, it can be connected and placed under the label of qualitative research method” (Clandinin, 2007, p. 6). Smith (2017) adds to the



importance of qualitative research methods, particularly narrative inquiry by stating that “stories teach us who we are by constituting our identities and sense of self” and that “people need stories because of the work they do for us, which primarily, is to help make the world meaningful” (p. 505). The meaning and identity understanding that comes from narrative inquiry is the reason that I chose this qualitative research method for my study.

As an ethnographer, Hayano (1979) set out to study his own people. He soon realized that he could not separate himself from his research, and this set the criteria for autoethnography to emerge. When writing an autoethnography one would be situated within a culture by having prior knowledge of the people, the language, while also being accepted or able to pass as a native member. When conducting research, the researcher often has a personal connection to the reason they want to investigate a certain topic. I am a teacher interested in my own experiences teaching health and physical education, hence using aspects of autoethnography to interrogate my identity and integrity within the culture of teaching makes sense.

Due to the personal connection of narrative inquiries and autoethnographies, the research is often criticized for being an outlier that does not have a place in research and academia, correlating the writing to nothing more than an autobiography (Muncey, 2014). However, Phillips (1999) made the distinction between the autoethnography and autobiography that confirmed the research component. An autobiography shows a linear correlation between the person and their past experiences. An autoethnography allows for a self-story that voices a “narrative oriented inquiry” honouring the told, the re-telling, and the teller (Hiles et al., 2017, p. 8). I chose narrative inquiry because I want to “leave space for re-membering and re-interpreting” (Stephenson & Kippax, 2017) my

experiences through the cultural, social, and psychological contexts through which the stories are analyzed. Mishler (1995) agrees that we need to be open to what we learn from our narratives and the fluid insight that the narrative brings so that we can learn or unlearn from it and better ourselves in our teaching practice. Being content with a “suspended state of not knowing” (Ovens & Fletcher, 2014, p. 37) was the first step in the autoethnography process, as I engaged and struggled with the non-linear approach. I wanted immediate answers to my questions, but what I came to understand is that the journey is non-linear and through observation and analysis I was able to understand how the narrative fits together to create my teacher identity.

### **Research Questions**

Some approach teaching as a set of skills to be learned, an amount of content to be covered. These educators believe that through mastering skills and content one learns how to be a teacher. Yes, teachers must have a wide range of skills, depth of knowledge, and certain disposition to be effective, but I believe teaching is more than this simple reductivist laundry list. I believe teaching is a discovery of self. As we develop an understanding of who we are through interactions and relationships with others, we construct meaning for ourselves as to who we are as educators and what we value, and this knowledge, and these values inform how we teach. (Scheiern, 2011, p. 38)

This narrative inquiry examines my lived experiences through a narrative collection of stories and subsequent analysis to understand who I am and if I teach who I am in my classroom. LaBoskey (2004) believes that the desire for narrative inquiries “stems also from the acknowledgement that we are as limited by our own personal

histories and cultural identities as are our students, we cannot expand their horizons if we do not expand our own” (p. 840). By first understanding who I am, I will be able to become conscious of it and know when I project my identity onto my students. I want to ensure that I am allowing my students to grow independently of my identity that I project onto them. Moore (2000) allowed me to make this realization when he asked the question “are we making little replicas of ourselves, or are we leading forth what was planted in eternity? (p. 8). Focusing more on the growth of my students from their soul, rather than controlling their behaviour through my perfectionist self and by questioning and examining the take for granted assumptions of teacher identity and learning (Loughran, 2006), I use the narrative inquiry to understand if I project my identity and will be more mindful of the impact it could have on their soul development. By analyzing the narratives that I have chosen, I will be able to understand who I am as a teacher, showing the implicit and explicit actions of my identity that I portray onto the students in my classroom. Implicit actions are linked to the hidden curriculum in the classroom—the pedagogy, strategies, and classroom management that a teacher uses. The qualitative research journey has allowed me to unpack the hidden ways of doing and being that have been shaped by previous experiences that contribute to who I am as a teacher; explicitly, actions when the teacher purposefully integrates the interests and activities that teachers enjoy outside of the classroom into their lessons. Henriksen and Mishra (2015) found that teachers who were more creative, especially in athletics and kinesthetic pursuits, were more likely to bring the mind/body connection into the classroom, thus strengthening the fact that “we teach who we are” (Palmer, 1997, p. 15).

### **Methodological Justification**

The process of narrative inquiry allows for a story to be created through the data generation and data analysis. First, through data generation I brought forth narratives from my past, and through the data generation phase, I wrote the stories. I decided to sit at the computer every morning and type as my form of journaling. First, I sat at my laptop and typed any story from my past that came to mind, then I went through my life in chronological order and picked out stories that showed who I was. When I was out of stories or hit a writing block, I would use embodied knowledge in the form of running, walking and dance to bring the stories out. I also used this time on my laptop to journal how I felt during the process. Trying to organize my own thoughts as I went through personal stories and emotions. I was reluctant to share my stories at first, worried about being judged. I had a hard time embracing the autoethnographic process. To overcome the fear of judgment, I placed myself as a story-teller, telling the stories of a character rather than myself to overcome the writer's block that came with data generation.

Clandinin and Connelly (2000) believe that the autoethnographic process has grown in popularity due to fact that people are natural born story tellers and with each telling and retelling of a story a person's identity is shaped. However, with the subjectivity involved in sharing your own stories, the narratives and meaning can be altered through the retelling and romanticizing of a memory. Smith (2017) notes that "stories are actors in that they shape what become experiences" and that "stories act on us by shaping human conduct" (p. 505). We are able to take what we want to understand from the story, or shape the story to fit the audience with whom we are sharing it. While writing my narrative inquiry I need to be mindful of the gap between the event and the retelling to

ensure that my research is effective. By sharing my stories with others and being open for questions and feedback, I am able to defend the position from which I tell the story.

The telling and retelling of the stories was the start of understanding my teacher identity. I furthered the analysis by using an embodied lens to understand the impact of the narratives. LaBoskey (2004) believes that it is

not that accuracy of our memories does not matter; whatever shape they take, they influence the construction of our identities, our current thinking, and our future behaviour. Therefore, if we begin to access and interrogate those memories, we can have more control over them and their impact to our teaching. (p. 843)

Through the embodied lens I listened to the feelings that were provoked. There would be moments when I had no choice but to stop and write down the thoughts that came from a song I heard or a book I read. Moments when I would jump out of bed in the middle of the night because I needed to write something down. The story was coming through me, my hands the vehicle used to tell it. The data analysis provided me with “unity, purpose, and meaning” (Bauer et al., 2008, p. 82) in my teaching identity to bring forth the stories that I knew I needed to unpack but was too scared to understand the implications of the results.

### **Personal Justification**

My personal narratives were analyzed through an embodied lens to ensure that I reached my goal of understanding who I am and if it shows up in the classroom. While gathering and analyzing my narratives I was able to feel the emotions as if I was reliving the experience again. I could feel my competitive nature, the pain, the confusion, and the passion that I had for teaching all through my body. With this visceral understanding

through the mind and body connection, I have the capacity to further both research and writing (Freedman & Holmes, 2003). I cannot ignore the churning of my stomach when talking about my past experiences, or the easing of my shoulders as I gather my anxious thoughts on paper. Snowber (2018) describes this process of inquiry as “methodological streams that allow for holistic methods of investigating, discovering and uncovering research” (p. 233). Embodied knowledge also shows up in my daily movement. Through forms of dance, running, walking, and meditation I was able to sort out the thoughts in my head and connect them to the theories that guided my research. There is a harmonic feeling that occurs when the brain and body are connected, where we are just as much in our bodies as in our heads; Snowber (2018) calls this concept bodyfulness. During the autoethnographic process I stayed in this state because the “lived body ... has the capacity to connect to emotional intelligence” (Snowber, 2018, p. 233). The lived body has the ability to be present and awake, merging the mind and body that for years was thought of as two very distinct oppositions. Snowber (2018) continues to say that “the core value of holistic education is the ingredient of connection, and increasingly there is a longing to emphasize the relationship with our bodies to the art of living, teaching, and writing” (p. 232). Often, I would roll out of bed and wake half asleep to open my laptop and get some thoughts I had on paper; through some form of movement I would be able to come back and connect the thoughts together. My mind and body connected through the physicality of movement and the literacy of the writing process, in Snowber (2018) refers to as the research practice of embodiment.

### **Sustainability Justification**

Credibility, transferability, and dependability form the foundations from which my narrative inquiry can be evaluated. Credibility is “developing internal consistency and showing the readers the way by which rigor is maintained in the research” (Qazi, 2011, p. 14). Through the analysis of my research I maintain consistent in referring to the theme of embodiment. Using narrative inquiry allowed me to reflect on the purpose of the research by determining who I am and if my identity shows up in the classroom. Qazi (2011) refers to transferability as “generalizability of current findings to the similar context and setting” (p. 14). By sharing my personal narratives, I hope that someone will want to interrogate their own past in light of the present to illuminate the future in a different way. Dependability is described by Qazi (2011) as “consistent across time, researchers and analysis techniques” (p. 14). To ensure dependability in my study I used the same narrative inquiry technique throughout, by recalling and writing my narratives down, to listening to the visceral feelings that came through movement, and analyzing the correlation between who I am and my teaching identity. This relates to Scheiern (2011) who states that this is “only one of millions of stories about teachers. Each other brings her own self to the classroom, and each individual the teacher encounters helps her to know herself better and to know others better” (p. 50). While sharing the stories, they were able to connect to the process of identity formation or to the outcome as a reflection in their classroom. By sharing my personal narratives with credibility, transferability, and dependability in mind, I ensure that the substantiality of writing a narrative inquiry is upheld while I reach my goal of understanding who I am and if my identity shows up in the classroom.

### **Ethical Considerations**

These stories cannot be told, but they cannot not be told! What to do with all these memories morphing into secrets, secrets morphing into stories? How can I reverently, respectfully write these stories into life, knowing that I am exposing to the light of story many things that have lived in the shadowy crawl space of my family's collective lives? (Poulous, 2018, p. 88)

From an ethical standpoint, writing autoethnographically is difficult because of the subjectivity that is involved. As the researcher researching who I am, I am exposing myself and in doing so I need to become vulnerable (Poulos, 2018). I know that by sharing these narratives I am opening myself up for judgment, but the people and places that have shaped me and that I write about have not. By applying an ethical consideration to my research, I understand that it is my duty as a researcher to do no harm to other people and places that are vital to sharing my story. To achieve this, I have changed insignificant details in the narratives so that the people's names and places are protected without hindering the plot of the story. This way the message comes through the story with a spotlight on how my identity is developed and portrayed, rather than a focus on others.

Through the use of relational ethics (Ellis, 2007), my hope is to invite readers to question their own stories rather than decide if my story is right or wrong. By using narrative inquiry, I invite readers to question their own narrative and identity creation as they may see themselves in my stories. I hope that the readers use this research to take them on their own journey through their identity development and portrayal. With each narrative that provokes an emotion or connection, they asking questions that reflect on



their own personal journey like “‘what should I do now?’ rather than the statements of blame, such as ‘this is what you should do now’” (Ellis, 2007, p. 4). I invite the readers to dive into their own identity as they read my narratives, but I understand that I cannot be there with them, I cannot act as a safeguard and ensure that these stories will not bring up past traumas or emotions. I add this as a disclaimer that I hope the stories bring you clarity through reflection, rather than taking you to a dark place.

### **Vulnerability**

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#### *The Iceberg*

*“Alright I think it is time to get started” the presenter for class this week stated as she scanned her eyes around the room. I take the hint and close my laptop, giving her my full attention. “To start my presentation, I will be passing around a picture of an iceberg, above the water line on the visible part of the iceberg I want you to write how you see yourself or how others might see you. Then on the bottom of the iceberg I want you to write down all the things that people do not see. Things or events that you may not want to remember or things that people do not see when they first meet you. These will not be shared with the class because I know they can be sensitive topics so write whatever you’d like.”*

*I looked around the room as there was a layer of unease tension looming. Everyone had their paper shielded from their neighbouring classmate. We have been with the same group of people for about a year; why was everyone so afraid for others to see? Not that I was any more open, I wrote on the paper the basics, things that would be different than meets the eye, but nothing that would make your jaw drop.*

*Vulnerability. This is something that I am still not comfortable with, until now. The process of writing in narrative removes the immediate shame or guilt that I feel, as if I am separated from the story. Admitting my past becomes easier as the words flow from my brain through my fingers typing furiously on the keyboard.*

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“It’s a vulnerable place, revealing your secrets. But in letting the secrets out of the closet, there is freedom. In the deluge, you are also washed clean, free of their hold on you, free of maintaining them, free of them” (Poulos, 2018, p. 52). It is not easy writing about secrecy or the embodied stories that make up your being, you feel as though you are exposing yourself for the world to judge. Palmer (1997) stated that

teaching holds a mirror to the soul. If I am willing to look in that mirror, and not run from what I see, I have a chance to gain self-knowledge—and knowing myself is a crucial to good teaching as knowing my students and my subject. (p. 15)

Through vulnerability there is freedom. A freedom that comes from the need to explore my past, to needing to tell my past and provoke expressions from the reader.

Vulnerability forms the connection between the self-study in social sciences and the literature (Muncey, 2014). Through an autoethnography the author is reflective on the experience and the writing process, displaying the “researchers’ vulnerable selves, emotions, bodies and spirits” (Brown, 2014, p. 143). You can feel the embodied self, emotions, and tone that comes across through their writing, strengthening the correlation to the literature. Researchers often pick a topic based on their past experiences and interest, making it difficult to be complete reflexive on the bias they hold. Reducing it

down to the literature would not do the lived-experience justice and not letting the healing take place that only vulnerability can bring. There is such value that comes from writing a narrative inquiry from a vulnerable place, adding strength to the connected literature. I share stories that show me in difficult situations, not just the perfect days, so that you see all aspects of me. But it also allowed me to break down the walls of perfectionism and work through the need to always display the wins in my life. With the losses comes learning and growth, making this research that much more valuable to me.

### **Value of Narrative Inquiry**

Shanahan and Macmillan (2008) remind us that “To better understand the problem of forming a working professional identity, there is a need for richer, more descriptive, languages and for increasingly more powerful and potentially analytic concepts that link biography and history” (p. 309). Covid-19 was a gift, a gift of time to write my story. A time to write my way into being so I can understand why I teach the way I do. Some might argue that this time could have been spent in better use, rather than a self-indulgent narrative inquiry. I would argue that there is value in the work and the time spent writing a narrative inquiry. Narrative inquiries offer an extension to a community through the cultural analysis of self and others during the dialectic process of author and reader (Chang, 2008). By sharing and analyzing my narratives I am allowing others into the process where they have the opportunity to reflect and assess their own identity development and portrayal. Ovens and Fletcher (2014) agree, stating that “the study of self-in-practice is never a solitary endeavour since practices are sets of culturally bound activities emerging from the collective actions, culture and relationships with others also working in the same setting or community of practice” (p. 10). Readers may

relate to the message of the story or the struggles and triumphs I go through to find my own identity. They may agree with my identity portrayal in the classroom, or they may have thought about how they would change it instead. Through the sharing of narratives and the “dialectic approach towards identity” (Akkerman & Meijer, 2011, p. 309), I allow for the connection between reader and myself, to form a deeper connection through the emotions that were displayed through my vulnerability and may occur as the reader goes on the journey with me.

I went through teacher’s college saying all the right things but never understanding why they affected me at my core. I do not want another teacher to graduate not knowing their beliefs, not knowing their identity. Palmer (1997) states that teachers are at their best when they are aligned intellectually, emotionally, and spiritually. This paper is meant as an active process of discovery for both the writer and the reader. I want to show the reader that their journey to alignment may be uncomfortable; they may want to stop or forget the stories they have moved to the discard container of their brain. By sharing my own narratives that I built walls around I hope that the readers do the same through the connection and journey that the paper provides. I want the reader to know that this is a journey—a process, rather than a product, so they should not come into the paper thinking that their teacher identity will be solved and definite. Rather, through the work that is done they can become more mindful of their identity and how it is portrayed in the classroom. The work that I did on my own identity was not easy. But I would rather show my vulnerable self through these narrative encounters than not improve as an educator. As I do this research, I ensure that other teachers have a guiding voice to follow if they choose. I may show them that they can wrestle with the discomfort and come out

stronger on the other side. If this can align one more teacher with their intellectual, emotional, and spiritual self, to become the best teacher they can be for the education system, should that not be the goal?

## CHAPTER FOUR: NARRATIVES

When writing the narrative inquiry, I took the advice from Poulos (2019), allowing the writing process to take over, to mindfully display the stories that make up who I am as a teacher, some I am proud to share and others I hesitated to write. The narratives chosen do not all take place in the classroom, but show the growth, turning points, and experiences that shaped my identity as a teacher. So why did I share these stories? There is learning and unlearning that occurs within these stories and my hope is that you, as the reader, will begin to unpack your own stories guided by my examples. My stories may resonate with you or not, but they are the experiences I have chosen to share. The narratives are written from my point of view. I hope my stories and experiences open up the space for you to discover what shaped you into the teacher who you are today. My analysis of these stories leads to understanding the development of my identity in concepts of perfectionism, people-pleasing, the tension between masculine and feminine energies, and discovering myself after hardship.

### Narrative Series 1: I Am Grateful for Fields of Good Soil

I am grateful for fields of soil because it provided me with an introduction to the working life. I realized that to be successful in life, I needed to work hard so that I could watch the literal fruits of my labour prosper.

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#### *Who Really Won?*

*The dirt was a light, pale brown as the sun that beat down on me sucked out all the water from the sandy soil. That was the 14th day in a row that I was out in the fields. I remember being so thankful that I brought my hat that day. As a farmer's daughter I*

*worked when the weather was good, not according to a schedule. At the age of 12, this was a similar experience to most of my friends in Norfolk County. Once school was out, we spent every summer working on our family farms. I was lucky enough to have a lots of family members in the field that helped out and provided entertainment that helped pass the time. I glanced up from the ground where my hoe was dug in and looked to see how many more meters till the end of the row. It looked like 500m, or the equivalent of one and a half songs on my iPod. As I looked to the rows on my right and left, I noticed the location of my brothers and cousins. They had increasingly gained distance on me. I hated being the last one. It made me feel less than, and it did not help that I was the only girl in the field so they would pick on me for being slower. I felt my knuckles tighten around the wood handle of the hoe as I hacked at every weed I found in the row; careful to miss the small tobacco plants. At the site of the last plant in the row I looked up and realized I had finished first. Was it a real race? No. Did it matter to me? Yes. I won the race that everyone else did not know they were even a part of.*

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Working in the fields instilled two qualities at a young age: a hard work ethic and a desire to be the best. The hard work ethic showed up in the inability to take a day off, having to keep up to the other relatives in the field when I was the youngest, and the concept that the job was not finished within a schedule; rather, it was finished when the task was complete. The faster and more efficient I worked, the more time I would have off that night to cool down in the pool or practise shooting pucks in the driveway. But hard work also got me the recognition that I wanted. I thrived from knowing that I was the best and having other recognize that. I knew who I had to be and how I had to show

up. There was little room left for listening to what I wanted to do. I knew I had to be tough like one of the boys or else I would be laughed at. I knew I had to work hard to prove myself and I knew I had to show up ready to work; which meant clothing that was functional rather than fashionable and the only product I would put on my face would be sunscreen. The structure of the farm left little room for interpreting my embodiment. Being the youngest and the only girl in the field, I always felt like I had something to prove. I wanted to show that I was just as good, if not a better, worker. I felt a constant pressure to perform. The boys would always get picked first to drive the tractor, and I thought if I worked just as hard as them, I would get chosen for the better jobs. It was more about being better than others, in the hopes that I would get recognized I fought so hard for.

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### *Double Standards*

*I knocked my knuckles on the door of the Professor's office. I felt the sense of excitement my body tried to hold in. This was a woman that I idolized, she was everything I wanted to be. She moved with grace wherever she went and spoke with a confident poise that commanded the room. Something that I never witnessed before, she could walk into a massive gymnasium and with one call get all attention on her. She represented what I wanted from life: a successful and respected career, a husband that went on adventures with her, and children that adored her. Throughout her lessons she would speak of talking with her children who were spread out across the country, or how her golf lessons and trip to the opera went from the previous night. It was a life that was so intriguing yet so foreign to me.*



*She invited me into her office. I sat on the sturdy yet cushioned chair, being sure that my body did not relax into it.. I wanted to show the same posture and poise she demonstrated. We exchanged small talk about how my classes were going that term and the research book that I originally came for. I told her the usual, that I was exceling in all my classes and would be attending the OPHEA conference on behalf of the Brock Physical Education Department, as well as the Honour Roll Ceremony. The corner of her mouth rose into a small smile and she said, "Tell me about your upbringing." I could not hide the confusion from my face; what did my upbringing have to do with anything? I quickly decided where to start, "I grew up on a farm in Vanessa, a small town in Norfolk County. There is six of us in my family. I am the second daughter with an older brother and a younger sister and brother. I admired my older brother growing up and wanted to do whatever he did. If he was playing hockey, I was playing hockey. He hunted, fished, and went quadding, so I did all the same. I was a big tomboy. I did not mind getting my hands dirty and cared more about who was it in tag rather than what I was wearing".*

*"What kind of farm did you have there; do you parents still work on it?" she asked. I replied very awkwardly: "Yes we have a farm with chickens, ginseng and ... tobacco." I lowered my voice on the last crop, hoping that she would not question how a healthy physical education student could be connected to growing tobacco for cigarettes. "I grew up working on the farm every day in the summer, since I was 13. I am told that is where my work ethic comes from, on a farm you work until the work is done." She nodded as if to say keep going I am intrigued. "My parents still have the farm, but I am so thankful to be pursuing an education, I cannot imagine taking over the farm. It is mindless work and long hours; I do not have the passion for it. My dad does though, he is*

*so smart when it comes to the techniques and business of it. My mom works on the farm as well, she does some manual labour but also the payroll and bookkeeping. Actually, it is funny because she used to be a teacher, I guess that is where I get my passion for teaching from. But when she met my dad, she gave it up and committed to being a stay at home farm wife and mom. It is pretty typical in my town.”*

*Her faced looked as if I almost insulted her, I waited anxiously for her to answer. When she composed her face she said to me, “Jenna, promise me you will not become a stay at home farm wife; you have far too much potential.”*

*I left her office confused. I thought my mother had it pretty good. Yes, she has to work in the manual labour but she had most of the winter off and got to stay home and raise her children. Since when was being a housewife a bad thing? Most of my friends’ moms were stay at home moms and it seemed like a good gig to me. I tried to sort out the thoughts in my head, when I ran into my closest friend in the hallway. I told her what happened in our Professor’s office: “I do not get it, why would she say that?” I questioned. She obviously understood the Professor’s opinion: “Because she sees potential in you and how much you enjoy the work you are doing here at Brock. Think of your mom, she probably really enjoyed being a teacher and gave up her passion to raise you guys and be a good wife. That is the old way of thinking, small town thinking, you can be a good wife and mother AND have a successful career.”*

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My hard work ethic and need to perform for others carried over into my university career. I always arrived in class earlier than any of my friends. I would create professional relationships with the faculty and be the first to raise my hand to volunteer in

class. Some would label me the “teacher’s pet” but I was never embarrassed by the title because it allowed me to be seen. My hard work paid off as I got invited to different conferences and networking events. Each time I got dressed up for an event I felt a sense of pride, that I was being seen for the hard work I put in. Again, I question if I would work as hard if I was not being watched by others. And the answer would be yes, because I created such a high level of standards for myself that I would be letting myself down if I did not achieve them. I believe this is because I had always identified as someone who is hard working and high achieving, who would I be if I did not hold myself to a high standard? What would my identity be? I remember discussing with my friends and hearing that they were getting their first job at the mall at the age of 18, whereas I had years of a demanding work experience already. I was known for being busy and working hard. I had to keep up that identity for myself so that I did not feel lost and less than.

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### *Running on Empty*

*I woke up as my alarm clocked pounded, as I silently begged it to stop.. As I rolled over to find the button to turn it off, I felt every muscle in my body ache. It felt like someone was pushing me back down as I tried to get up. It was 5 months into my new job of teaching physical education full time. I had four classes a day and with orienteering and hiking as the present focus. I spent over 8 hours in the forest covering over 20kms of walking or running a day. I loved being physically active, but I felt the mental and physical toll this job took on my body. I debated calling in sick, letting my body have a day to recover. I remember being jealous at the thought of the other physical educator who decided to only work 40% this year due to burnout. But I was a new teacher; I*

*questioned how could I already be burnt out? I worried about what would others think of me. I thought I would be perceived as weak and not fit for the job. My childhood taught me that there were no sick days in the tobacco fields, only work. I applied the same principle then, when I forced my legs to swing out of bed and start my morning routine, I felt like I still needed to arrive early to school before everyone else, as if I had something to prove.*

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In my first year of full-time teaching full, I experienced a full-on burn out. I started the job with a positive attitude and felt like I was full equipped with the knowledge and skills to be a great teacher. What I was not expecting was the physical and mental burnout that would occur because of the stressors of the job. Although, I was an athlete growing up and continued to enjoy physical activity in my young adult years, I could not keep up to the demands and I did not know how to ask for help. I was afraid of what others would think and how I would cope with not being the perfect high-achieving self that I had put years into forming. For me, asking for help was a sign of weakness and one that would threaten my identity. When I reflect back to working in the fields, I would never ask for help because that meant I was seen as weaker than the older boys. I had to “hold my own weight” out there, they would say. I continued with the job and the burnout for the remainder of the school year. I ended up gaining thirty pounds and felt more sluggish and de-motivated with every day that passed. Not only did my physical body suffer but my teaching ability suffered too because I was too tired to put in the extra effort.

## Narrative Series 2: I Am Grateful for the Sports Teams

I am grateful for sports teams because they created friendships that I maintain today. They provided a way to bond over a common passion and similar healthy values.

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### *Violent Beginnings*

*I was 9 years old; my white blonde bowl cut was pushed back as my coach secured my helmet into place. "Show me your mean face," he said, as I tried to squint my eyes so that they created slits on my face and scrunched up my nose with the right corner of my mouth raised up. Within seconds I smiled. "Meaner, Jenna!" I tried again, this time I curled my top lip up to show my teeth. Again, a smile escaped me. I looked around the dressing room of all the boys as they jumped around and punched each other as if they are going into battle. I backed into the corner out of their way. Something I was used to as the only girl on a boys' hockey team.*

*It was the second period in an old freezing cold arena that was shaped like a barn with all the wooden beams exposed on the roof. The Delhi Rockets were losing 2-1, as my coach patted me on the back, enough that it shifted my shoulder pad forward.*

*"Remember, Jenna, you have to be mean to want it! Go out there and show me what you got!" I was on defence so I positioned myself between the hashmarks just to the side of our goal, so that I covered the boy out in front of the net. He was bigger than me, the cage of my helmet only came up to his collarbone. up to his collarbone. I used all my force as I drove my shoulder into him. I ended up falling. All I thought about was how I could have let the team down if I did not get mean and move this player from out front of our net. I could not let my team down. My quick thought, led me to looking down at the*

*weapon I had in my hand. I hacked his shin-pad as he crashed to the ice, but he got up again. Alright, that worked I found a solution to the size difference. I hacked him again but this time from behind where there was no padding. The whistle blew, and I skated towards the bench. "Where do you think you are going?" I turned around to see a man in a white and black striped shirt who asked with an angry expression. "You got a penalty, go to the box." When I skated towards the penalty box, my coach yelled, "Good job, Jenna! You were so tough."*

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I started playing hockey because I wanted to be just like my older brother. The first time I saw him on the ice I wanted to join. When I was 5 my parents put me in skates and let me go; I fell in love with the game. But starting out in a small town we did not yet have a girls' hockey league. For the first 10 years of hockey I played on a boys' team. Which meant, changing in my own "dressing room" which was typically a closet at the arena, having to be tough and loud like the boys, and become a tomboy to fit in. Watching hockey on TV with my family was a weekly tradition, I knew all the slang and how hockey players acted. I adapted these tough, joking characteristics into my being because I knew that they would help me excel at the physical and social aspects of the game. I never once stopped to question if I wanted to build a tough exterior and willingly participated in the natural "chirping" that occurred. I enjoyed playing on the boys' team and became good friends with lots of my teammates. The only time my gender bothered me was the lonely time I spent in the changeroom before the coach called me in and let me join the boys' changeroom for the pre-game chat. When I would get called in, the coaches would try extra hard to include me by asking me questions and getting me to lead

cheers. The extra effort they put in to compensate for the fact I was alone, allowed me to build my confidence and become more vocal with the team.

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### *Popular Vote*

*I bounced with excitement when we pulled up to the banquet hall. I could barely wait until my mom parked the car before I clicked my seatbelt off. I threw the heavy truck door open and called out over my shoulder, "I'll see you inside!"*

*As I made my way into the banquet hall, I was on a mission to find my teammates. I moved as quickly as I could wearing the black flats and high waisted dress pants my mom made me wear. This was in stark contrast to my usual track pants and sneakers. I was greeted with the faces of 14 other smiling girls. One called out, "Jenna over here, I saved you a seat." I made my way to the middle of the table, as I said, "Hi," I bumped fists along the way.*

*The noise in the room was ecstatic. A Taylor Swift concert was the only place I had ever heard more noise than this. From team to team conversations about who would win the awards this year, could be heard from table to table. The noise was hushed as the plates of chicken and mashed potatoes with beans were served. The awards ceremony had begun.*

*Silenced filled the room as the head of the organization stated: "We want to start the night by honouring someone who has been nominated by their team because of the acts of service they do in the community and the leadership they show through the hockey organization. It came down to three girls and the winner will receive a scholarship for school next year." I felt the stares of my teammates looking at me, as my face got red*

*from all the attention. I kept my eyes down on the plate so that my emotions stayed hidden.. “Jenna Dierick, you have shown exemplary leadership and community service through your involvement in the school Athletic Council, tutoring after school, organizing an equipment drive for girls’ hockey in Northern Canada and helping new players learn the sport of hockey. Your coaches are not sure how you manage to balance everything, while also being the captain that holds the team together. We are honoured to name you this year’s recipient. Would you please come up and get your award?”*

*As I moved to accept the award, I felt the support of my teammates who beamed with excitement for me. In front of hundreds of people, I walked to the stage. I was not sure who nominated me; but I was honoured to be known as making a difference in my community.*

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When I switched over to girls’ hockey, around the age of 16, I was a natural leader on the team. My coaches would always say that I was a mix between a social and a silent leader. Sometimes I would be loud and outgoing to rally up the team, but other times my teammates would naturally follow my lead because of the experience that I had on the ice. I knew the sport and people recognized that, looking up to me as a role model and a teammate. My coaches often rewarded my leadership by appointing me as the captain or alternative captain on the team. I contribute the confidence I built from initially playing with the boys which continued with my success in the girls’ hockey organization. I had the skills and confidence to be a leader. Where some girls may have stayed quiet, I was volunteered to try the new drills first. This confidence transferred off the ice as well. I had a presence within my school and my community. If someone needed a young



person in the community to start or promote a program, I was often called on to do so because I was a leader not only with the girls but still had the friendships I built with the boys. I was confident enough to step-outside my comfort zone for the good of the community because I have always been rewarded for being a leader. Always seeking that validation that I craved. This was an easy way to get attention, and it correlated with something I enjoyed so I thrived off of the atmosphere. My prior experiences set me up for the success and attention, I soaked up every bit of it that I could.

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### *Extra Involvement*

*It was a typical mid-November day in Sweden. No daylight shone through the window, even though it was only 4:00 p.m.. Candles were lit around the room to give it the “hugge” feeling. Wrapping myself in a blanket, I cozied myself into my usual seat in the staffroom. The extension of the school building, where the meeting was being held, never felt as though it was heated like the others. I gazed around the room happy to be in the presence of my fellow teachers rather than in the physical education building that was separated from the school. Pleasantries were exchanged but the exhaustion from teaching and lack of vitamin-D were present. Forced smiles were plastered across faces.*

*“Alright let’s begin by doing our rounds; would anyone like to share?” I raised my hand timidly, as this was my first year at a new school and first year teaching, I felt as though I always had a naïve presence about me, although no one had mentioned anything. When I was cued with a head nod I began: “I think it would be nice for the students if we had some kind of sports team after school. I see them playing basketball all the time outside, even in the snow. I would be willing to organize a team and open up the*

*gym for them. We could connect with other English schools in the area to create a mini-tournament. It is a popular thing to do in Canada and it boosts school community.” The principal’s face was expressionless, and hard to read.*

*“We have thought about school sports before, but it is a lot of work to form. You would need to have try outs and jerseys. We would want only the best if we were to have a team representing our school. It’s a lot of work, but if you are willing, I will agree.”*

*Success.*

*“Thank you!” I replied, as I felt a purpose to turn my forced mid-November smile into a real one. I felt giddy. I knew the students were going to be happy when I announced it.. After the rounds of announcements finished, we moved on to start the discussion about graduation.*

*“We will need someone to take on the yearbook; the teachers that did it last year did a great job but it was a lot of work and I think we need to pass the torch.” Silence. No one raised their hand.*

*“I can do it if no one else wants to. I do not know anything about graphic design and the best camera I have is my iPhone but I’m sure I can make it work with a crew of help from the students.”*

*“Alright, sign Ms. Dierick up for it then,” the principal said to the person who recorded the meeting minutes. We went through the rest of the agenda, which only lasted about 45 minutes. We were invited up to grab some “fika” on our way to join with our grade level meeting groups. I got up from the indent that I made in the couch and started to fold the blanket when I was stopped by my friend who taught science. “That was a lot for you to take on! You sure you are going to be able to handle it?”*

*“Oh ya, I love being involved, I am a teacher it is what I do. Wait until I suggest my news project I have been dreaming of. It is a sleepover retreat night for the Grade 8 girls. I noticed there is a lot of cliques and drama going on, so I thought if we organized something with just them and worked through it, we could make them a cohesive unit instead of having them pick each other apart all the time. I’m still working out the details that is why did not bring it up tonight, maybe next month.” She shook her head; I was not sure if she thought the idea was crazy or that I was crazy. Either way, the school was my community and I wanted to bring out the best in the people who also made it their community. I grabbed a plate of food and hurried onto the next meeting.*

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The desire to bring extracurriculars to my school environment came from two factors: the desire to provide the benefits of sports to students and to nourish my identity of being a leader. First, I wanted to provide the opportunities for students to enjoy and grow with sports. I learned many valuable lessons about social skills through sports and believe that my students should experience the same. Second, I want to be a leader in my school community. I enjoy starting and organizing programs that the student’s want to be involved in. I want to ensure that there is an extra-curricular activity for all students so that they can find something they enjoy. My identity as a leader had been shaped by sports and I carry it with me into my school community.

### **Narrative Series 3: I Am Grateful for My Family’s Health**

I am grateful for my family’s health because I know what it is like to have it taken from me. Through this I have a new outlook on life, one that tries to be present in the moment and not take moments for granted.

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*Deadly Whispers*

*I walked into class at 8:35a.m. I felt the cool hard metal of my kilt pin against the bottom of my thigh as I stepped through the door. I had matched it with a black polo shirt and knee-high maroon stockings. I wanted to look put together that morning, and not draw any attention to myself specifically the puff bags that formed under my eyes which I had spent 20 minutes trying to hide with makeup before I left for school that morning.*

*I heard my Birkenstock shoes clacking all the way down the hall as I approached the door. "Okay," I thought to myself, "take a big deep breath in and put on a smile, no one needs to know." The classroom filled up with friends and chatter; discussions of who won the hockey game between the rival community teams and where everyone was going for the weekend bonfire tonight. The corners of my lips turned into a smile, I nodded along trying to hide the fact that it felt like I have a frog stuck in my throat. A small tear ran down my cheek when the bell rang signalled the start of class. "Can I have a minute?" he asked as I ran past the teacher into the hallway, not waiting for an answer since I did not want my friends to see me cry.*

*Deep breaths, deep breaths, I told myself. I heard the heavy footprints of what could only be of the large male teacher, as he tried to catch up to me. I stopped and pushed my back into the wall of lockers. Feeling as though I could have been sick he started, "Jenna, I got the email this morning. I am sorry to hear about your dad. If there is anything that I can do please let me know. I know you are going to be worrying about the course, but your marks are the best in the class and you already got accepted into the university you wanted. Focus on yourself and your family; that is your priority right*

*now.” I nodded, feeling so much comfort in his words. A rush of relief came over me when I was able to wash away the happy front that I tried so hard to uphold that morning. When we walked back into class together, I caught the faint whispers of, “Did you hear? Jenna’s dad has cancer?”*

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I have a close relationship with my dad because he was my boss growing up, and he taught me how to keep up with the boys and never raised his voice. He greeted me with understanding which I really appreciated. When I found out that he was diagnosed with leukemia with a low survival rate, I was in shock. I remember going to bed that night questioning what my life would look like in the future. Would he be at my graduation? See me and my date off at prom that year? Help me move into university? Or walk me down the aisle at my wedding? Was I selfish to think of myself first, when he was the one going through the pain and staying away at the hospital for weeks at a time? But I had always been daddy’s little girl and going through my days without him seemed unbearable. In my final year of high school, I would have people ask how he was doing, or how I was doing, and that was the hardest thing to go through. I appreciated that they cared to ask but I was trying to put on a smile and once asked, that smile would crack. I sat in all my classes still, but my mind was elsewhere. I would worry about my dad in the hospital. I would worry about what I would be making for dinner that night for my siblings. I would worry about how I would be able to take my siblings to their extracurriculars while still doing my homework and playing my sports. I felt like I was being forced to grow up fast, in a year that is filled with milestone events.

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*Forced Forgetting*

*“And remember, don’t do anything I wouldn’t do,” my older cousin yelled from the front seat of the truck; my friends and I hopped down what felt like a two-foot drop and landed carefully to make sure that the bottles in our backpack did not clink from all the movement. My cousin was the cool older cousin, but also the kind that would have this for blackmail if she found out I was drinking.*

*My friends and I adjusted our outfits to make sure that there were no dirt on them from the truck that sped away down the dirt driveway. We looked way too overdressed to have be walking down the kilometer trail that lead to a man-made shack in the middle of the woods. Our “club” for the night. I wished would have worn my running shoes instead of the useless but adorable flipflops. I linked my arms through my friends and started down the trail. “Are you going to blackout again tonight Jenna?”*

*“The 2-6 of vodka in my backpack tells me I just might,” I replied with a laugh. But deep down I felt a pit of guilt in my stomach. The pit silently asked, “Why do you always have to do it, why do you have to be the drunkest girl at the party?” No answer came. Sure, I was having a laugh with my friends, but I questioned whether the laughs were with me or at my expense. I questioned why I even got dressed up for this. As I tried to pinpoint the time that my identity, and idea of fun, changed from reading a book or playing tennis with my brothers, into the need to blackout from drinking too much, I arrived at the shack. I took in my surroundings. It was a two-storey wooden shack complete with a dance floor and a group of guys huddled around the long picnic bench playing beer-pong. “Nice to see you not passed out Jenna,” a boy said with a laugh; “Come on over and join in on the game.” And just like that, as I cracked open a drink, all my critical self-reflection was disappeared.*

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After my dad's diagnosis I took on a lot of responsibilities in the house; taking care of my siblings, cooking dinner, and taxiing everyone to where they needed to be. My focus on school and sports faltered and the time that I did have for myself, I spent partying. Before, I was the girl who would choose to miss the parties because of commitments to my sports and my family. Now my house was a free for all. I did not have much guidance from my parents because they spent most days at the hospital which meant I was the parent in charge. I looked to partying and alcohol to let loose and escape the identity of being the parent and perfectionist that I previously had. I partied like a typical teenager, but always took it too far. I was either a perfectionist, role model teenager or a sloppy mess; there was no in between. I knew this was not who I was at the core, but at the time I wanted something different. Being used to having the perfect life and then being hit with a devastating family illness, I started to believe that life is not perfect so why do I have to be?

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### *Sobering Isolation*

*"Have fun tonight guys!" I cheered, as what felt like a bus full of people piled out of my vehicle. It was a Thursday night in a university town, so the bars were busy. I knew that it was not my scene, so I continued my sober streak and offered to be the designated driver that night. I dropped them off and instructed that I would pick them up just down the street. "Wish you were coming!" replied Sasha, when she slammed the door closed.*

*When I drove home, I thought about that statement. Because the truth was, I did not wish I was going out. I did not miss it. The past year was what I call my selfish year because I knew I needed to do the work on myself before I could help others. I stopped*

*drinking because I regretted it every time. Not in the hangover kind of way, but in the way that I just did not feel like myself and I spent too many years using it to forget about what was really going on in my life. I spent the last year finding out who I was again, the same girl that I was when I was younger and had people look up to me for my positivity and leadership. I began running, and I looked forward to it. It gave me the time and space to think through my life and decisions, rather than cover it up. I began taking my health seriously, making it something that I valued; staying active and eating healthy. I began staying in with a book and relaxing, rather than being the girl that needed to be at every party. Enjoying the sunrises when I woke up, rather than on my way home. As the months passed, I finally felt like myself again. I thought about what I valued and became unapologetically unwavering in living who I am.*

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During my third year of college my dad got the news that his cancer was dormant again. He still lived with cancer in his body but it was at a manageable place and the doctor visits would only happen four times a year. This really snapped me back into place. My dad decided that he was going to be sober and try to live a healthier life, and it was just the motivation I needed to rediscover who I was. I stopped drinking as well and began doing activities that I previously enjoyed. I felt like the weight of worry and hiding my pain was over and I could focus on myself again without feeling guilty. I would stay in and read for fun again, something that I grew up doing as a child, and I looked forward to it every night. I would meditate, do yoga, and journal when I felt overwhelmed. But my go-to activity was running; running was a form of therapy for me. This is what Snowber (2018) calls “body inquiry” (p. 236), I could push out all distractions when I was running and focus on issues that were bothering me or let the thoughts flow easily



through my mind.

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### *The Role Model I Needed*

*“Ms. Dierick! Ms. Dierick! You have to come watch our volleyball game after school today, four of us made the team!” The girls entered the classroom for their first health lesson of that term. I noticed that most of them looked like clones, as they all wore their uniforms identical, right down to the same socks. That was the first time I saw them since we switched from volleyball to health and out of their gym uniforms of baggy black shorts and gray t-shirts with the school logo on it.*

*“I’ll be there!” I replied. I guess my teaching games for understanding paid off and noted in the back of my mind.*

*“Do we have to do health? I want to go practice instead,” they replied.*

*“Not only do we have to do health, I am so excited to be able to teach your health. This is one of my passions. I love talking about it all from healthy relationships to substance use and body image.” I noticed the girls’ eyes widened as I said things that are often hushed in schools. One girl crossed her arms over her stomach when I said, “body image.” I already felt the growing passion in me to relay the content. I was thankful that my placement teacher allowed me to switch the schedule around so that I could teach health during my block. “I am almost 60 years old; what do I know about girls’ health these days, all this sexting and mental health issues. I can only do so much, please take it off my hands,” she said as the bell rung and signaled the start of class.*

*“Alright let’s start off by talking about what a safe classroom is. What does it look like? What does it feel like? What does it sound like?” I recorded the answers on the*

*board. I was thankful that I had already had the time to form relationships with these girls in the gym so that the conversation was free flowing.*

*As I paced around the room to hand each student a piece of paper, I provided the instructions to divide the paper into four rectangles and the student drew these out on their papers. "In each of the corners you are going to draw or write a symbol that relates to the question I ask. In the top left corner, I want you to display something that you value, in the top right something that you like to do, in the bottom left a person you admire and, in the bottom left a word that would be used to describe you." The girls began and some eyes fluttered around the room, I reminded them that it was their work and only they would know the answer.*

*The students shared what they responded and discussed what was important to them and their identity. I reminded them that they could not learn about relationships and health until they understood who they are and understanding what they valued. It was something that we came back to throughout the unit so they needed to understand their beliefs and positions on controversial topics and why it may be different from their classmates.*

*"Tomorrow we will be back in this room talking about healthy relationships." I was matched with a mixture of reactions when the girls looked at each other and laughed;, two girls who dropped their gaze to their desk. I did not let it affect my calm facial expression; I readjusted my shoulders to stand tall and be the guide that they needed through this crazy time as a teenage girl.*

*"One more thing before you go. I have a box at the back of the room; whenever you think of a question that I have not covered in class or you want me to go into more*

*detail you can write the question down and put it in the box. You do not have to put your name on it unless you want to, and I will not point out who asked it in class but I will find the time to answer the question. Deal?" With heads that nodded in synchronization the bell rang and the girls filed out of the classroom. I noticed the boys already at the door who clearly left their class early to meet up with the clone girls in my class.*

*My placement teacher and I walked over to the box and found one crumpled up paper in the bottom. We looked at each other and smiled. I knew that at least one girl was going to get some clarity in this confusing point of her life.*

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I took an interest in helping my students navigate the pressures and changes that adolescents bring. When I was doing the work of rediscovering my identity, values, and passions, I educated myself on how to follow my calling and be true to myself. I wanted to share what I learned with my students and could do this work in a high-school setting because most students wanted guidance to alleviate their confusion. Covering topics like sexual education, healthy relationships, and peer pressure were topics that I felt needed to be taught because they were issues that I struggled with during my identity crisis. I recall my associate teacher sharing with me that she had never seen a group of teenage girls so eager to learn as they were hanging off of every word I said. She related teaching health to pulling teeth when she taught it over the years. She asked me to continue addressing health because that is what the students requested. When my placement came to a close, I provided her with my resources as I hoped that the information would be shared with as many students as possible.

#### Narrative Series 4: I Am Grateful for the Ability to Run

I am grateful for the ability to run because when I travel I can pack a pair of shoes and explore all parts of the city in a cheap and enjoyable way.

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#### *Racing Thoughts*

*“What would happen if I went to teacher’s college in Hamilton instead?” I thoughts ran back and forth through my head. I glanced down at my watch that tracked my kilometers. I pulled back on my speed just a little to check in with my body. I started with my feet that were hitting the pavement, up to my shins, knees, torso, arms and head and I agreed with myself that everything felt good enough to do at least one more lap around the neighbour sidewalk that I ventured to every night just as the sun began to set.*

*“First, I would have to get a place to live, or would I be able to commute from home?”*

*“I bet I could convince one of my friends to join me in Hamilton.”*

*“I heard it is an abandoned high school.”*

*“Do they even have a cafeteria? I guess I could just prep my meals every day.”*

*Thoughts raced through my head, as if the tempo of my run was the rate at which they were produced. The faster I ran the quicker the thoughts came. When I felt overwhelmed by the thoughts, I turned my attention to the scenery. The wind pushed against me in resistance. I slowed my pace hoping that my thoughts would follow. I looked for familiar outlets along my running route. There was the house that always had the garage light on no matter what time of the day it was. And there was the university boy’s house where they drank too much, judging by the stacks of empty cases lining their*

*porch. My mind felt lighter, I pondered my original question. I decided that moving to the Hamilton Campus for teacher's college was the best option for me. I hoped my placements, friends, and living arrangement would all sort themselves out.*

*Soon enough I ran up the steps of my neighbours and walked into the front door without even a knock. I slid the arrow across on my watch to turn the tracker off, as someone called out "How many kilometers tonight, Jenna?"*

*"14," I replied; "guess I had a lot on my mind."*

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Running provided me with the time and space to use body inquiry to focus in on a problem or clear my head. I found running to be therapeutic; growing up with mostly boys I was not one to share my feelings. I remember in my first year of high school Religion was my lowest mark because the teacher thought I needed to get in touch with my emotions more. I always felt my life was pretty good: I was from an upper-class family, played every sport I wanted, got good grades, had a loving family, and rarely was told no; I was a positive and fortunate person until my dad got sick. Running was my outlet that I never needed before. When I had fears of what the future held, I would run. When I was anxious about what was coming next, I would run. I was able to work through the thoughts in my head without the outside influence of someone else. When running, I had the ability to focus on the self, I was not running to be a part of a club or beat my fastest time. The unstructured nature of running was the first time that I was able to reflect inward with the body, rather than my environment dedicating who I was. I believe that this is why I always enjoyed running at night. The darkness provided the barrier between me and having to perform for someone else. When it was my time to

focus on me, my body provided the feedback that I needed. Being in tune with my body and my thoughts at once was a liberating experience. The feeling of control and alignment with myself ran through me when I was running.

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### *Take A Lap*

*At 8:00 a.m. sharp I opened the door and greeted the students. There was a lot of chatter, of course there was lots of chatter it was the self-proclaimed worse class in the school. I paced down the center of the two divided lines, girls on my right, boys on my left; glanced side to side as if to give them a warning that they are wasting their time not mine. By the time I reached the back, I turned around and paced back up to the front of the line. The room got quiet. I signalled for the girls' line to enter first; one by one there was a greeting of "Good Morning Ms. Dierick" as they walked into the changeroom. The boys' line was signaled next. When the second to last boy entered the changeroom I had to call them all back out because he had made a noise by banging on the stall dividers. The boys came out, some looked annoyed, some looked shameful and did not want to make eye contact.*

*"You know the school rules boys, we need a calm and quiet learning environment. Until we enter the gym, I expect you to uphold the same demeanor you would within the school hallways."*

*The boys formed a line outside once again, and I cued them to do the process over. The boy that made the noise greeted me with a sly smile as he entered, "Good Morning Ms."*

*As I checked off attendance from my laptop, I noticed a basketball fly from one side of the gym to the other. With the speed and angle, it was moving, it had to have been kicked. My head jerked up and analyzed where it had come from. I was greeted with that same sly smile.*

*“Come here,” I called.*

*“Ohhhhh he’s in trouble.”*

*“I bet you’re going to have to be collected by the detention monitor,” I heard from his friend.*

*“What is going on this morning?” I questioned him as to why he is trying to push his limits. Why had he wanted my attention so badly?*

*“I do not want to be here.”*

*“If you don’t want to be here, I am not going to force you, go take a lap and come back when you’re ready.”*

*“Go take a lap?” I am not sure if he questioned me because of the language barrier or the message.*

*“Yes, go walk around the school property until you want to be here. You know your classmates and I enjoy having you in the class and you bring joy to our day. But if you do not want to be here go take a lap until you sort out what is going on in your head.” He left without a response. I held my breath and prayed that I did the right thing.*

*With 20 minutes left in the class, he returned, “Hi Ms. I’m ready to play.”*

*“Great, you can grab a green pinnie and go in at the next whistle.” Nothing more was said as he filed seamlessly into the class.*

I never found out what the particular issue was that day with the student but the history of coming from a broken family and a recent passing of a father seemed to cause similar scenarios in the past. I dealt with the situation in same manner that I would hope someone would treat me. I would want them to give me the time and the space to move and reflect and let the body and the mind come together without and noise or influence from the outside world. I did not want to leave the student alone, just so I could continue on with the class, but I wanted to provide him with time and space to reflect and if he wanted, be open to discussion.

I shared office hours with my students and encouraged them to attend or come hang out and participate in activities in the gymnasium when it was free. Some teachers were against it, saying that it was a burden, but for me it was a time to build relationships with students through physical activity. But I felt as though putting in the hours outside of the classroom made the classroom management easier. Through this narrative inquiry journey I realize that I sometimes cross over into the burnout stage. I want to be mindful of this and not end up giving all of me teaching and have nothing left to recover just like my teaching partner who went from a vibrant teacher to working 40%.

Weeks after the incident with the student who needed time to decompress, he came to my office hours and asked if we could shoot some hoops. Trying to look approachable, but not too eager, I agreed. I approached with a sense of calm, rather than urgency towards the student because that is the kind of treatment I would want. This feeling of having the control of the conversation and not wanting to be bombarded with questions and help stems from my experience in school when my father was sick. Everyone was aware of the situation I had at home, but I wanted to avoid the



conversation. We began shooting basketballs, both facing the net as he opened up about what was going on at home. His home life was difficult, and his reputation as a tough kid in school was what he prided in himself. The attention he lacked at home was reflected in his behavioural actions which garnered him attention that often led to getting in trouble. When he admitted this to me, we were shooting hoops. The movement and attention to something other than sitting down face to face and talking allowed him to open up and share but in a less vulnerable way. This helped strengthen my faith in movement as a vehicle to connect the mind and body and feel the emotions that are suppressed.

### **Narrative Series 5: I Am Grateful for the Power of Dance**

I am grateful for the power of dance because it is known as a universal language, connecting people from different parts of the world through rhythm and music.

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#### *Hiding*

*“5, 6, 5, 6, 7, 8” my dance partner counted through his grinning teeth as we emerged from behind the tall blue curtains at the Ukrainian Dance Hall. He was dressed in a fitted white blouse with red and black embroidery around and down the neck, black pants puffier than MC Hammer’s, and thigh- high Ferrari red boots. I had the red boots to match but with a slight heel, a red and black embroidered blouse where only the sleeves puffed out from beneath the black velvet vest, multiple skirts and aprons that were layered on top of each other, and a flower crown head piece with 40 ribbons of every colour that dangled just above the floor. My costume was made by my Baba. I scanned the crowd for her short frame as I force a smile from my lipstick-covered lips. The way my hair was tied back so tightly in braids, it was , impossible to do anything but smile.*

*There she was, at the table front and center, pointing at me as she bragged to her friend, “That is my granddaughter.” I was happy she’s happy, that is why I dance. I dance because she could not anymore. Dance has brought a smile to her face year after year since I was 5 right until the year I left for university.*

*I never told my friends I danced at the Ukrainian Dance Hall. To them I was a hockey player. A tough hockey player, one that would put you on your ass if you even looked at my goalie the wrong way. Every Tuesday night during high school I would dash around like crazy from a school hockey game, to my league hockey game and then rush out yelling out some kind of lie—“I want to get to the gym to do my training”; “My dog is at home alone so we have to get back to let it out”; “I have lots of homework I need to finish”—only to wind up at dance practice till 11:00 p.m. I would admit I enjoyed it sometimes, and even at times had fun with my dance crew. But it is something I kept a secret from what I called “the rest of my life” that kept my identity as an athlete in tact. No one would ever see me as the dainty girl who waddled around like a penguin to the cue of the “ting, ting” music. That “ting, ting” still haunted me today. That girl on stage is a different Jenna. I questioned how could I be both the tough hockey player and the dainty dancer? I believed I had to keep my dancing identity hidden; it was high school after all.*

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I was embarrassed about my identity as a dancer when I started out. I would make any excuse I could to ensure that no one knew where I was going every Tuesday night. I would say that I did it because my grandmother really enjoys watching the performance. Looking back now, I did enjoy it but I could not admit it to myself. Admitting it to myself meant that I had to admit to not being a totally tough tomboy. I felt like I could not be a

dancer and a hockey player at the same time. The conflict between who I was and the environment I was in, arose. I only saw hockey versus dance; masculine versus feminine. I was not in tune with myself enough to be confident in the fact that my identity could lie somewhere in between. I did not look like a dancer either; my body composition was big, and bulky with muscles, whereas the other girls were dainty and always got chosen to do the lifts and twirls. This also contributed to my desire to not be known as a dancer. If I was to be known as a dancer I would want to be known as the best, not one that was average at the steps and looked out of place on the stage.

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### *Thriving*

*I arrived at education physical and health education class early, even earlier than I usually arrived for my classes. I wore baggie mid-length shorts and an oversized t-shirt. I wanted to feel comfortable in the space before other students arrived. Were we going to have to dance, actually dance? Will it be choreographed? I do not move like a dancer. That is not who I am, I am 5'11", awkwardly long and not the slender build of a dancer. I crashed into girls on the ice rink; this body was not meant for leaps and bounds off the ground. "My feet will not leave the ground". "No one is going to pick me up in this dance class," I thought as I paced nervously in front of the door of the dance studio. My body was so stiff my shoulders had risen up to my ears and I could not get them to relax.*

*The instructor started off by welcoming us to the class. As she went over the syllabus, I looked around the room; "okay there are two very tall, slender girls wearing leggings and tank tops," I thought to myself. My eyes widened as I noticed one was*

wearing ballet shoes; what had I gotten myself into? My breath became short as I panicked, my mind debated if it was too late to switch into gymnastics instead. The instructor asked if anyone had any previous dance experience. The two slender, dancer type girls had their hands up confidently within seconds. There were a few others who raised their hands more timidly, as I scanned the room just under half of the students identified as dancers. The secret was, I identified with them, but the first day of class was not the day I would admit to something that I have been embarrassed about for years.

The instructor continued to discuss how we needed a safe space for the class. Some male students in the class stated what they thought was obvious: “we are definitely not going to get hurt on the dance floor, compared to the ice.” They gave each other a nod and a smirk, as if the instructor was waiting for that answer. She prompted us for more: “What about a mentally safe space? What about an emotionally safe space? What would these spaces sound like? Feel like? Look like?” My face took on a puzzled look; this was the first time I heard anyone describing sense of place, as if giving it an image and a being.

The music was turned on and we took up space around the room. I felt the awkwardness in the room, everyone nervous to make the first move, to be the one to do something silly. The instructor asked us to start out by walking to the music. Okay I thought, I can do that. I may not be a dancer but I thought I could step to a beat. The dancer girls in the class made the first move. They put a lot of emphasis on the beat, dropping one shoulder, then the other, as they swayed from left to right foot; almost as if the beat was controlling them. Next, the athletic boys took a step, much less rhythmic but also to the beat. There was a heavy weight lifted from my shoulders as I realized if they

*could do it so could I. My heartbeat lowered along with my shoulders. Left, right, left, right. That was the first time I started to relax.*

*The last activity presented was to create a short sequence in a line of the moves we had learned. These moves were not typical dance moves like chasse and plie. They were movements we felt from the music. We became completely attuned to the music, not aware or caring what others in the class were doing. There was such a connection between the body and the mind and the music; it was something that I had never felt before. It was almost magical. I moved my body high and low, quick and fast, taking up the space. The instructor called last time through and I extended my moves further, hit the beat harder, and could not hide the smile that was on my face. For the first time ever, I felt like I was connected to my body rather than controlling it. I was not sure what this feeling is called, but I knew I want to create it again and again. I was hooked on dance.*

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The university dance course I was dreading completely changed me as a teacher. I wanted to incorporate dance into everything I teach. The mind and body connect that it provided was something that I had not felt before. It was similar to running, but with a broader emphasis on emotions and accepting becoming vulnerable; Snowber (2018) describes this phenomenon of connecting different intelligences as body pedagogy. It took a couple of awkward classes until I felt comfortable dancing. It took even more classes before I was able to self-identify as a dancer. I felt powerful when I was dancing from within. It was different than the Ukrainian dancing I did throughout my younger years because there was less structure. I was not performing traditional folk songs and I did not always have an audience. I was dancing for myself which allowed embodiment to

prosper. It was the bridge that I needed to connect my masculine energy that I carry with the feminine energy of dance movement. The first time that I ever admitted to someone that I was a “dancer,” they asked me to show them. I was caught off guard by this statement because to me dance is not something you perform to a set choreography, but rather it is something you feel; a connection for the thoughts to be expressed. I realize that my way of describing dance is different than expected and the way that I use it in my teaching is also different. When teaching kindergarten, I would use dance to have students move around the class and make the shapes with their bodies. Letting them feel through the experience. This concept continued into my placement teaching physical education.

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### *Un-denying*

*“Alright girls, we’re are going to try something a little different today for our warm up. It might feel silly at first, but I want to embrace it. I am going to play some music, it may be fast it may be slow, and I want you to move your body to it. Feel the emotions that the music brings. Questions?”*

*“What do you mean move your body to it, like how?” a student asked me confused by my vagueness.*

*“However you see fit,” I replied, not sharing any additional information as I was matched with an eye roll. They knew me by now, I did not give direct instructions when it comes to dance and movement.*

*“What kind of emotions will this bring?” another girl raised the question.*

*“I guess that depends on how you are feeling today. How has your day been?” I replied, not expecting a reply but rather giving them a challenge. “Alright here we go.”*

*I pressed play on the first song; it is just an introduction to get them moving. A medium beat that I described as neither happy nor sad. I watched the students timidly start to move. Step, step, step. I joined in, giving them a little encouragement knowing that stopped at the next song; not wanting to give them an example that they think is the “correct movement to be doing.”*

*I stepped with the class but moved in the opposite direction.*

*“Let’s not be a herd of sheep today girls, we do not all move in a circle,” I challenged.*

*I dipped my shoulders as I moved and coordinated each shoulder with the same side step. Other students began to add in some arm movements. I noticed out of the corner of my eye a student adds in a twirl. “Alright, now they are warming up,” I thought.*

*“Alright next song.” I switched the track to a fast, upbeat song. The kind of song you would hear if you went to a night club. The movements of the students changed. Gone was the step, step, step, replaced by ecstatic, jolted movements shown in all kinds of forms from jumps and bounces to what looked like arm spasms. Along with the movements came facial expressions. The students were in the moment; they beamed with joy as if radiated the light from their bodies.*

*“And switch.” I turned to the last song, and let the students catch their breath from their previous movements. This one was slow and passionate. The lyrics painted a picture of a breakup or a death, depending on the interpretation. I scanned the room and noticed the level change. The majority of the students were moving slow, as expected, but*

*they also moved towards the ground as if they were being weighed down by the now somber energy that filled the room. The ones who were still standing looking like they reached and grasped for something that is just out of reach. The facial expressions shifted as well. I looked around at the meek, almost lifeless expressions on the girls' faces. Were they able to feel the music, and make the kind of connection that comes from digging into their own emotions?*

*“Great job girls! Come join me while we discuss what happened and what we’re going to do next.” The girls who were spread out across the floor got to their feet and joined me on the corner of the gym.*

*“Ms. Dierick, I have never danced like that in my life, I feel like I spaced out.”*

*“That is what it feels like to have your mind and body connected. Weird feeling, right? Not one you experience often.”*

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When I started with the placement in physical education, the associate teacher said that I would start by teaching volleyball, then basketball, and then health. I agreed but felt reluctant to teach sport after sport. During the volleyball unit I pushed the boundaries on the lesson plans and played small group games and activities through Teaching Games for Understanding that the associate teacher had never seen before. Earning her trust and in agreement with the students, I was able to teach dance in place of basketball. When I started the class, some students were clearly dancers outside of school, wearing their tights and walking on their toes before we even began. Others were clearly uncomfortable, and I felt a connection with those students. I understood the anxiety and fear of doing something new or not seeing dance align with their identity.



Being vague in the lessons allowed the students to move at their own pace and understanding. I would encourage and highlight students that were doing things out of the ordinary. Those who chose to walk in a different direction than the rest of the group and those who added a spin in their steps because they felt the music. I cannot say that the students loved each lesson at every moment. But I can say I provided them with the unstructured space to make the body and brain connection and feel their emotions through the music.

### **Conclusion**

With these narrative series I was able to collect the stories that shaped my identity and relive them as I tell them. While I was recalling, writing, and analyzing I paid close attention to my visceral reaction. I focused on how my body felt and what emotions were being brought up. I sat with these emotions and I dived deeper into why I felt this way, and what experiences connected, leading to an understanding of who I am and confirming that I teach who I am. Through the writing, re-reading, and revision stages, I began to analyze the stories I chose to share. From there, I was able to synthesize four major themes that make up my identity. In the following section, I discuss the themes of perfectionism, people-pleasing, holistic health for both myself and my students, and masculine and combating feminine energies.

## **CHAPTER FIVE: NARRATIVE THEMES**

Thus far I have used narrative inquiry, with aspects of autoethnographic, to collect and analyze the stories that will answer the question who I am, and do I teach who I am. The autoethnographic aspects are brought forth through the short narratives and journal pieces that I share (Hamilton, Smith, & Worthington, 2008). These pieces not only provide an understanding of who I am as a teacher, but the social and cultural context that comes with the teaching profession, holding myself to a high standard and being a female and male-dominant positions. Researching my identity development and portrayal is important because “good teaching cannot be reduced to technique; good teaching comes from the identity and integrity of the teacher” (Palmer, 1997, p. 16). I wanted to understand the stories through Palmer’s (1997) framework of emotional, intellectual, and spiritual characteristics that make up a good teacher. However, when categorizing the stories into specific aspects, I noticed there was often a cross-pollination into others. Instead, I choose to pull out the themes of the stories to understand if there was a correlation between my identity and the way I teach. This concluding chapter discusses the themes that emerged from my analysis: perfectionism, people-pleasing, holistic health for myself and students, and combating masculine and feminine energies.

### **Theme 1: Perfectionism**

The qualitative research writing process has been difficult because of my need to control and organization. As discussed in the Prologue, the idea of conducting qualitative research was suggested to me after Covid-19 shut down schools and my chance to conduct research with participants. As a result, I decided to venture down the narrative inquiry path and look inward at my own teaching identity because I have come to believe

that knowing myself better had the potential to make me a better teacher. This did not come without a lot of anxieties and struggle to release control. I wanted the research to be robotic in a way that I could check tasks off the lists one by one. When I would wake up in the middle of the night to write, or be caught off guard by a song that connected so well to what I was feeling in the research, I did not know what to do. Often, I would try and force a connection between a narrative and theory simply because having everything organized meant I had control. Eventually, I realized that the research process had other plans as I felt as though I was running into a writer's block every time I forced the organization. By releasing my control, I was able to have the stories flow through me as if my body and mind were working seamlessly together. By relaxing on my perfectionism and trusting myself I was able to emerge in the process and let the words flow effortlessly instead of feeling like I was always trying to connect two puzzle pieces that did not fit together. I realized that this perfectionism comes from wanting to have control: If I can control a situation, then I can determine the outcome. Or if I can control the environment in my classroom and the routines that I have in place or the resources that I use, I will be able to control the outcome of my students. But as I have come to understand within this research process, it is not always the case. I have learned that there are circumstances outside of my control that I must learn how to ebb and flow with circumstance, rather than holding the reins tighter. Isn't it ironic, then, that because of circumstances outside of my control, I wrote a narrative inquiry that forced me to reflect on my perfectionist identity and to determine if it shows up in my classroom.

It was not until the analysis phase that I reflected on the intensity of my work ethic and the perfectionism that emerged through all facets of my life. I wonder if this is

something that I have been implicitly projecting onto my students. Has it come up in my expectations? Am I only focused on high achievement? If so, this may have hindered their growth. Could I have utilized other learning styles to meet students' needs or not forced them to continue on with their work when they may have needed a break? These are the questions that will continue to inform my teaching practice.

Perfectionism and my intense work ethic are central traits of my identity that were formed through wanting attention from others and setting high standards for myself in order to feel worthy as shown in my narrative *Who Really Won?* where I fought against myself to be the first person down the field when no one else was even aware of the competition. Growing up in a large family and always being compared to the others I realized that being the best at the job came with perks and external validation. The need for others' attention and my own perfectionism standards are traits that I have tried to work through with daily meditation and journaling, and they have helped me. Through journaling I find the benefit of unburdening my mind after I write out my thoughts of self-doubt. By writing affirmations and having the daily reminder of my accomplishments, I have built a sense of self-worth that is unwavering in times of doubt. By acknowledging that I am more than my success or failures, I am able to loosen the control that I have on every aspect of my life. I realize that there are things outside of my control and I may have a bad day, but this does not make me a bad person or a bad teacher. Through meditation I am able to take myself out of the scenario and look at the bigger picture. I found that when something does not go as planned in my life, or in my classroom, I dwell on the situation, constantly thinking of ways that I could have prevented it. While it is good to be reflective and think of preventative measures for the future, as a perfectionist I would continue to do so until it took a toll on my self-worth. Meditation has allowed me

to let the thoughts of self-doubt flow in to my mind, and out as I released them. This allowed for the balance between having a hard work ethic and a self-destructive perfectionist.

While realizing that perfectionism is part of my identity and it does show up in my classroom, I worry that with a new teaching job I will revert back to trying to reach the unreachable standards that I set for myself, wanting to control the environment and students to the point that I will become burned out from preventing and dwelling on mistakes. The take-away from this narrative is to become aware of signs of burn out, and continue to journal and meditate so that my self-worth is not determined by others or my successes and failures—focusing on progress rather than perfection to understand that “my best” may not be the same every day.

### **Theme 2: People-Pleasing**

Following along the theme of perfectionism and needing the external validation for self-worth comes the theme of people-pleasing. There is a fine line between wanting to help others and get along with them, and then people-pleasing to a fault where I ignore my gut feeling or own belief system to please the other person. I realized that the more structured an environment was: the farm, hockey teams or school, the more I molded myself to fit my identity into the person I needed to be to excel in the aforementioned situations. I was not listening to the knowledge of self that came through my embodiment experiences because choosing my authentic identity over how I needed to appear in the environments I moved in, two things may have happened. First, I may have lost the ability to please others and that may have put me at a disadvantage and I did not want that.

Through the narratives of *Sour Apple* and *Old School*, I silence my own voice to ensure that others are proud of me. Throughout these narratives it came in the form of validation through a grade. During teacher's college I found that in order to get a good grade in field placements, it was better to go along with what the associate teacher said and did, rather than to speak up and potentially disrupt the status quo. I felt the need to impress my associate teacher but never followed through with anything that they would not do. Needing my associate teacher to like me most likely meant that I would have a better chance of receiving high grades on my evaluation. Rather than using the time I had in placement as a learning experience, I catered my teaching style and pedagogy to what I knew would impress the associate teacher.

Through the narrative *Popular Vote*, I realized that people-pleasing is something that I do for external validation and increased self-worth. Although I developed self-worth from the competence and confidence I built up through my athletic prowess in sport, I still wanted others to be happy with me, whether that was reflected in my work ethic, going above and beyond, or the character traits I portrayed. I believe that this stems from the desire to need external validation growing up. From my childhood work on the family farm to playing on a boys' hockey team I received recognition for doing what others wanted me to do, rather than what I wanted to do. I became a people-pleaser because I liked the feeling that came with others, my parents included, for being proud of me and for recognizing my hard work and achievements. There was always competition in my life, through working on the farm, competing in sports teams, or among my siblings, and by "winning" these competitions I would receive that external validation and attention that I craved.

Reflecting how being a people pleaser translates into the classroom, I realize that my identity of being a people pleaser shows up in the narrative of *Extra Involvement*. I continuously want others, such as my students, the parents, and the administrators to recognize me for going above and beyond, or catering my school environment and identity to display what I know they would be proud of. Becoming aware of this trait through the narrative inquiry process is a freeing experience. Not only will I be more purposeful in finding my voice but I also will reflect more deeply on how my opinions are displayed in the classroom. I am now more mindful of not projecting my people-pleasing ideals on my students. They do not need to complete tasks in the same manner I would; rather, I want my students to have choice and a voice of their own. Knowing that people-pleasing is a part of my identity and the negative consequences that it can have, this new awareness has made me aware that I have a choice in how I use my power. I do not need nor want my students to seek validation from me simply because I am their teacher. Rather, supporting them through their own learning journey will help me combat the question “Are we making little replicas of ourselves, or are we leading forth what was planned in eternity?” (Moore, 2000, p. 8). I do not want to make little replicas; instead, I want to help guide my students to develop their own identity rooted in their own interests.

### **Theme 3: Holistic Health**

Viewing holistic health as part of my identity involves the three principles of holistic education: bringing awareness to the deep interconnectedness of life, shared sacred sense of the world, and educating the whole person (Miller, 2018). The narratives that I share bring these principles to light and show that holistic education is part of my identity, as well as holistic education showing up in my classroom.

The concept of bringing awareness to the deep interconnectedness of life (Miller, 2018) connects to the narratives I share in my *Mindful Morning* routine. I started inserting my own morning routine into my classroom practice so that students could also experience elevating themselves on a spiritual level. I believe that this sets the stage for the day to start off on a positive note. It provides students with the time to question and think about their emotions. I want students to realize that we are just one small part of a bigger interconnected system, and that our actions both past and present can have a lasting impact on our outlook for the day. By having students share what they are grateful for, they connect with the world spiritually. It is looking beyond the superficial aspects of their day and encourages them to look at the bigger picture.

A shared sacred sense of the world through holistic education (Miller, 2018) is illustrated through the narratives that described my journey back to myself after I struggled with my dad's cancer diagnosis. At this moment in my life I started to look at the world through a different lens, and I still do. I believe that I have a different outlook because of what I have been through. At a young age, the thought of losing a parent makes everything else seem less important. Now whenever something minimal goes wrong I can always step back and think how grateful I am that my family is healthy and happy. Getting to the point where I could shift my perspective did not come easy. When I was in the situation I was filled with a lot of doubt and self-sabotage. I would drink to forget that the strong father figure I had in my life, my role model, barely had the strength to move from his bed. The process of getting back to a positive outlook came with a lot of work on myself mentally, physically, and emotionally. I stopped using drinking as a vice and turned to running as a new form of therapy. Running gave me the time and space to use body inquiry to think and feel through the thoughts. Listening to how my body



responded to my thoughts and feeling the uplifting endorphins that came from running, I was able to start putting my life back on track again. I was able to take the time to think about what was important to me. I focused my time on being healthy to continue the momentum of how I was feeling. Not only did I want to elevate myself from a physical standpoint, but I also questioned my identity from a spiritual and emotional standpoint too. Through journaling and meditation, I was able to calm negative thoughts that crept through. These same techniques of running, meditating, and journaling show up in my teaching because I want my students to have the knowledge of different tools that they can use when or if they ever come to a struggling time in their life. By understanding that life is sacred, it has given me a purpose. I want students to be able to trust in their ability to overcome the various obstacles that they will undoubtedly endure in their life, and provide them with the strategies to work through those obstacles.

The concept of educating the whole student (Miller, 2018) comes through what I teach and how I teach it. During teacher's college, I developed a passion for teaching health and dance. I always felt like an outlier for wanting to teach this content because most students wanted to focus on sports and games. I believe that I became so passionate about teaching these subjects because it is content, I wish I had learned when I was a high school student; breaking down the walls of structured sports so that students had the space to focus on embodiment through body pedagogy. I wish I could have had a teacher who taught me health subjects such as coping mechanisms, healthy relationships, and staying true to my identity. It would have helped me navigate the hardships in my life.

I also wish I had the opportunity to experience dance that was not choreographed, so I could have felt what it was like to let my emotions move through my body. I want to ensure that my students will be able to feel the harmonic connection and clarity that

comes from movement, or bodyfulness (Snowber, 2018). In the narratives from my own dance experience and the subsequent dance class that I later taught, I realized the power of embodied learning and kinesthetic movement. Emotions came through the movement that I was never asked to share before, coming from a background of working hard in the fields and being strong and tough in the hockey rink I never had these moments focusing on how my body was feeling. Previously, I treated my body like a machine, a vehicle that allowed me to throw hay bales over my shoulder, defend myself from sibling wrestling matches, and play hockey at the elite level to keep my spot on my hockey team. When I was taking a slapshot during a game, I always used my mind to tell my body what to do; this dualistic approach positioned the mind to be superior to the body. Most of the Western society believes the same thing, we put our minds first to become smarter and quicker to compete in the global economy (Miller, 2000). I want to change the dualistic approach by showing students the balance and understanding that comes from focusing on the lived body and visceral feelings, instead of the outer body (Snowber, 2018). This will not stop our children from being able to compete in the global economy, if that is what they want to do, but rather allow them “the capacity to be more present and awake” (Snowber, 2018, p. 233) to do so.

Snowber (2012) describes embodiment as a way in which we teach who we are, noting that

as soon as we walk into the classroom, the students know if the teacher feels confident in relating to the class. We teach with and through our bodies. I call it body pedagogy and integrate movement as a way for students to make friends with their bodies. (p. 55)

I am an advocate for dance and embodied ways of knowing in the classroom. I allow students the time and space to understand themselves and the content through movement. I explicitly use this technique with my students alongside my own learning and in doing so it has become part of my identity as a teacher. Palmer (1997) says that “good teachers share one trait: a strong sense of personal identity infuses their work” (p. 16). It is not teaching through embodiment that allows me to teach with integrity; it is the integrity and identity that I carry with it into the classroom because I teach who I am. I now embrace these subjects as part of my identity and am proud to say that I am passionate about health and dance, being integral to my identity as I advocate for them and participate in and continue to learn more in my personal and professional life.

I am glad that the analysis of my stories to understand the layers in the text strengthened the understanding I had of myself and my identity of being a holistic educator. I have always connected to the idea of educating the whole child and focusing on more than just the academic development of my students. I now understand the emphasis I placed on this part of my identity emerged in the classroom with integrity and that this essential part of my identity is demonstrated through my actions and demeanour in the classroom.

#### **Theme 4: Masculine and Feminine Energies**

Throughout my narratives there are moments of dominant masculine energy and dominant feminine energy. This has nothing to do with my physical gender, but rather traits and identity characteristics that are associated with each gender. It was not until I analyzed my stories that I noticed the conflict that I had with submitting to my feminine

side. I now realize having fluid movement between my masculine and feminine traits is beneficial to my identity and feeling integral/whole with who I am.

I grew up with a very masculine dominant surrounding. Working on the farm, carrying large bales of tobacco on my shoulder, I had to be strong and dig into the strength that comes with my masculine traits. While playing hockey it was celebrated when I was tough and got my first penalty. Even when I switched over to a girls' hockey organization, the traits of being a leader and a logical thinker were beneficial. I not only had limited experiences to show my feminine side: I also connect it with the theme of wanting to be a people-pleaser. If people validated my actions when I was displaying masculine traits, then that is how I continued to perform my identity.

When I tried Ukrainian dance for the first time, I went into the activity wanting to not enjoy it. When it was time for the girls' elegant solos in the dance, or when the girls would get lifted and carried around by the men on stage, I would refuse, insisting that that was not me. My identity was performed around being a hockey player. Looking back I wish that someone would have pushed me a little more to break from my masculine defense so I could have discovered the feminine energy that I now thrive in.

I again questioned if feminine energy was a positive identity trait in the story *Double Standards*. Due to the fact that a powerful female role model of mine associated being a housewife and the associated traits of caring, empathy, and nurturing as negative, I wanted to revert back to embodying a strictly masculine identity as I had in the past because it seemed to serve the purpose of pushing me to achieve my goals. But I felt uneasy with the progress that I made. I looked up to my mother as a housewife and admired the feminine traits that helped keep our family connected. Without her greeting us with compassion and asking us to care for each other in the family, I believe that we

would have all been disconnected and self-centered. Since I adapted those traits myself, I found my life to be more fulfilling with socioemotional connections forming, instead of only looking out for myself. I was still achieving my goals but also making connections and enjoying the process along the way. Talking to my friend after questioning the benefit of the feminine energy allowed me to realign my values and realize that I can have a balance of both energies as a part of my identity.

I still think that I carry both energies with me, but now I understand that one is not better than the other; I can float through them fluidly to benefit me in different situations. I have moments where either trait is very dominant and allows me to approach the situation with the best frame of mind. I have moments in my life when I identify as a caring and empathetic individual, but I also know that there are moments when I need to be goal-oriented and logical. Having both energies is part of my identity and I balance them with my students instead of being polarizing one of the other.

### **Conclusion**

I want to conclude my research in the way it started: with a narrative of how I start my day, but this time it is my mindful morning in my classroom.

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#### *Classroom Mindful Morning*

*I moved from my car to the school doors, bundled in many layers to shield me from the cold Canadian winter. I looked like a marshmallow. It was alright because I was the first person at the school so there were no watchful eyes of other teachers yet. I wiggled to get my pass from my coat pocket and scanned the security system. When I heard the click I grabbed the door handle. The metal felt cold on my fingers when I*

*entered the building. As I walked to my classroom the automatic lights turned on one by one, almost as if they were lighting my way to another day.*

*I dropped my bags at the door and started to remove my coat. I noticed that the Early Childhood Educator had arrived behind me and we greeted each other. I asked about how her night was and then we chatted about what we were in store for that day. We took the chairs down from the tables and organized up the centers. We went over the day that I had precisely organized right down to transition times and assessment strategies. I wondered if she got annoyed by my over-preparedness? Do other Kindergarten teachers put this much thought into their day? I stationed myself at the front door so I was able to greet the students as they enter the room.*

*The children started to fill up the space, as they waved goodbye to their parents who departed for work or home. The children were bundled up as much as I was. I silently praised myself for allowing for extra time to take off all the boots and layers, before they joined me. The children filed in, each took a seat at their spot with their name cut out and taped to the carpet. Before I could even begin to say good morning, the children began to raise their hands.*

*“Good Morning, Good Morning, Good Morning to you. Good Morning, Good Morning and how do you do?” I sung.*

*I scanned the room full of eager hands of students who wanted to share how they felt about their day in the little hours that they had been awake.*

*“I feel super happy.”*

*“I feel sad because my sister did not share her toy with me on the walk to school.”*

*“I feel great because it is my birthday today.”*

*As the responses piled in, I prepared the meditation on the computer.*

*“We are going to start meditation, what does our meditation position look like?”*

*Some students raised their hand to answer, but followed suit into sitting cross-legged with their hands on their lap and palms faced open.*

*As soon as everyone was ready, I pressed play.*

*The students slowly began to open their eyes; I felt the sense of ease that was in the room now. I noticed a certain student who sat on the back-corner square of the carpet had stopped fidgeting with the loose thread on the edge.*

*“Would anyone like to share something that they are grateful for today? We will take five responses today.”*

*“I am grateful for the snow that was falling on my walk to school.”*

*“I am grateful that she helped me take off my boots this morning.”*

*“I am grateful my friends are here so we can play together today.”*

*“I am grateful for everyone in the school and my family.”*

*“I am grateful for you Ms. D.”*

*And with a smile on my face and a joyous feeling in the room, I asked the students to line up at the door so we could head to the gymnasium.*

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The themes of perfectionism, people-pleasing, holistic education, and masculine and feminine energies are all present in the narrative. These themes were shaped by my experiences of growing up on a farm, playing hockey and coping with a family diagnosis and I now realize they shape my identity as a teacher. Realizing through the research that

I teach who I am. After this research I realize that I cannot quickly change who I am and eliminate the negative aspects of my identity. The narratives show that my identity has been built up and embedded in me from different events of my past. What I can do is become more aware of my identity and be mindful of when these themes are present in the classroom. I realize that this is an ongoing process and my identity development as a teacher. It does not end when this paper is completed. Rather, the process is more important than the product, because I now know who I am. I now understand the benefits of reflection on my identity and this will help me continue to be mindful of my identity as it shows up in the classroom.

### **Epilogue**

Recently, I received a permanent job offer teaching Grade 7/8. When I met the principal to review my role, she asked me who I was and where I came from. I shared with her that I am a perfectionist who is a people-pleaser, and a teacher who is focused on holistic education who can relate to both students who are passionate dancers or students who are tough hockey players. By easily sharing who I am, confirmed for me, that I know who I am as an educator; “teaching holds a mirror to the soul. If I am willing to look in that mirror, and not run from what I see, I have a chance to gain self-knowledge” (Palmer, 1997). Through the research process I have been able to deeply understand the people and experiences that shaped me, and made me aware that in fact I do teach who I am, (Palmer,1997). I feel confident in my identity and through the integrity of my teaching practice I can feel confident in teaching who I am. I still wrestle with the tensions of being too masculine or too feminine in my practice but becoming aware is the



first step towards finding the balance; and for that I am truly thankful to have worked through this autoethnographic research process.

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