

A Teacher/Mother's Journey Toward Liberation: An Autoethnographic Account

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A MOTHER/TEACHER'S JOURNEY TOWARD LIBERATION

Abstract

Through my first professional decade as an educator, I simultaneously raised a daughter with special needs. The journey into motherhood challenged what I thought I knew about teaching and learning. This compelled me to move inwards and (re)connect with my body through Yoga. This way of being shifted my ontology and epistemology from positivist into a more interpretive critical standpoint. Researching this shift, I was drawn to autoethnography. It allowed me to understand the socio-cultural context of education in a deeper, more nuanced manner. Weaving the personal and the professional ultimately allowed me to understand the impact of these shifts on my professional identity and classroom practice. Using Freire (1970) and hooks (1994), I draw closer to the potential for liberation in education by placing my own liberation at the center of my practice. My intention in this research is to move more deeply into liberation and to offer my experiences towards the possibility of collective benefit.

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CHAPTER ONE: IMPOSSIBLY SHAKEN TO THE CORE

I am a mother to two daughters, the eldest with special needs. I have been a classroom teacher in public French Immersion schools in Ontario for nearly 20 years, teaching across the divisions within the elementary panel. More recently, I have stepped back from teaching full time. To suit the needs of my family and myself, I currently primarily teach in Long Term Occasional assignments.

My body is that of a white able-bodied woman, in my fourth decade, and cisgendered. I am a wife. I enjoy music, play, and quality time with my family, and horses. I love the earth and find great restorative powers in the wild spaces on my farm. I am a Jesus-follower and a Yogi. I am committed to the wellbeing of children and work to support families as an AHA Parenting Peaceful Parenting Coach (Markham, 2022). I believe that children deserve to be heard and seen in full human dignity, in homes, and in classrooms. I see and am honoured to accept the many parallels in the roles of teacher and parent.

My journey towards liberation began in earnest when my daughter was two and I began attending workshops as part of my Self-Realization/Yoga Instructor program. My mentor asked the group, "If world peace were declared tomorrow, would there be peace within you?" (Byron, 2021). This seemingly simple question would become a compass, of sorts, in the years to follow. Versions of this question, and the answers, hold implications for all levels of functioning, from the health of individual cells to all of society (Maté & Maté, 2022). I believe this includes efforts to move towards a more socially just society. Through the physical practices of Yoga, I came to realize that even when the world around me was calm, my emotions were keeping my body out of balance and unwell. Meditation began to highlight the chaos of my thoughts.

Having a pause in my teaching career while I was home with my children afforded me the opportunity to reflect on factors that brought my students and me closer to tranquility in a classroom and those that interfered. I troubled schooling practices as I reflected on how to best meet my children's needs at home and learned to listen to the expression of needs differently.

Letting the Breath Flow

“Mom, would it be easier for you if I didn't have so many problems?” My daughter's breath frosts in the December air, as my heart shatters on the impact of her words. I struggle to compose myself, breathing, and listening.

“Love, if you weren't the person you are, I would never have been able to grow in the ways I have. For that, I am forever grateful.” I wonder if she will ever understand the depth of her impact on my life. She beams her mega-watt smile and skips into her dance class. I have channeled the right words. (Lived 2019, Recorded 2020)

This research is about my personal lived experiences, including paradigm shifts, growing awareness of neoliberalism and exploring possibilities outside of the dominant narrative for self-regulation, connection, and learning. I discuss these concepts more fully throughout the work, as well, I have included definitions in the Appendix. My purpose in this research is to deepen my understanding of the formal education system in Ontario, to understand my professional identity within this system, to critique neoliberalism in education, and to offer what I have learned to the teaching community.

Research Questions

In this research, I explore the impact of my personal experiences on my teaching identity and classroom practices. The over-arching research question that guides this autoethnographic work is: *How have my lived experiences impacted my teaching identity and professional practice?* As I move through the chapters, the sub-questions that I explore are:

- a) How and in what ways have I explored embodiment towards self-regulation in my classroom practice?

- b) How and in what ways have I explored emotional awareness toward self-regulation in my classroom practice?
- c) How and in what ways have I explored relationship in my classroom practice?

Through the final stages and reconsiderations of my autoethnography, I have found myself moving closer to discovering answers to these questions. In many ways, this final stage mirrors my experience of learning the methodology of autoethnography. It took patience, time, and practice to understand how to craft an autoethnography that would allow me to theorize my lived experiences. Chang (2016) defines autoethnography as a methodology that works to deepen the understanding of socio-cultural context using the researcher's personal experiences as data. I discuss the methodology and methods in greater detail later in this chapter and spiral back to this topic again throughout the autoethnography. For now, I wish to make visible my research process and to invite the reader '*onto the Yoga mat*' with me. During my Yoga practice, when I am reclining, I cannot be sitting or standing. I must focus on the postures that are aligned with my body in that space. Similarly, this research includes all the components of trustworthy research woven *throughout* the practice. In keeping with the elements of the methodology, I chose to address the various aspects of scholarly research as they arose, clustered around a related emerging insight. In this work, there is no hierarchy of concepts and there are no chapter titles signaling a particular aspect of research. The research came through the process. I chose to review the relevant literature as the insights arose and to address methods, methodology, and findings in ways that were relevant to the unfolding story, peppered throughout the entire research.

In learning the art of autoethnography, I have grappled with how to privilege creativity while also maintaining rigor and prioritizing cohesiveness. I have struggled at times with how to

organize the many components of my work and am grateful for a committee that advanced the quality of my research. The art of autoethnography challenged me at every turn, as I grappled with vulnerability and scholarly expectations. I spent a significant portion of time reading autoethnographic scholars, such as Stacy Holman Jones et al (2016), Carolyn Ellis (2007), Christopher Poulos (2016), and Heewon Chang (2016) to learn the craft. Respectively, these scholars have deepened my understanding of the key concepts of vulnerability, evocativeness and ethics, memory, and linking the personal to wider socio-cultural phenomenon. The aspect of autoethnography I struggled with the most, and am thus the proudest, is my ability to simultaneously hold all the threads of the research – the literature, theory and scholars, the themes, insights, and findings, alongside the methods, methodology, ethics, and rationales – and to weave them cohesively from the first paragraph to the last.

Exploring: Yoga

If I could choose an image to represent this research, it would be an empty *Yoga mat*. To me, *the mat* represents my journey as a teacher and a mother within the liberatory potential of self-awareness. I would leave *the mat* open as an expression of unlimited possibility.

Yoga was and is a vehicle I use in my journey towards liberation professionally and personally. Syed et al. (2022) briefly describe Yoga as “an essential form of spiritual discipline based on an extremely subtle science bringing harmony between mind and body” (p. 30). I add that Yoga is a spiritual vehicle, bringing me closer to that which is in my heart (Byron, 2021).

Shroff and Asgarpour (2017) highlight this dimension of Yoga:

Yoga's greatest aim is to create compassion within and a deep sense of unity and oneness with all forms of life. Yoga is an individual activity that has social implications. Those who regularly participate in yoga typically interact with the world in calmer and more

reasonable ways. More positive social interactions and relationships are one of the ripple effects of individual yoga practice. (p. 1)

This perspective resonates with me and informs this research, particularly my positionality within critical pedagogy. I have experienced this “ripple effect” (Shroff & Asgarpour, 2017, p. 1) and would see it spread further, into the ‘collective benefit’ I mentioned earlier. Siegel (2010) highlights the impact of regulatory states on the ability and desire to listen to others, confirming the importance of calm to do the work of critical pedagogy.

Working through a lens of Piran’s Developmental Theory of Embodiment, Piran and Neumark-Stzainer (2020) have found that Yoga can lead to positive ways of inhabiting the body, which I explore briefly in Chapter 2. For now, I will confirm that I have experienced a shift in how I inhabit my body through my own practice, alongside many of the health benefits attributed to Yoga practice, such as improved digestion, regulation of the autonomic nervous system (ANS), improved muscle tone, increased oxygenation of tissues, and improved immune function. Syed et al. (2022) reiterates the benefit of Yoga on stress reduction, mental and physical flexibility, and the regulation of metabolism and mood.

To remain consistent with autoethnographic reflexivity and vulnerability, I am using the framework of a Yoga practice to clarify my research process. Imagine, if you will, that this ‘research’ practice is positioned at the outset of my graduate studies, when I had already become more self-assured. I was already exploring how embodied practices, emotional awareness, and connection strategies support self-regulation. Tranter, Carson, and Boland (2018) define dysregulation as “the state in which a person is unable to regulate their emotion” (p. 11). I was observing and experimenting, personally and professionally, with regulating the nervous system,

wellbeing, and learning, and how they are connected. The following vignette highlights aspects of my growth.

My daughter stares at me, wide-eyed. She wants to tell me something that is so important it can't wait. As so often happens, I am already chopping carrots, watching the sauce pot on the stove, and planning the year's dance schedule. Mentally, I am regretting that sharp word with a colleague, remembering to schedule my daughter's appointment, noticing the cat's water is empty, and noting my nearly late credit card bill.

*Her excited voice crashes into my thoughts again: "Mama?!" I recognize the jolt in my body. I am prepared to chastise her. Already, my patterned reaction of making her responsible for **not** seeing **I'm busy** is rising to the surface. I am primed to blame her.*

I have done my work, though. Taking a breath, I try to sort out what is happening inside of me before I respond. Why this aggravation? I soften the tension in my body. I discover a very full bladder. What do I do now? I begin to panic in the face of the hissing stove pots and my daughter's expectant face. I coach myself through the steps. Identify my needs. Connect and communicate. Breathe. Softening again, I turn down the burner and secure the knife at the back of the counter. I look over into my daughter's round, blue eyes. Reaching out to stroke her hair, I tell her how much I want to hear her story. Firmly, I add that I need to get to the bathroom before I can do anything else. Will she please wait until I've finished with just the carrots?

She nods. Of course. I beeline to the bathroom, smiling. I have worked hard to learn to connect to myself. Identifying my needs has been hard. Learning to communicate those needs peacefully? Harder still. Feeling like a "good mom" and prioritizing that relationship? Worth every moment. (Lived 2015, Recorded 2021)

Connection, self-care, and love for my body are also gifts I have received through working to listen to my body. Through Yoga, I have learned to recognize when I am physiologically dysregulated, and I continue to practice with the head, breath, body, and emotional knowledge to move towards greater regulation. For me, this offers opportunities for improved relational connection.

Letting the Breath Flow: Opening the Practice

As I sit *on the mat*, I begin with setting an intention. Often that intention is simply to listen, paralleling the reflexivity of this research. For this specific 'research based' practice, I add the intentions of deepening understanding of myself and of the formal elementary education system in Ontario. I also wish for my research to serve the teaching community.

Intentions considered; I begin gentle movement. Reclined *on the mat*, I explore. Within this analogy, the observation of muscular tension and limitations in range of motion parallel rising awareness of the constraints of neoliberalism. I turn to scholars such as Stephen Ball (2003, 2016a, 2016b), Wendy Brown (2009), Noah De Lissovoy (2018), and Raewyn Connell (2013a, 2013b). My questioning of performativity led me to Ball's (2003) work, while Connell's work focuses more on the widening socio-economic gaps of neoliberalism (2013b). Brown (2009) highlights the impact of neoliberalism on democracy and De Lissovoy (2018) underlines the anxiety inherent to neoliberal ideals. I breathe into the tension I find and begin to name components of the neoliberal apparatus: narrowing of curriculum (Reay, 2016), compartmentalization (Phyak & De Costa, 2021), dysregulation (De Lissovoy, 2018; Slater, 2015), standardization (Slater & Griggs, 2015), performativity (Ball, 2003)). I have found neoliberalism difficult to define clearly. My review the literature around neoliberalism reveals the ideology's presence in many spheres, including economics, politics, and education. As a very brief, general definition, Lazzarato (2009) states that "Neoliberalism is a mode of government which consumes freedom, and to do so, it must first produce and organize it" (p. 120). Continuing into this section, I explore the perspectives of many scholars. For now, Ball (2016b) offers a compelling rationale for seeking deeper understanding as neoliberal reforms,

...change what it means to be educated, what it means to teach and learn, what it means to be a teacher. They do not just change what we do; they also change who we are, how we think about what we do, how we relate to one another, how we decide what is important and what is acceptable, what is tolerable. As I have said already – these changes are both out there, in the system, the institution; and 'in here', in our heads and in our souls. (p. 1050)

While reading these words, I feel an urgency to press on with my research. I wish to teach from a place of meeting my students' needs, of serving them...yet I have begun to feel that what is positioned as important in education does not necessarily align with what I believe is important for children.

Awareness of the Constraints: Neoliberalism Becomes Visible

A wise mentor (Byron, 2021) once told me that going sane feels like going crazy.

I can't see the terracotta floor tiles stretching down the Kindergarten hallway because of my pregnant belly, but I hear the cacophony of the Kindergarten students even before I round the corner. These classes are small still, under 20, but that won't be true next year. I enter a world of fat pencils, puppet shows, and true bathroom emergencies.

This school is in the last year of the 'Early Learning Kindergarten Programme' implementation. Next year, these same classrooms will welcome 30 three- and four-year-olds, all day, every day. Next year is supposed to be my daughter's first year of school.

My guts twist. I feel confused at this notion of duality, at this rejection of a system I have spent my life working to please. I feel afraid to open myself to this path of non-conformity. I am not strong enough to face the judgement of family and friends. It would be easier to send my daughter to school next year. The temptation is strong.

Gazing around the room once again, the noise levels pierce my consciousness. I revel in the caress of this familiarity, this love-hate relationship between this imperfect human and this imperfect system. With something akin to nostalgia, I mentally step between my daughter and the behaviour labels, the noise, the bullying, and the Individual Education Plan. She will stay home with me on maternity leave next year. The homeschooling journey has begun. Somewhere inside of me, I feel like a traitor. But the stakes are high...

Retreating down the hallway, my stride lengthens. I walk into the role of advocate. (Lived 2013, Recorded 2020)

This vignette harkens to my first recollection of consciously challenging the norms of formal education in Ontario. As a student, I learned to seek out the black-and-white expectations of schoolwork. At that time, I craved the comfort of certainty. My family promoted a clear focus on academic achievement. In reflection, I see that key components of my upbringing were geared

toward my success in school. My mother was a teacher and many aspects of life in my home paralleled traditional classroom routines and expectations.

I excelled at my 'tick-the-box' education. With a focus on academic success and achievement, there was nothing to give me pause. I had no reason to question the principles of education I experienced at home and in classrooms, both as a student and early in my career as an elementary, public-school teacher. I suppose if I had lived a different life, I may still be holding firm to my conviction in the *rightness* of every component of the education system. I could still be clinging to the neat and tidy compartments. I certainly did for the first decade of my teaching career. This project was born from questioning why the knowledge I had gained outside of formal education was not readily available to me in my professional role.

I have received many benefits throughout life because of the academic components of my upbringing. However, I did not understand the limitations inherent within my formal education (and the home life running parallel to it), and I was taught to not question its authority. With limited reflexivity, I blindly accepted *all* that I was taught, whether explicitly through curriculum or implicitly through the neoliberal worldview that quietly dominates formal education.

From my beginnings within the formal education system, I internalized and integrated the neoliberal ideology with ease and without awareness of it. In discussing the many facets of neoliberalism, Brown (2009) offers this definition:

...neo-liberalism...is not only about facilitating free trade, maximizing corporate profits, and challenging welfarism. Rather, neo-liberalism carries a social analysis which, when deployed as a form of governmentality, reaches from the soul of the citizen-subject to education policy to practices of empire. Neo-liberal rationality, while foregrounding the market, is not only or even primarily focused on the economy; rather it involves

extending and disseminating market values to all institutions and social action, even as the market itself remains a distinctive player. (p. 39)

I remember the “Anti-Harris” buttons worn in political protest by so many in the late 1990s. I was in high school, and the currents sweeping education were stronger than what I had seen before. So, too, were the tides of unrest. I escaped a senior-level chemistry exam because of teacher strikes. I was fresh-faced still, and unaware at the time of the ways that these currents shaped – and would continue to shape – the face and soul of education.

Neoliberalism, as an ideology, has been at play in Ontario education since the 1990s (MacLellan, 2009). The impacts have been difficult to define because the changes have been gradual and incremental. Neoliberalism in education has functioned as a bit of the proverbial “slippery slope.” On the surface, parents and educators may find neoliberal ideals quite seductive. Arguments can be made for the benefit in increased accountability, in the competitive edge, in curriculum specific to the job market. There is merit to these positions – but at what cost?

Davies and Bansel (2007) contend that neoliberalism produces, ...docile subjects who are tightly governed and who, at the same time, define themselves as free. Individuals, we suggest, have been seduced by their own perceived powers of freedom and have, at the same time, let go of significant collective powers, through, for example, allowing the erosion of union power. Individual subjects have thus welcomed the increasing individualism as a sign of their freedom and, at the same time, institutions have increased competition, responsabilization and the transfer of risk from the state to individuals at a heavy cost to many individuals, and indeed to many nations. (p. 249)

To summarize, neoliberalism prioritizes free-market functioning for all aspects of society (Connell, 2013a). Couched in the terms of “equity in education,” neoliberalism silently widens economic and social injustice gaps (Connell, 2013a). In education, this planning towards corporate demands has led to the normalization of such concepts as meritocracy, performativity, constant growth, binaries, standardization, competition and scarcity, individualism, and narrowed curriculum. Students fill their educational plate from the buffet of what corporations require to meet the needs of their workforce. In this process, natural talent, interests, passions, and creativity fall to the wayside. Connell (2013a) further explains that “Neoliberals have had astonishing success in creating markets for things whose commodification was once almost unimaginable: drinking water, body parts and social welfare among them” (p. 99).

Awareness of the Constraints: Seeing the Narrowness

Schools have become a “marketplace” (Reay, 2016, p. 328) where students are to focus on making themselves as desirable to employers as possible; work is the only sphere of life. For teachers, these shifts have meant greater control by the state with less investment, all under the headings of accountability, flexibility, and quality (MacLellan, 2009). Critical thought, spirituality, collectivity, and agency are among the unacceptable foci in this selection process for desirable skills. How can I teach my students to value critical thinking or how to question authority towards a goal of understanding and compromise when I have been groomed to adapt to the demands of private economy? How can I model that my human needs matter and deserve space if I am having trouble believing that myself?

Coming to grips with these realities has been a slow process for me. This is the only backdrop to formal education I have ever known. This is true for me as a student, but even more so as a teacher. The neoliberal experience placed me as a “winner” in the job market. I am

grateful for the opportunities I have had professionally and academically. A winner at other important aspects of life, however, I was not.

I had internalized the narrative. I had a successful career and that was supposed to mean that I had a successful life – at least, according to the values of neoliberalism (Martin, 2012). What to do, then, when other pieces of my life began crumbling? How could I navigate personal struggles when I did not have the suitable skills? I found myself in a desperate position: my survival and the well-being of my family depended on me uncovering different ways of being and knowing. As it turns out, there are many; they were invisible to me at the time.

As a dominant ideology, neoliberalism insists that the only valid knowledge and learning occurs in schools (Slater & Griggs, 2015). Though I recognize that I learned from many different situations, places, and people, I also think it is fair to say that I had largely internalized that dominant construct. If I had not internalized that belief, perhaps I would not have chosen to undertake this research. I would have already been open to possibilities. However, I was not open, and as I began my own journey of learning vital life skills outside of formal education, I started to wonder why many of these skills are not present in the domain of education. I noticed the narrowing of curriculum and the standardization of which or who's knowledge and skills were included in our current model of education, confirmed by Sleeter and Stillman (2005). I began to learn about concepts such as *neural "pruning"* (Siegel, 2001, p. 72), which is a prioritization of certain neural pathways in the brain at the expense of others. My list of "learnings" that are left out of the current curriculum – and which were thus "pruned" because they were not practiced and prioritized in school – includes relationship skills, self-awareness, native species of Ontario, many aspects of creativity, embodiment, many aspects of critical thinking, and well-being. This list is far from exhaustive! Reay (2016) iterates that a shift in

one's philosophy of and understanding of the purpose of education is required to counter the trend of neoliberalism.

I find I have come full circle back to the murkiness. Perhaps the murkiness I perceive is more an indicator of new spaces or new ways of thinking, being, or doing. It is hard to say for sure. I can say with certainty, however, that this process of leaning – and, occasionally, falling – into the grey between the poles of black and white has led to a foundational shaking of all aspects of my life. In the decision to homeschool, I questioned deeply held beliefs, and rejected those deemed not helpful. In my experiences of education to that point, both at school and within my family, the material presented at school had worn the top honour of “what you need to know to succeed in life.” Slater and Griggs (2015) speak to neoliberalism's requirement that “epistemic conformity is mandatory” (p. 441). I discovered that the shaping of my brain around the gathering of objective “truth” knowledge (Yilmaz, 2008) had shrunk the scope of my perception – and now threatened to harm one of the people I love most.

I hear the unmistakable wail of pain. My feet fly over the old wooden floorboards. I fight the rising panic and take in the scene. One of my children is standing uncomfortably to the side. The other, furious, howls her rage and pain. The understanding of deliberate violence is a weight on my heart. Summoning empathy, I sooth my little one's painful fingers and bruised feelings.

“I trust in the process of life (Hay, 1999).” Breath out.

“I trust in the process of life (Hay, 1999).” Breathe in.

Repeat as needed. Daily, hourly, by the minute. Do I trust my daughter? Myself? Life?

The affirmations are conscious, deliberate, and in the moment. I reflect on trust later. I make my choice. The taste of anger is tantalizing on my tongue. I reject it and push toward and into new responses. I see the pinched look on her face. Fear. I feel my arm stretch away from my side and I watch as my fingers beckon her in. The pinching in her cheeks releases and sadness fill her gaze. My fuzzy slippers swish as I step her into my embrace. Our bodies soften together. I will spiral back to the discipline later. In this moment, there are more important lessons. (Lived 2016, Recorded 2021)

This vignette demonstrates another moment of hard-won intentionality for me as a mother. In my earlier days of motherhood, I would have harmed my children through my inability to model self-regulation facing such a scenario. My narrowed set of skills did not include the self-awareness I experienced in this vignette. My experience of education did not include the understanding that relationship must be reinforced for correction to be heard.

Surrendering to – and even celebrating – the normalcy of having needs, dreams, and passions were lessons far outside what the authorities in my life taught. True to the “banking concept” (Freire, 1970), I was taught to disregard anything not valued academically. The care of my body? Unimportant. Emotional intelligence was never mentioned, so emotions must not have a place in “real” life. What of ideals of hope, joy, and resilience – that which is necessary to overcome the sorrows inherent in living (Poulos, 2021)? What about the notion of interconnectedness, of caring for the Earth, that spirituality is a balm to the human soul? All absent. What about communication where relationship is prioritized, and the needs of both parties considered? Pure lunacy in a world of hierarchy. As a child, subordinate in that system, my needs were disregarded.

Education is complex. The many facets include educators, students, administrators, policy makers, and parents. Each of these players brings a list of requests, desires, and needs to the educational table. Each player makes decisions in both the short- and long-term from the selection of options available. Many times, the options available are already determined by policy, curriculum, parental expectations, and reporting standards. Sometimes, the choices are dictated by the immediate constraints of the moment. I have searched for the words to explain *narrow curriculum* using the language of education. Perhaps not so ironically, the situation I am

attempting to describe does not seem to be one of the available choices. I respond by sidestepping into the imaginative realm of analogy, through the following *fictional* example:

Today has been a difficult day, sweaty and challenging. In the cool of the ice cream shop, I collect myself and look forward to the much-anticipated feast for the senses that is ice cream. I crane my neck, leaning around the others in line in front of me. I see the long glass counters ahead of me, though my view is obscured by the others pacing, making their own selections. Finally, it is my turn and I approach exuberantly. I see the tubs under the shiny glass display cases. I walk up and down the long stretch of the counter, but to no avail. The disappointment swells inside of me, and I prepare to select from the limited options available. As a small child, I held vivid dreams of every flavor imaginable. The reality in this place, however, is different. Tub upon tub of language, some with sprinkles or nuts – but language all the same. I pace a little further, holding on to the hopes of passion, and curiosity, and wonder. I find the math and STEM display. Abundance and possibility are truths inside of me; yet, they don't seem to match the reality I'm presented with. Jarred from my reflection, and the dissonance I'm experiencing, I respond and place my order. Ice cream is better than no ice cream after all, isn't it?

I have had many conversations throughout this Master of Education program with various professors about curiosity. Imagine my dismay when their observations parallel my own. Curiosity and humility are irrevocably intertwined with learning. Yet, these qualities have been scarce in my junior and intermediate students. It seems these qualities are in short supply in graduate level students, too. Nonetheless, I am certain as small children we all possessed these qualities in large quantity. I need only think on the incessant “why?” of a 4 or 5-year-old child to confirm this finding. What happens to that?

Earlier, I briefly touched on a short list of topics not included within the narrow curriculum of neoliberalism; we can add to this list community and culturally specific needs, education of the heart (Dalai Lama), and open-mindedness. To be clear, I am not suggesting that we should be teaching *everything* in schools. My educator's heart trembles and threatens to give out at the mere notion of adding more to what we cover. No, I am not suggesting that. I'm not actually certain what I am suggesting. Perhaps the writing process will bring greater clarity.

On the mat, I have set intentions and increased awareness around the obstacles. Briefly, I rest, knowing my ontology and epistemology have shifted from positivism towards a critical interpretivism perspective. I will need to discern with care in deciding how far is safe to stretch, where to breathe into the tension, and when the discomfort signals danger.

Awareness of the Constraints: Ontology and Epistemology

As I rest, my thoughts wander to the practices gone by and that in 'becoming', it is helpful to reflect on starting points. Gently, I notice the changes in ontology and epistemology I have lived. Smith (2005) states the importance of clarifying the epistemological and ontological positions underlying the research before choosing a methodology as this builds meaningful coherence. My research delves into my shifting ontology and epistemology personally and then professionally. Leavy (2017) defines *ontology* as,

a philosophical belief system about the nature of the social world (e.g., whether it is patterned, and predictable or constantly re-created by humans). Our ontological belief system informs both our sense of the social world and, correspondingly, what we can learn about it and how we can do so. (p. 12)

When I began contemplating methodologies for this thesis, I struggled with consistency. My ontology had changed since my Faculty of Education and undergraduate years – and yet, I

continued to write passively as I was taught to pursue scientific objectivity and to seek more quantitative data and methods. My own interpretation of *ontology* is that it is my way of being in the world, including how I relate to myself, others, spirit, and the physical world.

According to Carter and Little (2007), “Epistemology contains values, in that epistemology is normative. It is the basis for explaining the rightness or wrongness, the admissibility or inadmissibility, of types of knowledge and sources of justification of that knowledge” (p. 1322). Leavy (2017) adds that *epistemology* determines the research plan and what counts as trustworthy knowledge. I, however, define *epistemology* as a way of knowing and of discerning what counts as valid knowledge that will impact my ontology. Through my lived experiences, I will continue to explore my ontological and epistemological shifts *throughout* this research. To begin, a significant shift in my epistemological position is the opening I have experienced to diverse ways of knowing. Epistemologically, I also hold beliefs lightly, meaning that while I do not accept new ideas without questioning, I also understand the limitations of my own human senses and cognitive abilities. As such, fluidity, discernment, and re-creation are defining factors in my ontology and epistemology. To be open-minded, I must be willing to filter knowledge through different lenses – meaning, I must be willing to leave space for that which I do not know and for me, this is what learning looks like. These were not always my ontological and epistemological positions; I lived a transformation.

Letting the Breath Flow: Grounding into the Sits Bones

A benefit I have experienced through Yoga is the simultaneous building of strength and flexibility. Looking to design a research project, I sought to open new spaces and intentionally limit or compress others, as one would when breathing into a side bend. I planned to research the journeys of holistic educators and to conduct interviews. I placed holistic education,

embodiment, emotional awareness, and relationship within the broad umbrella of research interests.

I began to write my stories and wished to include my own lived experiences as data as well. I debated narrative inquiry and phenomenology and explored Cooperrider and Whitney's (2005) *appreciative inquiry*, where the priority is seeking out and understanding the best in people and organizations, ultimately towards valuing praxis that is life-giving. I considered autoethnography as a methodology as well, though I was not yet convinced of the trustworthiness of my own story as research.

I was grateful to be resilient and grounded on my sits bones when the realities of conducting research during the pandemic years become known. I centered myself in my practice and prepared to change course. Autoethnography, while already a distinct possibility becomes the strongest methodological fit when I become the sole research participant. However, I must still consider whether my use of autoethnography will lead to rigorous research demonstrating meaningful coherence (Tracy, 2010). Tracy (2010) highlights that *rigor* in qualitative research is work that is complex in theoretical constructs, offers rich data, and brings transparency to the research process. Tracy (2010) further explains that rigorous research meets its research goals. Using methods that fit the stated goals and achieving said goals also contribute to Tracy's (2010) "meaningful coherence" (p. 840), as does ensuring interconnectivity of all the components of the research (Tracy, 2010).

Autoethnography honours interconnectivity, the sharing of lived experiences and varied perspectives, and vulnerability (Holman Jones et al., 2016). Autoethnographers find themselves drawn into the discomfort of troubling hegemony to consider "How could life be better?" (Bochner, 2016, p. 53).

Considering autoethnography as my methodology was a first step in challenging neoliberalism as a researcher. Behar (1996, as cited in Smith, 2005) describes emerging genres, such as autoethnography, as efforts “to map an intermediate space we can’t quite define yet, a borderland between passion and intellect, analysis and subjectivity, ethnography and autobiography, art and life” (p. 174). As such, autoethnography is consistent with this research of liminal space, where I trouble the impact of the personal on the professional.

I have also chosen to organize my research under non-standardized headings. As a Yogi my life is better when I practice awareness of my breath. Awareness of the breath supports my experience of feeling grounded. The level 1 headings I have chosen for this work reflect the centrality of breath. For me, the heading “Letting the Breath Flow,” which opens each chapter, reminds me to stay open to whatever learning I need. It is a reminder to observe and respond, and to allow the insights to unfurl through the process. Another level 1 heading is “Questioning.” This indicates that I am critiquing neoliberalism. I also created the heading “Breathing Together.” I have placed many of the links to methodology and critical pedagogy – the theoretical underpinning of this research – within these sections. Listening to and learning from the breath is liberatory for me. It is the collaborative, uplifting potential I celebrate within the idea of “breathing together.”

The space *between* breaths, however, is the most interesting, creative space for me. In *Pranayama*, or breath practice, there are times when I suspend the breath between inhale and/or exhale. Within this suspension, I more easily access the realm of *possible* – that which has yet to be realized. From here, I intentionally choose that which is beneficial and brings me closer to the human being I am continually becoming.

To conceptualize the critical nature of this research through the headings, I have also created level 2 headings “Exploring” and “Awareness of the Constraints.” “Exploring” indicates that I am writing more deeply into the topic being explored, whether that be methodology or critical pedagogy. I also use “Exploring” to signal that I am turning the research lens to classroom experiences that disrupt or sidestep the hegemony of formal education in Ontario. “Awareness of the Constraints” indicates a deeper exploration of neoliberalism.

Breathing Together: Methodology

Autoethnography encourages the exploration of the past through varying lenses alongside a creative gaze into the future. *On the mat*, I twist first to one side, and then the other. I look back. I analyze and interpret my vignette data. Vignettes are brief, evocative descriptions. I pause in the middle, centering myself into the present of the research and focusing my gaze forward, into the space of intentional possibility. To move deeper into the twists, I write timelines and create concept maps, some of Chang's (2016) tools of autoethnography. Chang (2016) defines autoethnography as a methodology that works to deepen the understanding of socio-cultural context using the researcher's personal experiences as data.

Exploring: Autoethnography as a Methodological Fit

Autoethnography is a contested methodology. It is a form of research that privileges the self within a specific social context. It is not required to provide the firm conclusions that are expected of other methodologies, does not delineate findings, and eludes prescriptive evaluation criteria. Ellis et al. (2011) define *autoethnography* as a “systematic analysis of personal experiences, with a goal of understanding culture” (p. 273). Learning to write autoethnographically has deepened my understanding of this methodology. Holman-Jones et al.,

(2016) highlight the understanding that autoethnography is a methodology that transforms both the researcher and the reader:

Cultivating reciprocity with and expecting a response from audiences thus becomes the means by which our autoethnographies embrace *vulnerability with purpose, make contributions to existing scholarship, and comment on/critique culture and cultural practices*. These four characteristics respond to several perceived needs in research: to create particular and contingent knowledges and ways of being in the world that honour story, artfulness, emotions, and the body; to treat experience and individuals with responsibility and care; and to compel all who do, see, and listen to this work to make room for difference, complexity, and change. These characteristics also hint at the history of how and why autoethnography developed as a qualitative, interpretive, and critical research method. (p. 25)

The ability of this methodology to impact both the researcher and the reader, as identified above, supports my hope to influence others with what I have learned through my lived experiences. In this sense, I am truly an autoethnographer, as I use “personal experience to promote social change” (Holman Jones et al., p. 37) and I hope to compel “readers to think about taken-for-granted cultural experiences in astonishing, unique, and often problematic ways and, further, to take new and different action in the world based on the insights generated by the research” (Holman Jones et al., p. 37).

Autoethnography is also a way of living, bringing the personal insights of researcher reflexivity and introspection to the work of ethnographic research (Poulos, 2021). Critics of autoethnography, such as Anderson (2006), assert that it is never acceptable to use only your

own perspectives as data. Delamont (2009) argues that autoethnography is self-centered and a misuse of academic resources. In response, Poulos (2016) shares that,

Autoethnography has been criticized as too focused on the self, as “navel gazing.” But autoethnography is not really my story. When it works, it is the story of us all. It is the story of the people who inhabit my life world, it is the story of us together navigating this world. (p. 476)

Autoethnography values multiples voices and ways of being. As a methodology, autoethnography validates the stories of human experience. It is true there are risks in using my own experiences as data which I explore in Chapter 4. Nonetheless, with Tracy's (2010) criteria for quality in qualitative research in mind, I intend to pursue the goals of autoethnography: to use writing and reflexivity to “gain a fuller understanding of the interaction between one's inner world(s) and the outer world(s) encountered in human social life” (Poulos, 2021, p. 16).

In response to critics, Andrew Sparkes (2016) highlights that,

In an audit culture framed by neo-liberalism and scientific imperialism poisonous darts are aimed at autoethnographers by those who wish, at best, to demean this form of inquiry as a mode of scholarship and, at worst, to erase it from the academy. The poison stings the flesh with accusations of self-indulgence and lack of rigor, to name but a couple. Autoethnographers require antidotes and these are provided by the authors in the chapters that follow. Their antidotes not only soothe but also cause discomfort. Good autoethnography does this for both its producers and consumers. (p. 512)

I do not know how to tell my stories of how I shifted my professional educational stance without referring to my personal struggles. Sparkes (2016) predicts both struggles and comfort in autoethnography. My experiences of changing ontology and epistemology within family life

reflect both. For me to explore possibilities within the socio-cultural context of education, I needed to begin by examining my lived experiences. Using the critical components of autoethnography, I can connect a deepening understanding of myself professionally with a troubling of the neoliberal apparatus: soothing within the discomfort.

My intentions for this research are summed up in Le Roux's (2017) succinct breakdown of the critical components of the methodology:

Autoethnography offers a way of giving voice to personal experience for the purpose of extending sociological understanding (Wall, 2006) and consequently provides opportunities to help people interrogate and challenge aspects of their worlds and themselves in these worlds and to work towards reshaping these worlds – often in the interest of social justice (p. 198).

Finding my voice through the interrogation of both my personal and professional identities, in this research I explored the socio-cultural context of formal, public education in Ontario. I also plan to use reflexivity to trouble my identity and practices as a professional within that world. In Sparkes' (2016) introduction, he highlights the optimistic, creative potential of autoethnography that I wish to rely on and cultivate with my own research:

They wonder how different the world would be, and how differently we would move through the landscape, if autoethnography were an ethical way of being in the world, being with others, and being there for others... In so doing, they set up ways that might privilege autoethnography not merely as a way to know, but also as a way to critically act in the world, and a way to understand the construction of the self. For them, since social justice is a collective journey to actualize the possible rather than simply accept the actual

as finished, the autoethnographic project provides a fertile ground for individual and social transformation. (p. 513)

Autoethnography provides me with a platform to investigate the transformations I have lived personally while also bridging these shifts into the wider context of education. In the chapters that follow, I explore classroom practices that support the possibility of transformation and thus, disrupt the constraints of neoliberalism.

As a methodology that values transformation, autoethnography is situated in both the interpretive and critical paradigms (Holman Jones et al., 2016). Through my reflections, I have come to understand that I have shifted paradigms. This research traces my shifts from positivism into interpretivism, and then finally, into a critical paradigm (Scotland, 2012), which I explore at the end of this chapter. Even though I define autoethnography as critical, it is at times situated within the interpretivist paradigm. My research, and my identity, serpentine through both the interpretivist and the critical paradigm. I highlight this positioning as a reinforcement of the interconnectivity within my research design.

Deepening the discussion of autoethnography, some scholars refer specifically to 'critical autoethnography', though the methodology is critical whether it is labelled as such or not. I am including the following definition for the purpose of understanding the methodology broadly, though I choose not to make this delineation myself.

Holman Jones (as cited in Adams et al., 2021) offers this definition:

...autoethnography is a relational, rather than individual, practice. In the case of critical autoethnography, it is also a deliberately political practice, one used to show how our experiences with/in relationships, institutions, communities, and cultures are enlarged or constrained by power and (in)justice. Autoethnographers reflexively examine our

positioning in relation to others and explicitly acknowledge the privilege and marginalization we experience, including the practice of research itself. (p. 11)

As a teacher, I must consider that I am in relationship with the institution of formal education in Ontario. Through autoethnography, I can compare my ideals as a junior/intermediate classroom teacher prior to becoming the mother of a unique daughter, to those I brought into my teaching practice after I had been home three years with my second daughter.

As I explore the shifts in my identity and classroom practices through this study, I will both critique practices that I have used – and continue to use – as well as consider how new elements derived from my personal experiences impact the way I relate to teaching and students. As Tami Spry (2016) writes, “One of the things we do best in autoethnography is critical reflection upon the effects of hegemonic power structures even, and especially when, we may be the arbiters of such structures” (p. 37).

As an arbiter of power structures within my classroom, I have chosen to challenge and educate myself around some of the elements of power that were less visible to me prior to this research. To explore my teaching identity and practice, I needed to deepen my understanding of what it means to teach and learn within the current neoliberal apparatus. Each chapter brings forth aspects of neoliberalism in education, while also offering possibilities to increase the many types of potential outside of that narrative.

The liberatory potential of autoethnography is another element of the methodology. I believe in the liberatory potential of education. In this work, I connect the possibility of liberation through the building of self-awareness, wellness, and regulation to education and learning. Shoemaker (2016) writes,

Inherent in this moment of flux is a critique of the present moment. We need new ways to conjure more stories and different ways of telling stories that bring past, present and future together in uneasy and shifting ways. We must continue to revisit, articulate, theorize, and analyze “on the pulses” what we know, what we think we know, and what we don’t know at all. Autoethnographers must also keep asking hard questions: who is speaking, who is listening, and who, if anyone, is emancipated in this work? (p. 533)

The question of liberation is a thread of this work. Shoemaker’s (2016) words suggest that there are always more diverse perspectives to consider. How can I be certain of what I *think* I know? Through autoethnography, I continue to delve into the emotional, relational, and embodied practices that widen learning. Autoethnography values my exploration of what I think I know through my multiple lenses: a mother, as a human being, and as a teacher and a learner, and now as a student and researcher.

An autoethnographic process I used while working with my data was Chang’s (2016) “zooming-in” and “zooming out” (p. 129). This allowed me to bridge the personal and socio-cultural phenomenon that autoethnography demands. I experienced the zoom inwards into the deeply personal lens of motherhood. The process of widening the lens, or the zoom outwards, progressed from my personal to my teacher lens and then to the critique of neoliberalism within formal education through both the mother and teacher lenses. There are moments in this work where I separate some of the lenses I identified above. Many of the vignettes come from my time at home with my young children, though in analyzing a vignette, I often connect to classroom practice, neoliberalism, or both. This is the bridging, the “zooming-in” (Chang) of autoethnography. The paradigm shifts I lived as a mother are then paralleled in my professional practice and explored as I “zoom-out” (Chang). I am not striving for symmetry in lenses in this

research as I do not hold separate lenses in the role of mother and teacher, student, and researcher. The bridging acknowledges that there are certainly responsibilities I attend to professionally that do not overlap with motherhood, and vice versa. Yet, part of my journey has been building the self-awareness and clarity to cultivate unity within myself. Who I am cannot be separated. For the purposes of this research, I have attempted to separate my ways of being from my ways of knowing, though I must share that I do not necessarily see these as separate either. I seek the deep wisdom stemming from unity within myself. When new ways of knowing support that liberatory goal and fit my life, then they become my new ways of being. I use reflexivity of autoethnography in this spiraling process of cultivating a unified self.

Spiraling is an important concept in autoethnography. For the sake of clarity, I have organized this introductory chapter through more defined categories. True to the evocative nature of autoethnography (Ellis et al., 2011), I have prioritized the flow of writing and ease of reading. This aspect of the methodology impacts the work as I have woven all components of scholarly research seamlessly into the narrative. In keeping with the elements of the methodology, I chose to address the various aspects of scholarly research as they arose, clustered around a related emerging insight. At times, I deepen the spiral around a concept, such as methodology, and ontology and epistemology, as the research progresses. Feeling confident in my choice of methodology, I return to my analogy of 'the research practice'.

In my time '*on the mat*' thus far, I have gathered enough data to sculpt my research question. I refine it with the considerations that I must share my personal experiences as a baseline for my original ontology and epistemology of teaching and mothering and the reasons underlying the shifts I lived. I also begin to realize that I have a clear sense of my new ways of being, knowing, and doing generally, and as a mother, but I have not yet explored those changes

as a teacher and a learner. I restate the research question I developed to inform these wonderings:
How have my lived experiences impacted my professional identity and teaching practice?

To explore this question with greater clarity, I add three sub-questions, reflected in the chapters that follow:

- a) How and in what ways have I explored embodiment towards self-regulation in my classroom practice?
- b) How and in what ways have I explored emotional awareness toward self-regulation in my classroom practice?
- c) How and in what ways have I explored relationship in my classroom practice?

In the following sub-section, I elaborate on the methods I used to generate, analyze, and interpret the data leading to the insights and findings of the next three chapters.

Exploring: Data in Autoethnography

It is important to note the iterative and generative nature of qualitative research, and more specifically autoethnography. For the sake of transparency, I must share that I have returned to the data analysis phase after completing each draft of the work. In seeking to produce rigorous, focused, cohesive research, I return time and again to my data, now included in this thesis.

Vignettes, which are brief, evocative descriptions frequently created as a method in autoethnography, are central to the data for this research. The vignettes are presented as single-spaced, italicized text. Prior to the writing of this autoethnography, I generated many vignettes, as well as timelines, to both clarify the research focus and to serve as raw data. The vignettes I chose to include are generated data reflecting the stories most appropriate to the research. In turn, choosing which stories to include, and for what reason, initiated the analysis phase. The bridging

of my personal stories, through the vignettes, into a reflexive analysis on my experience within (and outside of) formal education is the interpretation of the data.

Through this autoethnography, I share vignettes of my personal and professional stories as they relate to my teaching identity and practice. I began writing the vignettes at the outset of this research project, in the spring of 2020; this began my data generation process. In the subsequent years, I wrote vignettes following conversations with my advisor. We did not choose specific topics as that would have limited the research. I could group many of the vignettes together as 'experiences of motherhood'. To me, these vignettes are crucial to the identification I do through this research of the epistemological and ontological positions I used to hold as a teacher and brought with me into motherhood, as well as identifying the professional shifts that followed my personal changes in ontology and epistemology. I also wrote categories of vignettes from my past perspectives in teaching, and from current perspectives as a student. These vignettes supported my exploration of the professional challenges I lived that convinced me that my 'motherhood' transformations were beneficial to me, to my family, and to my students as well.

The vignettes that I have written through the lens of a student during this master's program have served to highlight ongoing tensions in my worldview and the process of integrating the shifts I lived professionally, through motherhood, and into my life as an academic. This research project was my first opportunity to examine my former student self and those vignettes were some of the most recently written. The data generated through the student lens supports my analysis of who I used to be in the world and where my knowledge came from, compared to those elements of my current self.

I choose to keep the bulk of my professional descriptions embedded within the text, though I could highlight them as vignettes. In my conceptual organization of data, the bulk of the professional experiences I describe come after the personal transformations in ontology and epistemology. As such, I position the classroom practices I describe as findings within the work. Further, they do not carry the same emotional charge for me as the personal lived experiences I share. I do not feel the need to place the descriptions of classroom practices in the same evocative space I access through the vignettes.

I have also created timelines as data, though far fewer than vignettes. With the encouragement of my advisor, I worked with Chang's (2016) timelines exercises, found on pages 74–81. These exercises brought clarity to how my ways of being and knowing had changed through my experiences raising my daughters. I was then able to apply the writing process to describing those changes and how they challenged the teaching identity I held prior to motherhood. The timelines also required a more explicit comparison of my 'self' of different periods. This comparison helped me to identify which aspects of my experiences with education, as a student and as a teacher, were the greatest obstacles to my self-assurance and self-awareness. Thus, I identified the components of neoliberalism most important for me to challenge and critique in this work.

I found Chang's (2016) "Writing Exercise 5.1" (p. 74) particularly significant for this work. Analyzing my responses to lived experiences through a chronological lens brought much greater clarity to the process of transformation and how different spheres of my identity were impacted at each point. I was able to compare aspects of my worldview and assess when or if I had challenged them: if yes, how, and the result. While all these methods were important in the data generation and analysis process, I have chosen to include only a portion of the vignettes in

this work. I made these choices as themes emerged and the research focus became clearer. Again, with the intention of keeping a clear focus, I have not included the process work of timelines within this document.

I did not exclude topics in the data generation process and so I began data analysis by sorting the vignettes. The themes that emerged became the foundations of this work: wellness, peace, neoliberalism, embodiment, emotion, liberation, and relationship. The process of choosing how and where to include the vignettes contributed to the analysis of data as well. The analysis required as I responded to the vignettes and through the process of writing, bridged the analysis and interpretation phases. As per Chang's (2016) definitions of *data collection*, *analysis*, and *interpretation*, my continual reflexive process with the vignettes constitutes the important link to socio-cultural phenomenon that characterizes the process of data interpretation.

While '*on the mat*', I have identified obstacles in movement and limitations to the unity within myself professionally, I need to determine a theoretical framework upon which to build my research. It is time to step more fully into my role as a researcher and an advocate.

Breathing Together: Critical Pedagogy

In the early phases of research design, I was reluctant to work through a critical lens. However, as I read Paulo Freire (1970, 2005) and bell hooks (1994), I understood that the reflexivity I practiced while stretching into new paradigms is an integral component in the critical pedagogy of these two scholars. I learned that many critical pedagogy scholars believe that reflexivity is a necessary precursor to liberatory action. I agree. In my work, I stretch a step further, viewing unity within myself as a precursor to social action. While critical pedagogy is ever evolving and thus, somewhat unbounded, it provides a theoretical position from which I can trouble and open new possibilities in response to neoliberalism while also continuing to research

the tools I use to build the self-awareness and self-regulation I need to build my self-assurance.

On the mat, I rise to a standing practice.

As I gently argue in my work, I believe that simply rising into advocacy without a balanced approach comes with risk. I maintain that, as Freire (1970) communicated, praxis must balance reflexivity and action. Since the inception of the theory, some critical pedagogy scholars have abandoned the reflexivity component in favour of a primarily activist approach. *On my mat, I shift into a balancing pose. Balancing strengthens my core values, requiring me to focus within while also fixing a gaze externally if I wish. Within the stillness of a balancing pose, I listen while strengthening my resolve. As a Yoga Therapist, I know that balances improve my proprioception, my awareness of my body within a space, and will allow me to stretch further safely on my mat, ontologically and epistemologically, and into the world. The following vignette and reflection describe the beginning of my need to learn to stretch and ask questions.*

Exploring: Learning to Think Critically

Can the moment I grew a backbone be defined?

Contemplating, I shift in the dull blue pleather hospital chair. It's summer, and my leg sticks. My daughter and I giggle at the resulting sound. This noise is a welcome break in the now familiar hum of medical offices.

Drifting back, I recall the knots of tension in both body and emotions, facing choices with no right answer. I breathe, remembering to cultivate gratitude for the doctors, and the possibilities. I cultivate appreciation for the tension, too. At a completely unremarkable moment during one of these routine visits, I learned that the sucker-punch feeling in my gut meant I needed to ask questions, to be my daughter's voice, to advocate for a different choice better suited to her.

I do recall the difficulty inside of me as I learned to question. I was raised to obey. I also recall the persistence I have developed in making my voice heard. Insisting on choices and levels of care not always offered as "standard." In a situation where all choices carry risk, who can truly say what is the "right" choice? I carry the scars of moments where hindsight shows clearly the "wrong" choice. It seems the complexity of the human body persists; one size does not always fit all. I pause at the ideas I held a decade ago, expecting the path to be clear – and simultaneously terrified of what that path might be: that I would have to disagree.

Now, I know that this path my daughter and I walk is sinuous. I suppose I stepped into my backbone the same moment I accepted that I will make mistakes on the way, that I must consider multiple good choices, and that I honoured my boundaries for myself and my child. I grew a backbone when I put love for my daughter ahead of my hurts, ahead of my fears and conditioning, and learned to be comfortable in my discomfort so that I can also carry some of hers.

The pressure of her fingers in my hand brings me back. Her name has been called and she's nervous. I rise and bring my daughter forward with me into the centered strength of my humility and humanity. (Lived 2019, Recorded 2020)

I have a litany of moments such as this one. My heart still bleeds recalling moments I wish I had spoken or questioned – but instead, remained mute. I wish I had requested additional scans when the risk of complications was presented as negligible. It seemed negligible to me, too, until once again, I was breathing through the suspension of time while I waited to comfort my daughter in post-operative recovery. It seems I had a double dose of obedience and self-negation growing up, with obedience to the ideals of others awarded top merit. Sadly, I do not believe this to be a situation unique to me and I highlight it now to underscore the need for a shift towards privileging the self-awareness that contributes to reflexivity in schooling.

Most students in public education during the '80s and '90s would have experienced a *banking model* (Freire, 1970) style of schooling. In this “banking concept of education” (Freire, 1970, p. 72), only the teacher knows, thinks, acts, talks, chooses, and exists: “The more students work at storing the deposits entrusted to them, the less they develop the critical consciousness which would result from their intervention in the world as transformers of that world” (Freire, 1970, p. 73). hooks (1994) emphasizes that formal education conditions students to be “passive consumers” (p. 14). For me, this led to a disconnect within myself and a very limited ability to think critically. Freire (1970) is clear that the banking concept of education dehumanizes all involved.

Exploring: Origins of and Current Perspectives on Critical Pedagogy

Part of my purpose in this research was to understand, trouble, and open possibilities within formal education; I chose critical pedagogy as the theoretical underpinning for this work. In its original form, critical pedagogy emerged at the intersection of critical theory and the seminal work of Paulo Freire. *Critical pedagogy* asserts that neutrality is unachievable, and that all knowledge/knowledge creation is political (Darder, 2003). *Critical pedagogy* offers an understanding of the historical purpose of education to unite power and knowledge (Darder). As an educator, then, I must learn to pose the questions that enable me to see the power structures at work in the system. Darder further urges that I understand the nature of the cultural struggle of *whose* knowledge is legitimized within classrooms, that I may see how perspectives are valued or dismissed.

Defining critical pedagogy beyond this poses a few challenges. As Breuing (2011) suggests, there is no single, clear definition of critical pedagogy and the theory has changed over time. While working towards clarity in defining critical pedagogy, I noticed that much of the more recent literature focuses on democracy and social justice, some with a strong focus on activism. Darder, Mayo, and Paraskeva (2017) share that,

Critical pedagogy is fundamentally concerned with the relationship between education and power in society and, thus, uncompromisingly committed to the amelioration of inequalities and social exclusions in the classroom and society at large. Conceptually and in practice, this radical educational view contends forthrightly with the inextricability of power/knowledge relations. (p. 1)

I agree with the transformative potential of education, as it is highlighted in this quote. I also agree that the challenging of power structures is necessary for society to move towards greater

social justice. I underline again, however, that from my perspective and experience, the first steps towards liberation must come from within.

To return to the current scholarship around critical pedagogy, Giroux (2018) offers these points of reflection,

Central to such a politics would be a critical public pedagogy that attempts to make visible alternative models of radical democratic relations at a wide variety of sites. These spaces can make the pedagogical more political by raising fundamental questions such as these: What is the relationship between social justice and the distribution of public resources and goods? What are the conditions, knowledge, and skills that are a prerequisite for political agency and social change? (p. 34)

Giroux underlines the democratic goals and political expectations of critical pedagogy. I agree that these goals are important and worthy of discussion. I also note that the many current critical pedagogy scholars focus their gaze externally, while I believe that this thesis, with its inward gaze and focus on wellness and self-awareness is a response to Giroux's last question. I believe that wellness from a holistic perspective, self-awareness, and reflexivity are important precursors for "political agency and social change" (p. 34).

While current critical pedagogy scholars may disagree, I believe that reflexivity is crucial in social justice. In my experience, it is difficult to engage in seeking understanding of another without the ability to reflect on my biases and positionality. This work is a deliberate plunge into the "murkiness" of questioning assumptions, of remaking belief systems, and of cultivating comfort in discomfort. For me, reflexivity is required to do this personal growth work.

Reflexivity is what allows observation and questioning of patterns, of belief-systems, and of assumptions. As Freire (1970) and hooks (1994) emphasize, I also believe that reflexivity is

necessary to the continued work of liberation. As with most quality ideas, reflexivity is known under many guises in the field of critical pedagogy. Reflexivity falls under the umbrella of what Freire coined *conscientizacao* in his seminal work *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (Freire, 1970). In *Teaching to Transgress*, bell hooks (1994) extends Freire's umbrella and refers to *reflexivity* as critical consciousness or critical awareness.

As the current understanding of critical pedagogy turns away from what I see as the necessary reflexive roots of the theory, I have written my own definition and rely primarily on Freire (1970, 2005) and hooks (1994) in my research. For me, the praxis I describe in this research is the necessary reflexive piece that precedes liberatory action. For the purposes of this research, I offer my own definition,

Critical pedagogy is a philosophy of teaching and learning that prioritizes reflexivity towards an increase in liberation from external and internal limitations. The liberatory potential of education is prioritized and cultivated towards the ideal of individual and collective life-affirming intentionality. This liberatory potential is built on reflexivity and self-awareness, which can grow into critical consciousness as the teacher/learner cultivates greater peace first across the layers of being, physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual, and then across the layers of relationship/society.

I see social justice work and the goals of strengthening democracy, as identified currently in critical pedagogy, as continuations or extensions of the research I present in this autoethnography. My research began from a place of disconnect and turmoil within myself. My journey moved through my body and breath, emotions, and finally, my head as I sought liberation from within, cultivating intentional harmony. Only then could I share my experiences of embodiment, emotional awareness, and relationship with others.

I believe that the tangible examples I present in this work, of embodiment, emotional awareness, and mindfulness in relationships support liberatory, socially just action. Thus, this work is aligned with the democratic vision of critical pedagogy. From my world view, learning what self-awareness and self-regulation feel like while experiencing the liberation of intentionality is a powerful path that can lead to greater agency, improved understanding of self and an increased desire to listen. This research is an exploration of grasping that which is within my purview and attempting to know it, and to transform it.

On the mat, I ground myself, pushing down and observing the connection between the earth and my feet. From a place of greater clarity, I can easily stretch into 'Warrior Pose' or return to my center in 'Mountain'. Working from this life-affirming position, Chapter 2 explores holistic education, as championed by John Miller (2019), valuing it as its own theory but also as a response to the neoliberal obstacles I found in my practice. Breathing into discomfort, I turn to 'The Third Path' series (Tranter, Carson & Boland, 2018) and prepare to open possibilities.

The Space Between Breaths: Possibilities in Paradigms

On the mat, I have climbed to my feet now with my research question developed, methodology chosen, and theoretical framework in place. From standing, I return to twists, side-bends, back bends, and forward folds. Through the data analysis and interpretation process, I sort my vignettes into the categories now represented in my thesis document: embodiment, emotional regulation, and relationship. I back-bend into the uplift and empowerment of being able to teach in ways that support wellness. I experiment with opening and closing spaces and seek to place my professional experiences under the changing gaze of twists. I forward fold into the surrender of teaching, writing, researching, and living within the neoliberal apparatus, that I might learn to integrate that which serves from any paradigm.

*I suppose what may be most compelling in my transformation is how the currents of life swept me from one river path clean into another. Of course, the transition was not that smooth. The pebbles digging into my flesh. Eddies of beliefs swirling through my mind as I lie, bedraggled and choking in the dirt of the island at the turn of the river. Even fluidity requires a bed of river rock. With the help of an amazing Yoga mentor (also psychotherapist, which I did not yet know I needed!), I slogged through the mud, away from the survival stream. With my beliefs shifting like quicksand under my feet, I continued to explore my way sideways. You see, an unidentifiable **something** had begun to grow inside of me. Perhaps you have felt this presence in yourself, too: it was this divine motivation, this force greater than me that drove me forward, in the quest of love, peace, and balance – first in myself, and then around me. Weaving my way along, I eventually rounded the bend in the river. In my tentative new strokes, I was blessed with fresh eyes and a fresh heart. I got to look at my world from a different place. (Lived 2012, Recorded 2020)*

My “pre-motherhood” self was committed to a positivist epistemology: knowledge came from schools and other formal institutions. Guba and Lincoln (1994) explain the epistemology of *positivism* as dualistic, or binary, rooted in objectivity. Scotland (2012) adds that the ontology of positivism insists on realism. He goes on to explain that within positivism the world is one of objective reality, able to be simplified and known in equal ways by any researcher. True to the scientific paradigm, I believed that the narrative presented through academic institutions was the only correct option. The standardized, compartmentalized, objective epistemology built upon this ontology was reinforced by my success as a student and within the career marketplace. There was little within my education to trouble my positivist perspectives.

A challenge within this work is that it is both a reflection and a generation of new understandings. As I elaborate in the following chapters, I have lived several philosophical shifts since my “pre-motherhood” days. As a part of these shifts, I began to explore *constructivism*, which falls within the interpretive paradigm (Leavy, 2017). Within the constructivist paradigm, individuals construct their own subjective, local reality (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). The constructivist/interpretive paradigm expects and validates multiple perspectives. Scotland (2012) adds to this understanding of interpretivism:

The ontological position of interpretivism is relativism. Relativism is the view that reality is subjective and differs from person to person (Guba & Lincoln, 1994, p. 110). Our realities are mediated by our senses...Reality is individually constructed; there are as many realities as individuals... The interpretive epistemology is one of subjectivism which is based on real world phenomena. The world does not exist independently of our knowledge of it. (p. 11)

My shift into interpretivism opened many new possibilities in beliefs, thoughts, feelings, words, and actions. The constraints of the positivist paradigm had loosened. Guba and Lincoln (1994) state that a *paradigm* is a belief system that is based on methodological, ontological, and epistemological assumptions. To further elaborate, Guba and Lincoln (1994) share that,

A paradigm is a set of *basic beliefs* (or metaphysics) that deals with ultimates or first principles. It represents a *worldview* that defines, for its holder, the nature of the “world”, the individual’s place in it, and the range of possible relationships to the world and its parts, as for example, cosmologies and theologies do. The beliefs are basic in the sense that they must be accepted simply on faith (however well argued); there is no way to establish their truthfulness. (p. 107)

Upon reflection, I see that my paradigm shifts were preceded by awareness, curiosity, and ultimately, a willingness to change, to open to a different version of ‘truth’. I observed others who were content and confident in life, relationships, careers, and within themselves. I did not know what other worldviews existed; but I *did* know that mine was causing damage within my life. Learning to say “yes” to unknowns was scary. The universe, as I had constructed it, was unfriendly.

I realize that there may be people who function well within the paradigm of positivism. My intention within this research is not to prescribe a worldview that is “better,” but rather to offer my lived experiences as an alternative to a neoliberal narrative which aligns with positivist constructs. I cannot – and must not – decide the paths of others, though I used to believe that the best choices were identical for all. I would have been what Noddings (2012) describes as a “virtue carer”; I was a teacher who assumed the needs of students and prescribed the same prioritizations to all. Now, I prefer to listen.

My research requires a critical paradigm. I am critiquing neoliberalism, which is an example of Leavy's (2017) “discourses that normalize dominant ideology-that is, those lines of thinking that become so ‘taken-for-granted’ that people may fail to realize that they are power-laden discourse” (p. 130). The critical paradigm intersects ontologically with *interpretivism* with the belief in the socially constructed nature of reality (Scotland, 2012). The critical paradigm builds on the epistemology of interpretivism and includes *historical realism* (Scotland). Within the critical paradigm, for instance, it is understood that humans are born into a culture that has been shaped by the power dynamics of both the time and times past (Scotland). Within the critical paradigm, moreover, knowledge is accepted to be value-laden. Critical methodology seeks to interrogate values and deconstruct assumptions, towards Freire's (1970) *critical consciousness* and ultimately, emancipation. Scotland re-iterates:

As it is culturally derived, historically situated and influenced by political ideology, knowledge is not value free. The critical paradigm asks the axiological question: what is intrinsically worthwhile? Thus, the critical paradigm is normative; it considers how things ought to be; it judges reality. The utopian aspirations of the critical paradigm may never be realized but a more democratic society may materialize. (p. 13)

Within the critical paradigm, not only can I open myself to imagining new ways, but I have the tools to deconstruct that which limits the haunting, abundant nature of the new stories I might dream.

The Space Between Breaths: Spiraling into Intentional Choice

Inversions are powerful in a Yoga practice. *On the mat*, practicing an inversion requires me to turn my world upside down, to cultivate balance and learn from losing my balance. Inversions are crucial to the insights I work to cultivate through the coming chapters, particularly the last. As I continue to interpret data, returning time and time again to the literature and my work, I struggle with how to choose which conclusions or findings to highlight. Through the writing process, I finally understand that I do not have to choose and that this research is more about adding and opening possibilities than it is about acceptance versus rejection.

Throughout this introductory chapter, I have offered the background necessary to my research. As I prepare to explore embodiment, emotional awareness, and relationship through the following chapters, I return at times to 'the murky', not because the murky is always comfortable but rather, because I now see the invisible backdrop and know it to be stifling for me. Reflexivity allows me to hold and weight multiple ideas and diverse ways, sifting, sorting, and ultimately moving towards the liberatory potential for myself, my family, and hopefully humanity. In this sharing of stories and reflections, I will leave the analogy of the 'research' Yoga practice here in Chapter 1. Though I have not spoken directly to relaxation and meditation, these are practices I use while writing; they are omnipresent. *The mat* has served to clarify my research process: the spirals, twists, bends, folds, and reflections the reader can expect to experience journeying with me into the next chapters. While not labeled in this way in the coming chapters, *this is the story of my research process*. This research is a story for everyone interested in the

understanding of the present and the shaping of the future. With deeper understanding, I can open possibilities. With deeper understanding, I find the self-assurance of informed intentionality. I have found my voice from out of the depths of the muck.

CHAPTER TWO: EMBODIMENT – THE MESSY AND THE BEAUTIFUL

Having become aware of the narrowness of neoliberalism and some of its constraints on my ontology and epistemology, I began to explore possibilities leading toward greater wholeness. Aartun et al. (2022) highlight a unifying perspective on embodiment, stating that “Embodiment has emerged as a concept that broadens the focus on the body beyond the dualistic natural scientific point of view” (p. 1).

I question compartmentalization in this chapter, having begun to experience embodiment. In this chapter, I explore cultivating the self-awareness necessary for reflexivity, which critical pedagogy states must precede liberatory action. I reflect on the absence of calm and, conversely, the transformative power of choosing to cultivate self-regulation through my body. I begin to understand the potential for connection and agency present in cultural traditions that practice an embodied ontology, as seen in Indigenous knowing, holistic education, and Yogic practices.

This chapter is the investigation of my research sub-question: *How and in what ways have I explored embodiment towards self-regulation in my classroom practice?*

Letting the Breath Flow: Are Bodies to be Trusted?

Trigger Warning: The following vignette evokes a space of extreme mental and emotional distress.

The waves are rising...

This grief: all consuming, rending my body, seizing me, drowning me. I drown in the relentless chokehold of this loss. This storm batters me, the barometer rising at moments unexpected and inconvenient. Never good enough. Guilt and shame prowl through my tissues. Bile rises, and the need to scream overwhelms all else. Darkness imprisons my body and mind. My body numbs on the hard, creamy, cold tiles of the kitchen.

Disconnected, I see my 2-year-old through the eyes of another. I see her motherless, this beautiful baby who deserves so much. My body still screaming. This flood of emotion is intolerable. I must escape. I don't know how to do this. Movement is my only lifeboat; my runners carry me multiple times a day.

I run. I run until, gasping for air, I allow my body to crumble into the embrace of the earth. My hands ball up, nails digging into flesh – but the sensation is lost on me. I am in another place. Flailing, I beat the ground and the screaming begins. The rawness of my throat matches the rawness of loss. Fists crashing through psychological walls, I surrender to the flow of tears. Screaming becomes weeping as I move back into my body, curling over myself on the patch of trampled grass.

I need help. (Lived in 2012, Recorded in 2020)

A new realization has come upon me. In the years since this time, I have made and re-made its meaning. I am grateful to have found greater unity, to have peeked at the stores of richness and resilience attached to the despair. Connection to my body ushered a time of greater meaning into my life. I was in the dark at the time of this memory: in the dark psychologically, but also in an exclusively cerebral state. I believed I was connected to my body and emotions prior to this experience, but my limited awareness nearly cost me my life. My physical and emotional crashed into my consciousness during the struggle of this deeply personal vignette.

There can be a messiness in the body and emotions; my body and emotions signaled disturbance and unmet needs through the messiness of dysregulation. Yet, I believe the splendor of the body and emotions also contribute to life at its fullest. Celeste Snowber (2018) speaks to the paradox of the body, where challenge and beauty are present together. Piran (2017) adds to the conversation that,

The concept of embodiment owes its philosophical underpinnings to the French phenomenologist Merleau-Ponty (1962) and refers to the lived experience of engagement of the body in the world. According to Merleau-Ponty, mind and body are inseparable, and the body is not only the center of perception, but also of subjectivity: experiencing the world meaningfully. Further, dialogical relationships exist between body and culture, such that, through active engagement with the world, the body performs and enacts

cultural norms and practices (Crossley, 1995); in turn, the body can alter cultural practices. The embodiment term therefore refers concurrently to the breadth of lived experiences as one engages with his/her body in the world, and to the shaping of these experiences by cultural forces. (p. 2)

This way of viewing the body in the world mirrors my experience. As I share in this chapter, the loosening of physical patterns preceded some of the mental and emotional shifts I have lived.

Throughout the chapter, I explore the ways awareness connects me to the gifts of visceral knowing. I explore the body as both an indicator of disturbance and as an ally in regulation. My understanding of self-assurance began when I learned to listen to my body and find the awareness of when I was out of balance. My relationship with my daughter improved when I learned to listen to the embodied communication she was offering. In this chapter, I flow incrementally into the spiral of where new awareness leads me. Becoming more connected to myself improved my ability to consider wider perspectives, *to learn*.

Learning involves risk. While completing this research, I discovered I would need to renew my commitment to being comfortable in discomfort. According to Gubrium and Holstein (as cited in Anderson & Glass-Coffin, 2016) autoethnographic inquiry...integrates distinctive features of the "new language of qualitative methods" (p. 58) including "the visibility of researcher's self, strong reflexivity, relational engagement, personal vulnerability, and open-ended rejection of finality and closure" (Anderson & Glass-Coffin, p. 58). Knowing that autoethnography prioritizes vulnerability and open-endedness is part of the messy I refer to in my work. I also draw a parallel with the body work I focus on within this chapter. The body is always honest, and sometimes its indications of unease are messy, physically and emotionally. The body can be a source of reflexivity and for me, became an ally. When I view my body as

part of my autoethnographic researcher's self, I revel in the beauty of my body's constant feedback on this process.

Though the former vignette is deeply significant to me, I am leaving this story in the shadows so that it may expand from a singular human's story to a story within humanity. What I offer through this autoethnography is that my lived experiences, challenges, and questions may "meaningfully reverberate" (Tracy, 2010, p. 844). For Tracy, resonance in qualitative research is achieved through aesthetic merit and transferability. Thus, I hope that my writing stretches into evocative, artistic spaces and evokes the beauty, even in pain (the messy), paradox. I hope that others may see themselves in my stories, that these stories may move the "heart and the belly" along with the "head" (Bochner, 2000, p. 271).

In the fall following the preceding vignette, after an intense summer of running, collapsed executive functioning, and survival parenting, I sought the help I needed. I began a Self-Realization Program and discovered the depths of Yoga. For me, the whole human being consists of inseparable layers of body, breath, mind and emotions, discernment, and spirit – as is the Yogic teaching. Since then, I have benefited from Yoga as a spiritual vehicle and have moved deeper into spiritual belief systems. I needed to learn to integrate my body as a valuable part of my nervous system and to listen to my body as part of the emotional and spiritual work I was doing.

Piran and Neumark-Stzainer (2020), using the lens of Piran's Developmental Theory of Embodiment, confirm my experience that Yoga can lead to positive ways of inhabiting the body. Shroff and Asgarpour (2017) state that "A review study found that yoga is as effective or better than exercise at improving a variety of mental and physical health measures such as stress, quality of life, mood states, heart rate variability, pulmonary function and so on" (p. 2). Diamond

(2012) adds that “Yoga has been found to improve not only the perception of stress but its physiological impact on the ANS, endocrine system, and the immune system” (p. 4). These findings are similar to my own experiences, alongside additional benefits I have noticed such as improvements in quality of sleep, regulation of the nervous system, improved focus, and more efficient functioning of the immune system.

To theorize my experience, I turn to Piran's (2017) Developmental Theory of Embodiment. During my now more than a decade of practicing Yoga, I have experienced improvement across all five dimensions of Piran's “Experience of Embodiment or E.E.” (p. 4) constructs. These constructs are: “Body Connection and Comfort, Agency and Functionality, Experience and Expression of Desire, Attuned Self-Care, Inhabiting the Body as a Subjective Site” (Piran, p. 2). Piran has theorized that a person's experiences and perceptions of each of these constructs contributes to a degree of positive or negative “E.E.” (p. 4).

Leaning into the construct of “Attuned Self-Care” (Piran, 2017, p. 2), I prioritized learning more about physical and hormonal feedback loops, as part of the functioning of the nervous system. I became aware of what dysregulation looks and feels like through improved “body connection” (Piran, p. 2). With this knowledge, my perspective on my daughter's challenges and behaviours changed. I understood ‘squeeze hugs’ and hands that touched constantly as signals of a nervous system working to meet sensory needs. I began to view aggression as a signal fire of dysregulation. Extreme levels of activity showed me her unmet needs. Unmet needs block connection and learning. I have learned the importance of listening to needs that are expressed through behaviour. Nel Noddings' (2012) *ethics of care* confirms the importance of listening to students. Noddings (2012) also goes a step further, sharing that, “Good teachers must be allowed to use their professional and moral judgment in responding to the needs

of their students. They will not ignore assumed needs—the curriculum cannot be ignored—but they will attempt to address the more basic expressed needs” (p. 74). Prior to motherhood, I am uncertain how I thought children expressed needs. I know now that not all children will express their needs in ways that schools would prefer or find developmentally appropriate. Yet, my choice as a teacher and a mother is not how a child expresses needs in that moment. My choice is whether, or not, I work to validate and understand the need and how I choose to respond. For my voice to be heard, I must save the correction until regulation is restored.

Beginning in my home, I learned to interpret the expression of embodied needs. To do otherwise would have dismissed my daughter's individuality and harmed our relationship. Building bridges of communication with her initiated harmony and connection. Simultaneously, I had begun to prioritize deep wisdom within myself. I wanted that for my daughter too. In years to come, I would wish this for every child and this research would begin informally in my classroom.

Throughout this chapter, I share experiences of my physical body as I breathed my way into embodiment and towards greater self-awareness and regulation. I elaborate on my experiences with reflexivity in movement, mindfulness, and building awareness of sensations, among other experiences. Because of my daughter's sensory needs, my exploration of the body's impressive regulatory ability became deeper as I sought to support her self-awareness through embodiment as well. I define *embodiment* as being present within my body, as well as listening to and honouring the knowledge available to me about myself and my perceptions. Adding to my experiences, Liimakka (2011) highlights the importance of “bodily empowerment as a social and bodily process that fosters power in women for and through bodily action and redefinition of the body” (p. 442). I, too, have felt empowered. I have redefined the parameters around health and

have cultivated the awareness to nurture my body, connect with, and care for all layers of my being.

Questioning: Compartmentalization

Embracing my body as an ally was a crucial first step for me as I sought wellness. I had taken in the 'rightness' of separation presented to me within my neoliberal education. My experiences have proven that, for me, wellness is difficult to attain in a state of separation. Miller (2019) speaks to the "fragmentation...within ourselves" (p. 5) and confirms the disconnect I experienced from my body and my heart. In this chapter, I explore compartmentalization as a component of neoliberalism.

I attended school through the same education system within which I now teach. For much of my life, the way subjects were delineated was common sense to me. In many ways, it still is. However, as I have already shared, my lived experiences shook my belief in the dominant narrative. Western mind/body duality is one example, and teaching subjects in isolation is another such example. For many years, I could not have fathomed a different way to teach the curriculum, or a justification to do it differently. Yet, as I widened my perspectives and sought out diverse ways, I began to make connections that were previously unavailable to me. Being present with my body and emotions has taught me levels of perception that my positivist past would reject.

Wagner and Shahjahan (2015) outline the depth of the dualism:

Given the pervasiveness of neoliberal frameworks of thought throughout institutional enterprise (i.e., managerial modes of regulation, power, and the performative nature of academic work), it is to be expected that such embodied pedagogy will be unsettling.

Introducing embodied pedagogy fundamentally challenges broader structures that shape

the academy, that continue to be mind-supremacist and outcome-driven, whereby increasingly knowledge, and our bodies have become commodities whose exchange is tied to market value (Shahjahan, 2014a). Such teaching challenges the fundamental premise that learning outcomes should be readily measurable and aligned with hegemonic instrumental knowledge claims. Instead, in embodied pedagogy our bodies are acknowledged as valid knowledge producers and elevated, having its own value for generating focus, stillness, and more importantly, anchoring us in the 'now' moment. (p. 250)

I began to question the supremacy of the mind, as the above quote explores. As my ability to be present in "the now" grew, I investigated the natural world around me and to truly see myself as a part of it. I learned that my body could also contribute to consciousness through mindfulness practices. I learned to view the body as a valid communicator of children's needs. I learned that alternate ways of viewing the physical exist, and that many diverse ontologies and epistemologies value integration in ways of living and learning. An example is Curwen Doige's (2003) explanation that *Indigenous knowing* as a harmonized process, transcending the divisions of the rational versus the intuitive, and of the spiritual as being separate from the physical. Modes of Indigenous knowing focus on what goes together, as an inclusive reality. Within education, John Miller (2019) presents holistic curriculum as a response to the separateness valued in neoliberalism:

Holistic education also involves exploring and making connections as it attempts to move away from fragmentation to connectedness. The focus of holistic education is on relationships: the relationship between linear thinking and intuition, the relationship between mind and body, the relationships among various domains of knowledge, the

relationship between the individual and community, the relationship to the earth, and the relationship to our souls. In the holistic curriculum the student examines these relationships so that they gain both an awareness of them and the skills necessary to transform the relationships where appropriate. (p. 16)

This research is not specific to holistic education, though I believe holistic education to be one avenue to open possibilities within education. Opening possibilities through shifting movement patterns is a transformative element I explore in this chapter. Opening to the interrelationship amongst formerly disparate concepts represented an important shift in my identity and an early part of my transition toward peace.

In opposition to prioritizing integration, neoliberalism builds separation, even within a subject. Science is one such example. Science is divided into strands, currently with great focus on STEM (science, technology, engineering, mathematics) themes in education. Current reporting practices in Ontario also highlight compartmentalization, with even language divided into listening and speaking, reading and writing. Some could argue that these distinctions support organization of content. I am not arguing that there is no role for examination and understanding of 'the pieces'. Isolating reading for the purpose of understanding why a child is struggling is good practice. It serves the child well. Understanding 'the pieces' can give clarity. However, given the Eurocentric background of education in Ontario, I believe educators must be aware that education is already situated very far from integration and that neoliberalism is unlikely to provide any alternative possibilities. Within the sciences and from an Indigenous perspective, Marianne Logan (2020) argues the importance of a system-based perspective. Aligning with Indigenous wisdom, Miller (2019) highlights the potential in challenging compartmentalization: "The holistic curriculum then seeks the "right relationship" between the part and the whole,

where both are acknowledged and nourished” (p. 13). As a French Immersion teacher, I have observed that the most successful language acquisition occurs when listening supports speaking, and then all strands work together to build reading and writing.

Had I written about these topics in the past, I would not have seen the interconnectivity of mind/body dualism and health. I bring the connection forward because attempting to deny my embodiment was making me ill. When I learned to view my wellbeing from an integrated, systems-based perspective, I supported my adrenal function, for example, through all layers of my being which I believe was far more effective than relying solely on supplements targeting ‘the pieces’. Maté and Maté (2022) critique the current Western medical model and point to the attempt to treat ‘the pieces’, rather than the whole being, as a significant factor contributing to disease.

In the past, my ontology was compartmentalized and narrow. Epistemologically, I believed that valid knowledge was transmitted through formal institutions and that I could only access knowledge of value through schools. I found it challenging to ‘transfer’ learning and make new connections. Currently, I hold an *interpretivist* ontological perspective, a perspective that allows me to investigate pieces relationally to find a deeper understanding of the whole. My epistemology holds that knowing can be transferable, and parallels exist across different categories. Denying my body, at the behest of well-intentioned teachers, cost me many years of self-awareness. I wish I had known the power in embodiment for facing the challenges of anxiety. I had simply accepted those struggles as being a “normal” part of my childhood. Yet, when I consider the Developmental Theory of Embodiment (Piran, 2017), I understand that my “Experience of Embodiment” (Piran, p. 4) sat on the negative side of the continuum for the five dimensions considered: “Body Connection and Comfort, Agency and Functionality, Experience

and Expression of Desire, Attuned Self-Care, and Inhabiting the Body as a Subjective Site, Resisting Objectification” (Piran, p. 4). Now, with connection to my body, bringing presence to the movement of the breathing apparatus and awareness and correction of posture are calming and empowering. Mindfulness exercises like counting the buds on a branch or watching the sky change also bring me greater clarity during the struggles.

Morcom (2017) speaks to the limitations of compartmentalized knowledge:

Indeed, as Stonechild (2016) points out, while a Western approach views these ways of knowing as less valid than detached empirical knowledge, from an Indigenous perspective, Western ways of knowing are hampered by a refusal to move beyond the observable to recognize knowledge that comes from emotional or spiritual sources. (p. 125)

My journey forced me to grow towards a less certain perspective, one where knowledge arises through body, emotions, and spirit. I thought I had an open mind, yet I was unwilling to see validity outside of “detached empirical knowledge” (Morcom, 2017, p. 125). As it turned out, my wriggling, seven pounds of unique little girl was about to draw me into listening and searching. My daughter – both of my daughters, now – have shown me clearly some of my own limited understandings. I am not deriding myself in this statement; I am simply acknowledging the limitations of my human intellect and my conditioning. But how could this be when I excelled at my schoolwork? Surely, that mastery of curriculum *must* mean I would be capable in life. My misguided beliefs about the compartmentalized, intellectually knowable reality of life caused my own narrow suffering. My education taught me I could control my black-and-white world.

Stolz (2015) explains the positivist perspective neoliberalism instills:

The assumption is that 'knowledge' is somehow independent of the mind and the body functions like a sensory object that empirically and objectively, without any meaning verifies (or refutes) certain a priori principles. Clearly empiricism here fails to account for the unity and connectedness of our experiences...Subsequently, the problem with such psychological approaches to learning is that they are disconnected from the integral role embodiment plays in how we perceive ourselves, other persons, and other things in the world. (p. 477)

In widening my epistemology to value sensory knowing, I have come to believe that both embodied knowledge and psychological knowledge can be enriched through the linking of the two. I have also found that increased regulation has brought improved health and more energy for learning, reflecting, critiquing, and opening new possibilities in how I live into the world.

Exploring: Connecting to My Body

I lean over the student's desk in my portable and catch my breath. The electrical current running through my back writhes, and I struggle to straighten. I am teaching a Grade 4/5 class with 29 students this year. My daughter is 18 months old, and not sleeping. I am running on empty. I implement SMART goals and meet levelled targets. I implement high-yield strategies and use best practices. The burning out I feel spreads through all levels. Disconnect feeds anxiety and insomnia. The spiral deepens into adrenal fatigue, digestive upset, and skin disorders. My body's signals become urgent: sciatica and trouble with fertility. Emptiness. (Lived in 2011, Recorded in 2020)

This vignette highlights the degree of separation I experienced from my body, which is part of neoliberal compartmentalization. This snippet of my experience is a direct precursor to my times of greatest reflexivity, the beginnings of the reflexivity that critical pedagogy insists is necessary to liberation. I am certain that the brokenness in my body contributed to what could be called a breakdown – though, at times I consider it to be a *breakthrough* (Brown, 2020).

Motivated by my love for my daughter – and later, myself – I began to learn what it meant to listen to my own needs and to genuinely care for myself. Slowly, I reclaimed my human right to

care for my body, to listen to and learn from my emotions. It was 2 years into my Yoga training when I felt, *for the first time*, relaxation within my muscles. At 33 years old, I surrendered control of my tightly held categories and allowed my body to sink into the Earth's embrace. I was free to trust in the universe, to believe I had a purpose beyond that of my market-valued skills. Possibilities began to open.

I am bereft of ways to describe this relaxation, this *softening*. I do not have words specific to the sensation of my body weight resting more fully on the mat as I allowed myself to be peaceful in the moment. There is no sensation like the awareness of my eyes moving back to rest more fully in their sockets. Feeling my chest open and my entire back drop into receiving relaxation is indescribable in its intimacy. I learned that day that I could, in fact, let go of the closed, protective rounding of heartbreak, that I no longer needed to “have my back up.” That I am making the attempt to describe these moments here seems almost foolish; I suppose I am reminding myself of how crucial body awareness continues to be for me, and of the importance of continued practice. Life is constant change, and my physical being will communicate when I am stuck – if I am willing to listen. As my body began to release tension, I could more easily hear the subtleties within. Thus commenced an embodied knowing. In the words of Snowber (2018), “Embodied ways of inquiry are a place of deep listening to the pulses within our lives, the rumbling inside our cells and the sacred and mundane space where body knowledge and body wisdom can be honoured” (p. 232). For me, ontology that honours the body was new, though I recognize that there are many cultures across history and the globe who have always viewed the human being systemically. In many traditions, including Indigenous and Yogic cultures, listening within the paradoxical sacredness and ordinary of the physical body is understood as a foundational piece of an ontology that is embodied.

I had experienced some of the benefits that Snowber (2018) lists: the honouring, the listening, and the increased clarity that come with embodiment. I was also noticing improvements to my health, both mental and physical. My nervous system was settling down. Over time, many of the health issues I struggle with resolved. Feeling a sense of empowerment in my health was transformative for me.

As a parent, some of my deepest desires are that my children are well in every sense of the word. I wish for them to know they matter and that they reach for their potential and give back, in turn. I hold the same goals for my students. The roles of parent and teacher hold many parallels. Empowered through the positive changes in my health, I held renewed motivation to share what I knew about regulation through and with the body first in my family and then in my classroom. Viewing behaviour through the lens of embodiment and expression of need brought me the reflexivity I needed to continue to learn.

Exploring: New Perspectives on the Body's Communication – Self, Family, Classroom

My daughter's fist crashes into my thigh. Bam, bam, bam. It is always a triple strike. Breathe. Soften. The hits don't hurt, really. She's only 2 years old, after all. I mentally detail my list: changes in diet, schedules, activity level, and types. I am confident I know how to be a good parent. I work with children every day in my classroom. (Lived in 2012, Recorded in 2020)

I would continue to be blind to my role in my child's behaviour for many months still to come. Pride and insecurity bound me to a conventional model of relating to children that jeopardized my connection with my beloved daughter.

*The waters of guilt and shame flood my face over and over again as I begin to understand how many lessons I still need to learn to be the mother my child needs. My heart aches at the vastness of what I **thought** I knew and did not, at the harm I have done. The waters are cleansing, also. I connect with Spirit and work to let go. Wishing nothing more than my love, my daughter forgives and teaches me to love her. (Lived in 2013, Recorded in 2021)*

I sometimes wonder if I would have seen how fragmented I had become without the wholeness of my children to first show me, and then guide me back. Opening myself to

reflexivity was not easy. Through body work, my nervous system slowly began to calm, and I gathered greater mental energy to effect change. I attended to my physical health and learned to embrace emotion as a friendly messenger. That these foundational building blocks were absent from my well-educated, professionally successful life is motivation for this research. Having begun to value embodied perspectives, I began to truly nourish myself, exploring multi-faceted wellness and seeking to balance the deficiencies within my being and to let go of the past. Returning to the memories of this time triggers emotion still. The tears running down my cheeks track memories of brokenness and despair. Paradoxically, the same tears animate the spirit of joy and contentment alive within the sacred spaces of life. I had no idea the power of emotional intelligence and will explore it more fully in the next chapter. Cultivating connection and foraging for the missing pieces of myself encouraged a desire to model new-found wellness patterns for my daughter.

In the past, I had experienced a disconnect philosophically. Ontologically, I believed in the importance of caring for my health – but epistemologically, I only valued knowledge arriving through the intellect. I dismissed knowledge derived through the body, even about my own health. When I began to say “yes” to new ways, I learned about neuroplasticity and investigated how to regulate my nervous system through all layers of being, including the body and breath. I became a more well-rounded teacher, with a breadth and depth of strategies to meet the needs of a wide range of learners. Noddings (2012) summarizes this ‘adding to’ formal curriculum, as “From the perspective of care ethics, the teacher as carer is interested in the expressed needs of the cared-for, not simply the needs assumed by the school as an institution and the curriculum as a prescribed course of study” (p. 772). As a parent and a teacher, I wish for children to know what wellness can be across multiple layers and to have deeper awareness around identifying

their own needs. In sections of this chapter, I discuss scaffolding this awareness through strategies such as heavy work, sensory experiences, changing movement patterns, and breath work.

While learning what my daughter needed and how to support her, I stumbled into other ways for the body to partner with the mind. The very division of the two is a false polarization based on the Cartesian rejection and repression of physical, that only the intellect be developed to benefit Western philosophy (Snowber, 2018). Maté and Maté (2022) argue that shifts in medical perspectives are crucial for health and that there is “ample and growing evidence that living people cannot be dissected into separate organs and systems, not even into “minds” and “bodies”” (p. 9). In the years since becoming closer to whole, I have applied much of what I uncovered into my teaching practice. Valuing wellness for my students and possessing knowledge and experience that enabled me to support them, has brought me fulfillment and confidence.

I believe that education is meant to be liberatory. The basics of learning are impacted when students struggle with self-awareness and regulation. Critical pedagogy is clear that reflexivity must precede liberatory action. That strategies to support students and teachers as whole human beings are absent from professional training and development clarifies that the neoliberal narrative does not prioritize the liberatory potential of education.

Exploring: Embodiment Towards Self-Regulation in the Classroom

As I have already discussed, compartmentalization is a component of neoliberal ideology. I would not have described the shifts in my classroom practice towards embodied knowing as a challenge to neoliberalism, though I see now that they are. Neoliberal ideals conflict with my understanding of growth. When I reflect back on the pigeon-holed version of myself, I wonder

how I ended up so narrow. Becoming is complex, so I am sure there are many factors. Nonetheless, in this educational exploration, the factors promoted and privileged through neoliberalism – such as competition (De Lissovoy, 2018), performativity (Ball, 2003), meritocracy (Mijs, 2016), compartmentalization (Phyak & De Costa, 2021), and narrow curriculum (Reay, 2016) – contribute to this myopic view of education.

In widening my epistemology, through a newly developed constructivist paradigm, I moved towards an epistemological position that was of benefit for my daughter and myself, and I was eager to offer the potential benefit to my students. Some of the most interesting movement points I applied within my classroom are heavy work games, sensory diets, and movement pattern work. All are described here, along with potential educational benefits.

Heavy work is one of the concepts I have learned in my wanderings; the strategy is part of the larger body of sensory tools used within the field of occupational therapy. Occupational therapy determines the needs of a “worker” and attempts to meet those needs (Youngstrom, 2002). Successful participation within the classroom context is considered the “work” of children. Like many of the isometric sensory inputs of Yoga asanas, heavy work involves input to the muscles and joints, often through pushing and pulling. Heavy work presented through a game can be used to balance the nervous system. As an educator, it is crucial that I understand that dysregulation inhibits learning, which I will describe in more detail in the next chapter. By extension, when students are more regulated, and feeling more assured within and interpersonally, they can cultivate the curiosity and take the risks inherent in learning.

A fun way to diffuse a lightly turbulent classroom is to head outside for “handstand practice.” Of course, to accommodate ability levels, we would practice against a wall, and students could maneuver into the handstand in any way possible. Depending on the class,

students could partner. Sometimes, we would work towards a time goal as a class, and occasionally, it would become a competition. In placing the body weight through the muscles and joints of the upper body, heavy work and the resulting regulation of the nervous system was accomplished, along with other health benefits.

Another simple game that encompasses similar benefits, with the addition of laughter, is what I call *push/pull*. I began playing this one across my kitchen with my daughter, and it was so effective at supporting regulation and connection that I have incorporated it into my classroom daily physical activity (DPA) repertoire. In *push/pull*, students work together with a partner and begin on one side of the yard. They place hands palm-to-palm at chest height, and the partner, facing out into the yard, becomes Partner A. Partner A must first push Partner B across the yard. Partner B is to resist “reasonably.” Once across the yard, Partner A must pull Partner B back to the starting point. Partner B will then have a turn at pushing and pulling. This game often results in good-natured resistance, falling, and laughter. In either case, the outcome of heavy work and connection through play and laughter will build safety and community, both of which are necessary for students to take the risks inherent in engaged learning.

As a teacher, I celebrate when my students are eager to engage with learning, which includes thoughtful questioning and critiquing. In my classroom, engaged learning looks like students who are absorbed in the process of learning, and who are working to make information meaningful to them, individually or collaboratively. For me, engaged learning means making connections between curriculum and lived experiences and carrying learning forward as a personally integrated building block, to hopefully apply and use it in ways that resonate with the student. Students are engaged when they are asking questions and refining their understanding of material, when they are sharing their thoughts and genuinely considering multiple perspectives to

a problem. Students are also engaged as they contemplate how to best use movement to illustrate the water cycle, for example, offering suggestions and practicing negotiation and compromise to arrive at an agreed upon presentation. To me, engaged learning stretches beyond curriculum. My understanding of engaged learning is also developmentally scaffolded, as students reach different developmental milestones at different times and sometimes in different ways. I will add, however, that engaged learning also comprises the necessary state of physiological peace required to be simultaneously open to new ideas, while also practicing the self-awareness to know what is or is not an acceptable compromise within oneself. Engaged learning and inquiry require that students feel safe to make mistakes and explore, as we see in growth mindset work as well (Dweck, 2016). As a mechanism for promoting regulation of the nervous system, heavy work optimizes students' ability to consider new ideas and to cultivate the curiosity that precedes critical thinking.

Research around *sensory inputs*, or the body, is in its infancy. While Aartun et al. (2022) underline that “Central to embodiment is the understanding that the body is not only connected to subjective experiences – rather, it is the ground of such experiences (Standal, 2020)” (p. 2), I have read repeatedly in reviews of Yoga literature that more study is needed (Büssing et al., 2012). Shroff and Asgarpour (2017) speak to the limited understanding of much of Yoga: “The mechanisms that make yoga a seemingly effective health promotion, disease prevention, treatment, rehabilitation, and palliation intervention are not entirely understood” (p. 2).

I wish to corroborate my experience of *sensory inputs*, but more study is needed to the experiential certainties of millennia of Yogic practice. My feelings of excitement come from considering the possibility for research to revalue the body and honour the power for wellness

held in embodiment. The research available offers a starting point showing benefits of sensory learning for self-regulation in challenging student behaviour.

Pingale et al. (2019) investigate *sensory diets* for students with special needs, specifically autism and sensory processing disorder. Fraser et al. (2017) have researched the impact of sensory tools on the behavioural symptomology of trauma. Both studies found sensory intervention had an impact. While both studies seem narrow, I would argue that I do not always know the types or depths of needs in my classroom. I can confidently assert, however, that I have experienced all the behaviours the researchers describe: “frequent meltdowns, fidgeted during classroom activities, sought to crash or fall on the floor, and required extensive redirections and positive reinforcements to engage in activities” (Pingale et al., p. 229). Fraser et al. add to the list of challenges: “...aggression, self-regulation, emotional regulation, attachment, depression, anxiety, trusting others, and often misinterpret or misperceive sensory information” (p. 200). While I am looking to bring about opportunities for greater wholeness through embodiment, and these studies are very specific, I believe there is great opportunity for further research here. My experience corroborates the findings of the studies above: Intentional Sensory inputs can improve regulation.

While not all students require embodied inputs to improve regulation – and thus, learning – I contend that all students deserve to learn as whole human beings. I understand this may be a position with which parents may disagree. My experience shows that when I attend to the whole child, learning occurs more efficiently. Therefore, I do not need to sacrifice academic expectations. Ron Miller (1990), a holistic education scholar, extends the rationale for this position with this research:

At its best, education...is concerned with the healthy development of human personalities — but the determination of what constitutes ideal development is largely defined by the prevalent psychological theory of a given culture. Identifying this dominant psychology is thus an important key to understanding the purpose and content of educational practice, and changing this cultural vision of human possibilities is essential to bringing about a significant, enduring transformation of education. (p. 382)

Neoliberalism, the hegemonic philosophy of education, deprived me of an epistemology of abundance, of the rich multiplicity of knowing my body as an instrument to finely tune my physiology and my ability to learn. I believe it is my responsibility and honour to support the children in my classroom in the most effective ways possible. The scholarly conclusions stressing the importance and efficacy of starting with the body through sensory based interventions are clear (Fraser et al., 2017).

Exploring: Improving Regulation Through Mindful Sensory Experiences

Tranter et al. (2018) stress the importance of building safety into the classroom environment. *The Third Path* authors commit to the “necessary for some, good for all” principle often applied to special education. The “Regulation” guide of *The Third Path* series (Tranter et al., 2018) contains information and strategies that are applicable to embodied learning. *The Third Path* (2018) mentions mindfulness under the heading of “promoting regulation and preventing dysregulation” (p. 15). While mindfulness is an expansive topic, I will share here some of the ways I have combined mindfulness with embodiment.

Much of my understanding of the nervous system and its impact on learning comes through Yoga practices and my own experiential learning within myself, my classroom, and my home. *The Third Path* (Tranter et al., 2018) suggest that “Some of the most effective strategies

involve physical activities, musical and expressive activities, or group activities” (p. 24) towards balancing the nervous system. These researchers also underline the importance of knowing one’s own brain and body. I wish to bridge the two previous topics. Beginning with my daughter, and now with my students, I find benefit in connecting sensory needs. When I say to a child, “I notice that the noise really bothers you. It seems like it makes it hard for you to focus,” I am seeing and valuing the child, as the child is. I am also scaffolding growing reflexivity and opening the space for greater student success in regulation and learning. From there, I may offer headphones or a quiet workspace just outside the classroom door in the hall.

There are many factors contributing to self-regulation, including emotional awareness, which I will discuss in Chapter 3. I contend, however, that seeking to regulate only through the mind, as compartmentalization privileges, excludes most learning styles.

Stolz (2015) elaborates:

Part of the problem with psychological approaches to learning is that they are disconnected from the integral role embodiment plays in how I perceive myself, other persons and other things in the world. In this sense, it is argued that a central tenet of any educational learning involves being taught to perceive, come to know ourselves and the world around us. (p. 474)

It is my experience that when I limit the strategies that I validate in building awareness, I am invalidating methods of learning. As Stolz (2015) suggests, as a teacher, I must offer guidance around possible ways to perceive, understand, and improve self-regulation through embodied learning. To reach more learners, I believe embodiment must be present in classrooms.

When working through challenging situations with my daughter, I would often observe that “she’s a very sensory girl” and that she really likes to know just how everything feels to touch. I affirmed for her that moving her body was a part of the way that she understands the world around her, and that was why her body felt so wiggly sometimes. We worked together to understand that there are gifts such as curiosity, connection with nature, and athleticism in being a sensory girl. As she grew older, tools such as weighted toys on her lap during lessons, hug breaks, and frequent use of directed manipulatives reinforced that including an awareness of her sensory needs within her personal epistemology could lead to empowered learning. Sensory awareness is a crucial component of embodiment.

Many facets of artistic or creative expression support a balance of the nervous system, as well. Many of the sensory experiences enjoyed in art also benefit children’s ability to self-regulate, for instance (Tranter, Carson & Boland, 2018). When my children were younger and I noted that they were dysregulated at home, often I would simply put out the play dough or plasticine, without speaking to the dysregulation. Different textures of paper, cardboard, or ribbon, or the act of tearing, can offer moments to support sensory connection. I will often invite children to notice the different textures, to spend a few moments truly exploring with the fingers, and to share with me their observations or comparisons. Bringing myself into presence and modelling this type of embodied mindfulness strategy prepares everyone in the room – myself included – to work optimally.

Following, or during, time spent squishing, smoothing, or pushing play dough, I explicitly narrate my observations of the classroom atmosphere:

“Before we got the plasticine out, there were many friends who were very bouncy. We were having trouble with very loud voices and even some conflict. Now we’ve had a

chance to work some big feelings out by using the muscles in our hands. It's wonderful that our bodies can help us to connect more peacefully inside of ourselves and with other people."

This kind of activity can also be used as a preparation for new concepts. I would proceed similarly but reinforce the strength of resilience in embodiment by finishing my comments with, "It's wonderful that our bodies can help bring us into the curiosity of right now so that we can be ready to tackle difficult tasks. We can do hard things!"

My experiential learning in the journey from "conventional parent" to "the parent my daughter needed" holds an abundance of ways to down-regulate and balance the nervous system. I never could have imagined the extent to which I needed these skills for myself, too. I have come to know and receive the warm comfort of loving touch, my body understanding the pressure sensors in the skin activated by a hug. The power of an intentional gentle smile surprised me. My patterns of impatience and intolerance for needs I did not understand relaxed when I smiled, and the connection my daughter craved opened more readily within me. From a smile, the sensory experience of laughter is a breath away. Knowing that my nervous system was prone to being overactive in the sympathetics (I was often in fight, flight, or freeze), laughter was crucial. Tentatively, I tried out laughing when my daughter laughed, whether I felt like it or not. As I continued to live into my body, smiles became giggles. I worked to understand and love my emotional self, and slowly learned to embrace laughter. From an academic avoidance of interconnectivity, I now welcome the gift of laughter, even when, – or perhaps, *especially* when – it releases the heavy burden of tears, too. In my experience, pairing mindfulness with sensory experiences builds self-awareness and promotes embodied learning and improved learning outcomes.

Exploring: Reflexivity in Movement Towards Intentional Choice

It is autumn. Outside my window, there are hues of ruby, topaz, and azure. I sit at my kitchen table, eyes transfixed on my laptop screen. I am attempting to write my first paper for my M. Ed. program. Again, I feel the lived pressure of decades of playing the “give the teacher what she wants” game. This time, I’m not entirely sure what she wants. This time, while there still may be limited “right” ways to complete this assignment, I know there are many right ways for me to live the process.

PAIN!

*My eyes scrunch and my breath quickens as I gingerly explore the left side of my neck with my fingertips. Tension. **This** tension is no stranger to my body, though it has been absent nearly half a decade. “Why not?” I muse, feeling the shift in my body and mind as I bring consciousness to my breath. With gentle fingers and gentle judgements, I delve into my consciousness and scan my body. Within the flow of my breath, I feel it.*

*My emotional video feed begins to spin furiously. Me, nearly a decade into my teaching career, normalizing the spasms of pain jolting my body as I write reports. Me, as the harried first-year teacher holding the phone with my left shoulder as I jot the requests of a disgruntled parent. Me, as an undergrad student bent over my notes, oblivious of the pain in my body. Me, as a Grade 5 child staying in for recess to revise a project because my B+ wasn't good enough. My left shoulder is the keeper of these kinds of memories for me. **This** is a tension that chokes off my creative self and hunches to protect my heart. I don't understand yet that it's also closing my heart. The knots in my neck are reminders of the reactions patterned so deeply into my brain and body. (Lived in 2019, Recorded in 2021)*

This vignette explains my experience of observing mental and emotional patterns through the physical patterns my body holds. When I began body work, I could not have imagined the creative possibilities held within the power of diverse movement. Now, as a Comprehensive Yoga Therapist (Byron, 2021), I know the incredible impact new ways of moving can have in making space for new ways of thinking, being, and doing. Celeste Snowber (2018) celebrates the potential in embodied movement to “reimagine” (p. 235) ourselves and the world we live in. Creativity in movement can lead to possibilities in thoughts.

I realized the power of *dehabituating* (Byron, 2021) movement when I sought to move off my neural highways and choose my response. Simply put, *dehabituating* movement means moving the body in ways that are new or outside of the regular patterns of movement. Examples

would be brushing my teeth with my non-dominant hand, or walking around my house backwards (Byron, 2021).

Snowber (2012) speaks life into the dance of humanity:

When we inhabit our bodies fully, no matter what vocation is in our lives, we are able to integrate the fullness of our intelligence, incorporating the emotional, kinesthetic, conceptual, and our complete humanity. We are fully alive, vibrating under our skin, and live with presence. This is a presence of knowing and experiencing our full vitality. And in this place we encounter the deep wisdom of our bodies, what we came into the world with, and what we need more than ever in this day and age. (p. 59)

Snowber (2012) also speaks to the fullness accessible to me when I am completely in my body. My experiences show me that my body is a powerful ally in understanding the challenges that I face. I think what amazes me most is the possibility of accessing a struggle from any level of being when I love myself as a multidimensional human.

For fun, I decided to play with dehabituated movement in my classroom. I knew the benefits I had gleaned and thought I would infuse our DPA time with the kind of challenge that opens space for critical reflexivity. In fairness, my students were already quite used to engaging in curious, playful ways, so they were not that surprised when I suggested crabwalk soccer. Wisdom gained from failed experiential learning compels me to share that crabwalk soccer requires small teams and small fields! Once we had sorted out some of the logistics, crabwalk soccer led to moments of lost balance (this is often where new spaces open), isometric heavy work of large muscles, sensory engagement of hands on the ground, and perhaps most importantly, barrels of laughter. Crabwalk soccer was declared a success!

Of course, the games and types of movement I have tried are not exhaustive. There are as many creative ways to move as there are creative ways to know oneself. Now that I have become accustomed to listening to my whole self and valuing the intuitive knowing that comes through, it is difficult for me to separate the physical from the emotional. The breath – bridging conscious and subconscious, intentional and automatic – flows through all. As such, the body will continue to figure into my memories of gaining understanding of emotion, which I share in the next chapter.

Exploring: Breath Work Towards Reflexivity

Breath work (*pranayama* in Sanskrit) provides a link between the body and mental/emotional processes. Nemati (2013) finds that, “*Pranayama* seems to have a significant positive effect on test anxiety and test performance” (p. 55). Carter and Carter III (2016) highlight the benefits of pranayama as well: “These state-of-the-art practices can have a significant impact on common mental health conditions such as depression and generalized anxiety disorder” (p. 99). Using my breath as an instrument to regulate my responses to challenges in life is another strength of body awareness. For me, the breath serves to interrupt thoughts. Breath practice is a way to remind myself to seek out a wider perspective, to think critically about my patterned reactions. I cannot be the kind of person, or the kind of mother or teacher, I wish to be when I deny my wholeness through a separation and rejection of my layers of being. I use the breath as a tool to support intentionality.

Consciousness used to be reserved for mental processes for me. Perhaps I have been slow to understand, but reflexivity and honouring myself as an authority on my life are deeply enshrined in my body, breath, and emotional state. Lacking other guidance, I subscribed early to the academic disowning of the body that bell hooks (1994) describes. I still sometimes forget to

prioritize my connection with my body in the demands of a classroom. The pain comes, physical and emotional, when I fail to remember and begin again to subscribe to neoliberal ideals that are intent on "...encouraging teachers and students to see no connection between life practices, habits of being, and the roles of professors" (hooks, p. 16).

Breathing Together: Critical Pedagogy Prioritizes Wholeness and Liberation

It is fascinating for me to read hooks' (1994) analysis of professors who leave the self outside of the classroom (in the guise of professional objectivity), and then feel threatened when students wish to be seen as whole human beings. Though I wish for it to have played out differently, my younger teaching days resonate here. I was still repressing all non-intellectual aspects and could not have led my students towards greater self-awareness had I even known such growth existed. Epistemologically, I prioritized the intellect and disregarded all that I did not consider 'factual'. I lived from a shallow ontological position, dismissing all that could not be intellectualized. Because my ontological and epistemological boxes were so rigid, it is no wonder I felt challenged when a student expected education to be liberatory (hooks, 1994). Again, it was my daughter who pushed me towards the reflexive, emancipatory framework of critical pedagogy.

My daughter was – and still is – an incredibly determined girl. For all that I resisted becoming whole, embracing my body and emotions for the wisdom they hold, she continued to insist. My daughter demanded the transformative agency celebrated in critical pedagogy and at the root of holistic education (Mahmoudi et al., 2012). At times, it seemed she would accept nothing less than my whole self, demanding that I squish through the mud barefoot with her. Rainbows of finger paint were indispensable, and pitch, volume, and frequency were favourite explorations. My daughter came into the world knowing that living with her complete sacred

being is a birthright. My feeble, dissociated attempts at connection solely through the intellect seemed to enrage her. When there was emotional reckoning to be done – which is often for young children (who do not compartmentalize) – she would allow herself to be soothed only after I had dropped my pretenses and offered myself with my whole being. Since I had come to believe that emotions were so frightening that teachers must avoid them, learning to accept emotion was a very difficult part of the journey. Releasing the clasps on my figurative armor left a vulnerability I had avoided for as long as I could remember.

Ontologically, my daughter would need me to shift from a guarded, protective position to one of openness and trust: a position of listening and gratitude. The epistemological change that ensued took me away from grades and perfectionism, and whisked me toward sensory, embodied, playful learning. Curiosity became a way to approach myself and others, with both the inter- and intra-personal peace that develops from a deep honouring of self and others as an unexpected benefit. Critical pedagogy states that reflexivity must precede liberatory action. My daughter pulled me along.

My daughter's lesson, although less clear to me then, was powerful. She was desperate for me to see and love all of her, that I might hold the beauty and the messy as a safe garden of wonder for her. But how could she ever see me as a safe place when my message to her seemed to be one of distrust? I continued to wear armor, to place walls between us. My avoidance of sensation and emotion communicated. Perhaps it said, "I am too fragile to be there for you", or maybe, "I don't like myself and I don't want you to see who I really am", or flatly, "I don't trust you." In any case, none of these messages encouraged connection. I wonder how often I have communicated a message like this in my classroom.

For hooks (1994), a holistic model of education empowers all as learners; sadly, “that empowerment cannot happen if we refuse to be vulnerable while encouraging students to take risks” (p. 21). My daughter led me a step further, into loving my whole self and finding the courage to connect through many levels.

Exploring: Embodiment in Critical Pedagogy

I wish that my childlike, innate ways of listening to and trusting my body had been validated throughout the various points of my development. bell hooks (1994) emphasizes the potential for freedom through education. hooks delves deeper into the impact liberatory education can have on the individual and the world, drawing comparisons between Thich Nhat Hahn's view of engaged Buddhism and Freire's conception of praxis. hooks (1994) elaborates on Freire's emphasis on *praxis* as “action and reflection upon the world in order to change it” (p. 14). Here again, I believe it is imperative to bring a critical gaze to the neoliberal compartmentalization of layers of being. For me, not only does my body offer crucial insight to grow in self-awareness, but it is also the agent of action. While not undermining the importance of thought, it is, in fact, the body that follows through with any further steps. It is my body that translates my thoughts into words, both spoken and written. Any goals I wish to accomplish in my life are ultimately actions through the body.

Wagner and Shahjahan (2015) add to this discussion that,

Incorporating embodied learning in anti-oppressive pedagogy and theorizing offers one means of moving beyond traditional Eurocentric paradigms, unsettling dominant tropes, and working toward incorporating a more holistic, decolonized approach that acknowledges multiple worldviews. Building on theorizing established by foundational educational theorists such as Dewey and Freire, embodied pedagogy further challenges

artificial constructions of the mind–body split and has the potential to deconstruct thinking steeped in Eurocentric paradigms and unexamined systems of privilege. Unlike other critical approaches, embodied pedagogy contextualizes the learning within the corporeal body of the learners and teachers. (p. 252)

The scholars I have drawn from argue that including embodied learning within critical pedagogy challenges even more of the limits of dominant theories. Further, the authors speak to the interconnectivity of the body and the learning contexts, acknowledging that learning does not happen independently, or just within the mind. Embodiment has offered me strategies to connect: within the layers of myself, with broader context of learning, and with others.

These new connections, available because of embodied praxis, support the goals of critical pedagogy and holistic education. Mahmoudi et al. (2012) explain that, “John Miller (2007) ... frames holistic education within a ‘transformation model’ of education, arguing that the core motto of holistic education is to seek transformation, that is, to seek the continuing growth of the individual and society” (p. 184). Holistic education is clear that the experience of humanity in its fullest is only possible with and through the body: Ron Miller (2000) highlights the potential of embodied human consciousness:

The holistic approach is by no means anti-intellectual, but it is most certainly trans-intellectual; it takes Merleau-Ponty quite seriously when he says that experience is rooted in the body. That human consciousness is embodied means that it involves passions, longings, hungers, sympathies, creative intuitions and other non-intellectual, non-linguistic, non-cultural elements. (p. 389)

To me, the strength of exploring into these “non-intellectual, non-linguistic, non-cultural” spaces is that I might begin to deconstruct them and imagine possibilities that would be otherwise excluded.

My experience of embodiment includes an increase in agency. To me, this is central to how embodiment facilitates critical pedagogy. Critical pedagogy shares the transformative goal of holistic education. Embodiment has allowed me to question dominant ontologies and epistemologies, asking questions about power and making the constraints of neoliberalism known through physical sensations of distress. As I came to know myself through my body's communication, I began to develop the agency to practice intentionality toward possibilities of peace outside of neoliberalism.

There is still murkiness, however, even with the intentionality of embodiment; the tangible tools of the body, however, support my trust of divinity through my times of insecurity. I can explore into these experiences, though, staying centered through my physical self and usually emerging with deeper understanding. When I am lucky, I emerge from these struggles with innovative response options and directions to take. I remember the paralysis of anxiety, when I was unable to learn when I needed to act intentionally. Learning to use my voice was a powerful step for me; listening to the inherent wisdom within my body guides the actions I choose and the words I speak.

The Space Between Breaths: Embodied Self-Awareness as a Foundation to Intention

Through my body, I practice presence. My body signals when I am stuck in an emotion that requires processing. It is through physical patterns that I am better able to cultivate critical consciousness. My gut is often the first response when I am betraying my values, when I am denying the divine, interconnected nature of my life or that of another. Occasionally in the

busyness, I forget to listen. The voice of fear can be loud; it can drown out wisdom. At times, reflexivity highlights these shifts in emotional pain. Physical pain invariably follows when I continue to disregard internal whispers.

One of the greatest physical epiphanies I recall is the moment of relaxation I described when I felt a tangible release of tension for the first time. That new awareness of patterns of tension brought increased consciousness around touch. I realized that my hands were tense when holding my daughter, that I put too much pressure on the toothbrush. I wish I had known the power of softening. I used to think that acting in the world meant that I had to be competitive, fast, and strong. Perhaps there is truth to this in the neoliberal job market. However, my experience teaches me that this kind of action leads to a separateness, a hardness. When I lived this perspective, the world was harsh. I do not wish to be a leader in this harshness.

Softening, releasing, down-regulating, surrendering: these are important ways to listen. Softening my fingers allowed me to feel the first tugs of my daughter's hand. My clenched fingers had communicated that she was required to follow my authority, to do as I said always: similar to the teacher-role in a banking model (Freire, 1970). A too-firm grip shouted that we must stay on my road, with no time for curiosity, exploring, or play. In the softening, I began to enjoy the touch that I had previously associated with yet another need. My heart softened away from insecurity, away from the segregated compartments of a disconnected life. I began to build a center of peace, from which I could stretch more confidently into the world with a freedom and intentionality in my choices.

My growth through body work is not the end of this journey, however. Tuning into spirit and my own authority highlighted that, while my confidence had grown enough for me to question the dominant narratives and to want to stretch the narrowness I found in my world, I

still did not have the knowledge I needed to be the kind of parent my daughter needed. I was still uncertain how to respond to what I now understood as the expression of embodied needs. I was motivated, though. The limitations imposed by my career-exclusive education were stretching and falling away. With excitement and trepidation, I could begin to dream.

Having completed both a Self-Realization Yoga teacher training, and a Comprehensive Yoga Therapist qualification, I required new relationship perspectives. I mention these trainings not as a topic I will explore, but rather, as the outline for my trajectory. With the softening came a new level of vulnerability. I became aware that my daughter's hurts were often mine, as well. I turned to the internet and was thrilled to find Peaceful Parenting by Dr. Laura Markham, a psychologist (Markham, 2022). For months, I voraciously read her work and bumbled through the action of implementing it. When Dr. Laura offered a training, I optimistically applied and became a Peaceful Parenting Coach. I was seeking harmony within myself and my family. My epistemology had shifted away from the neoliberal ideal that only standardized knowledge is valid. I had observed how much there was still to learn, and I yearned to uncover the knowledge that others had about building connection within myself and my family. Ultimately, my new epistemological positions would carry into my classroom and drive the desire to research. Inadvertently, I became an advocate for the inalienable rights of children and families to be connected, loved, and well. Without knowing, I had begun to embrace critical pedagogy's liberatory goal of becoming whole as individuals and collectively.

The Space Between Breaths: Moving Towards Choice

Where does this new awareness lead me? The process of learning to move in different ways, to exercise choice, began broadening the neoliberal narrative. As my body opened to new ways of being in the world, my ontology opened. I began to embrace possibilities, rather than

dismissing ideas because they were outside of what I had been taught. Epistemologically, neoliberalism's narrow view of what constitutes knowledge no longer made sense to me, as the knowledge I was using to cultivate different ways of being came through my embodied existence. I began to listen and interpret the expression of needs through behaviour and to cultivate connection differently in response. The compartments into which I had organized my life shifted when I became aware of the many divergent and sacred ways there are to live a good life. Corbiere (as cited in Morcom, 2017) shares the idea of a good life, quoting words on teaching:

In order to live a good, balanced life, or *mino-bimaadiziwin*, an individual must seek to develop in all of these areas; the best teachers are, therefore, those who help learner to develop not just intellectually, but emotionally, physically, and spiritually as well. (p. 125)

While the shackles of neoliberal compartmentalization had begun to weaken through embodiment, the obstacles to self-assurance I would now face within myself remained. Supported by improvements in wellbeing and self-regulation, I continued to use mindfulness in body, breath, and senses to grow and lean into the murky of new possibilities. With greater reflexivity came the awareness that I had work to do before I would be regulated enough to intentionally stretch into deeper emotional connections and the liberatory goals of critical pedagogy.

In my classroom, I began to view and understand behaviour differently. I recognized the physical signs of dysregulation and began applying what I had learned through my body and within my family. I used what I knew about heavy work, sensory inputs and patterns in movement. Over time my classroom became more collectively regulated. From my perspective,

we felt safer together, with the trust and collaboration that safety builds. Sharing of emotional space became possible.

CHAPTER THREE: BUILDING SELF-REGULATION THROUGH EMOTIONAL AWARENESS

In this chapter, I focus on emotional dysregulation and its impacts on learning. I challenge neoliberalism's crisis tendencies (Slater, 2015). With intentionality, I am troubling standardized classroom practices (Slater & Griggs, 2015) from the new perspectives of motherhood. I continue to wonder how to make life and learning better. I cultivate greater calm within and reflect on how gains in emotional awareness could lead to the goals of critical pedagogy.

This chapter is the investigation of my research sub-question: *How and in what ways have I explored emotional awareness towards self-regulation in my classroom practice?*

Letting the Breath Flow: A Worthy Topic

At the time of writing, I observe that we, as educators, are struggling with novel challenges. Missed prep time and condensed classes, while unheard of when I began teaching, are more and more common. Crucial primary caps are circumvented when classrooms are collapsed after September. Violence in schools seems to be increasing. A recent report about the Toronto District School Board indicates that "For the 2022–23 school year, if the current trend continues, the board will be reporting the highest number of violent incidents since the data has been collected in 2000" (Fleguel, 2022, para. 1). I have observed that the mental health struggles teachers noticed in students and worked to support pre-Covid have multiplied and that the gaps in learning have widened perceptibly. I know that these challenges impact the quality of daily life and learning in schools for teachers and students. I believe that the quality of education must be a priority for all living in a democracy. These challenges are complex and as such, need careful, open-minded consideration of possibilities. Neoliberalism does not offer that.

Neoliberal ideology in education offers strategies such as compartmentalization (Phyak & De Costa, 2021), competition (De Lissovoy, 2018), and standardization (Slater & Griggs, 2015) as possible responses to these types of challenges. Through my experiences, I am convinced that more of the above will not support people who are struggling. Thus, I find further impetus to press forward with this research. Tracy (2010) suggests that a key component to quality in qualitative research is exploration of a worthy topic. The concerns I listed in the previous paragraph constitute just that: a worthy topic. The post-COVID concerns I see in education meet Tracy's criteria for relevance and timeliness to deem a topic worthy. I grow in reflexivity when I question. Increasing understanding provides greater possibilities of intentionality.

This creation of space, murky and liminal though it often is, necessitates a shift in ontology. bell hooks (1994) underlines educator commitment to being whole and present as foundational pieces in building liberatory education. My experiences support this position. I began my career and my life as a mother holding the neoliberal, positivist perspective of the dominant narrative. I was forced to consider differing ontologies when I could not make meaning of what I was living as a parent within the framework of the positivist paradigm. As an M. Ed. student, I would face once again the same pattern from my past. What would I create within the possibilities of reflexivity?

Letting the Breath Flow: Possibilities in Methodology

I sit in the binary again. Tension mounts as I wonder how to be authentic and precise with my language in this research when authenticity, for me, is slow and interdependent and fluid. Surrounded by teal walls, I gaze at the fullness of the walnut tree out the rectangular window. I chuckle, spiraling around the purpose of this research in this way. I am asserting the need for "betweens" in education – and here I am, feeling up against a wall trying to open a "between" for creativity and academic expectations. (Lived 2020, Recorded 2020)

In this section, I conclude the methodology-specific discussion for this research project. As the vignette highlights, learning to "know" from my reflections in embodied, regulated

practices was a new epistemology for me. As I approached this research, I felt concerned about how to continue to live into the epistemology I had embraced: the opening to emotional intelligence and the connected layers of embodied knowing that contrasted so deeply with the standardized epistemology that was my positivist academic experience. As a methodology, autoethnography embraces the liminal spaces and gives voice to the subtle, so that I may find my own path in ways that are authentic to my identity shifts. I have flexibility to explore, with the understanding that the “conclusions” I may reach are no more than tomorrow’s building blocks. Within autoethnography, I can spiral towards greater depths while simultaneously stretching into broader social contexts. I see now that a strength of autoethnography is that I can have both creativity *and* academic quality. Autoethnography rejects the polarization of research styles – and yet, I was clinging to binaries. When I regulate the tension and move into creative consideration, possibilities abound.

Bochner (2016) pushes my reflections, adding that,

In practice, autoethnography is not so much a methodology as a way of life. It is a way of life that acknowledges contingency, finitude, embeddedness in storied being, encounters with Otherness, an appraisal of ethical and moral commitments, and a desire to keep conversation going. Autoethnography focuses on the fullness of living and, accordingly, autoethnographers want to ask, how can we make life better?” (p. 53)

How can I make life better? Could life *be* better if I removed the metaphorical fencing of what I have identified as “betweens” in the vignette? What if this binary exists only in my own epistemology? Can I use creativity and regulation to propel myself into further curiosity and open further possibilities? If I can, what will I do with these possibilities? Where will my

intentions lead? Outside of the dominant neoliberal narrative, what new responses may arise to the aforementioned challenges in education?

Autoethnography is a sharing of personal experience towards an improved understanding of oneself, lived experiences, and society. Autoethnography marries Freire's (1970) *conscientização* and critical pedagogy's gaze towards liberation. As autoethnographers, "We get excited about the idea that autoethnography becomes our way of life, an ethical code of being in the world, being with others, and being there for others" (Toyosaki & Pensoneau-Conway, 2016, p. 559). I still have much reflexive work to do. However, when I brought new, creative possibilities into my interactions with others, family and students began to respond differently to me. I noticed that when my ontology transformed, I became more relatable. When my epistemology stretched, I opened to new dialogues and began learning more deeply about others. In this way, autoethnography has become my way of life. Though I cannot presume to know what makes life better for anyone other than myself, I can practice reflexivity and prioritize connection. I can also support others in growing the self-regulation and awareness that leads to reflection.

At times, greater reflexivity brings me greater confusion. Doubts and fears fall outside of positivist ontologies (Jaggar, 1989) and yet, students and teachers, parents and children live this human experience. Positivism states that knowledge can only be trustworthy if emotions are excluded (Jaggar, 1989). Thus, I fought to disregard emotion. In resisting emotion, I felt extremely threatened by the emotions of others. My early classrooms were focused and academic. To be clear, this work is not a rejection of academics. I continue to hold value in classrooms that are focused and academic. The difference lies within me. With a reminder to see my past self through a lens of compassion, I humbly share that I recognize myself represented in

hooks (1994): "...professors who are not concerned with inner well-being are the most threatened by the demand on the part of students for liberatory education, for pedagogical processes that will aid them in their own struggle for self-actualization" (p. 15). This seems a reasonable assertion to me. I can only teach what I know. It was easier to create relational distance with a student seeking growth than to confront the narrowness inside of myself.

Exploring: Emotional Feedback

My breath is shallow, my thoughts spin, unnoticed. The lunches are not made: how will I ever teach my daughter about proper nutrition? Her health will suffer. I wish I had known more about nutrition. I wish I had been in better health as a child. Why won't she eat what we make? Can't she see all the work we put into feeding her well? She's going to get sick. Spinning like a compulsive top, my thoughts whirl everywhere but the present.

The shimmery purple nail-polish catches my unfocused gaze. I must get to work! Tension coalesces into a laser beam of fury. My voice explodes. Pride and focus fly from my three-year-old's face, replaced by fear. In that moment, I am lifted outside of my own whirlwind; awareness of my daughter's internal state is seared into my being. Afraid, she scurries to scrub the polish off the tile. Remorseful already, I crouch to help. Trapped now within her own crisis, she cannot see outside of herself. Watching her pencil-thin arms shake, I vow to find another way. (Lived 2013, Recorded 2021)

This was my first experience of staying present enough within my own body and emotions to observe and identify a state of extreme emotional dysregulation in another close to me. For much of my life, my mostly subconscious turmoil dictated that I was mere moments away from what I now think of as "falling off the cliff." Scientifically speaking, my experience of "falling off the cliff" occurs when the amygdala (a region of the brain associated with emotion) activates, usually in response to fear or anxiety. When this occurs, a person enters a state of fight, flight, or freeze (Goleman, 2011). The more recent evolutionary parts of the brain responsible for tasks such as collaboration, critical thinking, and decision-making become unavailable (Siegel, 2010). The body experiences physiological changes through this dysregulation, as well. Digestion stops as blood is re-routed to the muscles of fighting and running, and the adrenal glands secrete adrenaline. The nervous system moves away from

relaxation and rest as the entire being prepares for survival in the most primitive sense. This is pertinent to teaching because the ability to learn is compromised in this dysregulated state. Siegel (2010) also highlights how challenging it is to listen to others in a state of fight, flight, or freeze. Thus, dysregulation impedes the communicative goals of critical pedagogy.

Questioning: Dysregulation

At times in this work, I will refer to dysregulation as *crisis*. At its most extreme, it feels like a crisis. I view regulation and dysregulation as being on a continuum. In the vignette above, my daily experience of low-grade anxiety was pushed into extreme dysregulation. In looking back, I see this pattern expressed in how easily I became defensive in difficult social situations rather than opening to partnership, for example with the parents of students. Invisible anxiety made it a struggle for me to hear others because my nervous system was already prepared for an attack. My expectation of attack was exacerbated by low-grade anxiety and at times, caused interpersonal conflict. My limited self-awareness damaged my relationship with my young daughter. In that moment, she was frightened of me. I highlight this experience as, for me, limited awareness of my internal state can easily lead to dysregulation. When I function from a place of low-level anxiety, my ability to connect and learn is lessened. De Lissovoy (2018) further warns of the connection between anxiety and the impact on education:

Anxiety names the subjective and objective tension – expressed both in the fears of individuals and in the crises of institutions – that characterize a way of being organized on the basis of competition. The anxiety that is associated with neoliberal governmentality is important for us to confront, then, not simply as a pathology to be negotiated, but as a basic social condition – as a grid within which the responses of students and the pedagogies of teachers should be crucially contextualized. Moreover, as

I argue, the prospects for a contemporary critical pedagogy have to [*sic*] gauged in relation to this context. Teaching that does not centrally confront this problematic of anxiety will have little chance of reorganizing possibilities for students in an emancipatory frame. (p. 192)

In the opening vignette, I had not confronted my own underlying “basic social condition” (De Lissovoy, p. 192) of anxiety and the narrowness it created. The latent tension in my body held me closer to dysregulation, and my mental and emotional responses were more difficult to choose. Practices that deepened my awareness of thoughts and emotions were a crucial step for me in recognizing choices outside of the standardized ideals of competition. Critical pedagogy seeks to move towards liberatory action (Darder, 2003). Becoming aware of my underlying emotional state allowed me to bring intentionality to the regulation of my nervous system. I needed that foundation to be able to learn new ontological perspectives and priorities. To me, the ability to sculpt my identity with intentionality is liberating. Having the knowledge of practices to regulate my nervous system, and taking the epistemological position that this awareness matters, is restorative to my mental and emotional health.

My recent experiences teaching intermediate students and chatting with colleagues convince me that many young people are living through and with significant struggles, also. Kieling et al. (2011) report that 10 to 20% of children and adolescents struggle with mental health. The authors state that mental health concerns are the most prevalent cause of disability related to health for this group, and that these needs are being neglected by health care professionals. While not minimizing the health struggles of others, I will share that my mental and emotional health improved through body work. The epistemology whereupon I view the emotional layers of a human as contributing to connection and self-awareness delineates a sharp

departure from the epistemology Freire (1970) describes in the banking model. My emotions offer knowledge about my internal state. With this insight, I am better able to regulate myself.

Manion et al. (2013) state that “research has revealed that the majority of adult mental health disorders originate in childhood, with 50% emerging before the age of 14...” (p. 119). Short et al. (2009) share that “a scan of 27 Ontario boards of education revealed a high level of concern for student mental health and substance abuse issues and a strong perceived link between student emotional well-being and academic achievement” (as cited in Manion et al., 2013, p. 121). For these reasons, early intervention within schools is crucial (Manion et al.).

At this point, I wish to make clear that I am not suggesting that mental illness should be treated in the classroom, nor that teachers have any scope within which to do that. However, my experiences support the above research highlighting a link between emotional wellness and learning and achievement. Learning and relationship are more difficult from a baseline position of anxiety or other dysregulation. With this additional rationale, I will outline a few of the emotional awareness and regulation-building exercises I use and have modified to suit my classroom practice.

Exploring: Building Self-Awareness in My Classroom

One of the principle tools I use to promote regulation is visualization. As we practice breath work, I may ask students to imagine their favourite place. I will often cue them with possibilities: “Perhaps it is somewhere in nature, perhaps your favourite place is in your home, maybe it can be anywhere as long as you have your favourite pillow with you...”. Once students have imagined a space, I ask that they layer on details such as color, smell, and, if they wish, sound. Of course, as this is a favourite place, any details that take away from how wonderful this

place is are simply disregarded. We will spend a few breaths simply enjoying this peaceful, favourite space. Next, we build embodied awareness. It may sound like this:

“Take a moment to notice how your body feels in this calm, safe space. You are able to relax through your whole self. Observe, without judging, where your body is relaxed. If you find tension, simply breathe it away. This is your place to be totally safe.”

It is interesting, and sometimes a source of insight, to observe how various students engage in this type of visualization. I have worked with students who struggle to be still during visualizations. I have found silent fidgets, something squishable, and weighted toys beneficial. Some students are uncomfortable at first closing their eyes, in which case I suggest they can put their head down on their desk. I have found that over time and with practice, most students feel comfortable with their eyes closed and come to enjoy these times. Students become familiar with the range of visualizations and will place requests, depending on their needs. A caveat is that a student who is struggling with ‘big feelings’ may not wish to participate, as this work promotes awareness and can bring emotions to the surface. The desire to avoid participation is protective and the right to pass must always be respected. In this case, I would start with connection and dialogue with that student.

As the year progresses, I work with variations that support building emotional awareness and observation of thought, as well. I will often conclude this type of visualization by inviting students to really notice how they feel in this peaceful place, and to imagine tucking that sensation, that awareness, into a hand or a heart, that they may retrieve it any time: it belongs to them.

While more extreme student dysregulation in the classroom setting is not something I ever wish for, I certainly find it less threatening or stressful now that I am equipped with the

toolsets I metaphorically carry. I have even come to see the opportunity for connection within the challenge. As human beings, we know it is the friends who love us through our difficult times that we learn to trust most. I endeavour to be the teacher and the parent who loves fiercely into the sadness, fear, and anger. As I co-create trust and regulation within the classroom, I often enjoy the benefits shared by Tranter et al. (2018): as “indicators of progress” (p. 33) for regulation, these authors list benefits including connection with students, calm within the classroom, educator confidence, positive professional feedback, decrease in conflict and consequences, improved student behaviour, and as I have experienced, increased learning.

As I began to value the insight that emotion has to offer, I began to wonder how to build these components of mindfulness into my classroom practice. Drawing feelings is a strategy I find useful across all grade divisions. When I have validated the emotion and the student continues to dysregulate, I invite the student to “draw the emotion.” I invite the student to decide what size and shape the feeling is, and to draw that. Then, I can attend to other students for a few moments. When needed or able, I can circulate back to the dysregulated student and offer other prompts, such as: “What color or colors is this emotion?”, “How would this emotion feel to touch? Add those details.”, and “What would this emotion tell you that you need?” or “What message does this emotion have for you?” At the very least, the student’s response offers me insight into how I can tailor my support and honour the student’s unique human needs.

Of course, learning for the entire classroom community flows with greater ease when all members remain closer to an optimal state of relaxed awareness. As a Yoga therapist, visualizations and guided imagery played – and continue to play – a significant role in my internal transitions.

I continued to learn how to support mental and emotional wellness for my family. When tools worked, I became curious about their impact as classroom practices. As another example, I began setting aside a few minutes, usually in the second half of the day and often during transition times, for guided imagery-type work. This practice includes breath work and other components, such as building resilience, increasing connection and body-awareness, and building psychological safety. As we continue throughout the academic year, we build to increased awareness, validating and connecting to emotion within the body. Through the breath, we stretch into mindfulness practices such as observing emotion without judgement, while understanding we can choose to observe them and then set them aside, or to validate, but ask the emotion to wait. Of course, as a partner to these teachings comes the importance of sharing difficult emotions with friends and adults you trust and who care for you.

Exploring: New Perspectives on Dysregulation

With deeper understanding of emotions, I came to view dysregulation as an opportunity for connection. The understanding that screaming usually means that a person does not feel heard is invaluable as a parent and a teacher. I do not need to agree with a perspective to validate the perspective. When I verbalize what a child is showing me or telling me through repetition of the request or naming an emotion, I am offering the child foundational pieces towards emotional intelligence. With young children, I am often a detective, reflecting aloud on the events of their day, narrating, and noticing how scary it must have been to have a big fall off the climber and to have such a painful scrape. At times, my detective work leads to a verbal observation of just how hurtful a social interaction was, or how challenging a particular classroom task felt. Other times, I do not know – and neither does the child. I still remind myself, my children, and my students that “however you feel is okay. Feelings are messengers. We listen and learn from them and then

let them fly away.” It is equally true that sometimes, the mantra must include acceptance of emotion with limitations on words or behaviour.

From the positivist avoidance and invalidation of emotion (Jaggar, 1989), I concluded that “challenging” emotions must be dangerous. Even a decade later, my tissues and neurons remember the psychosomatic experience of urgency that accompanied intense emotion. The impression of urgency was exponential paired with any kind of “crisis” thoughts. There have been times when I have felt the crisis urgency to force the minutes for every expectation of that fifth science strand so acutely that I have made great sacrifices in other domains of learning. As I was a proponent of the neoliberal discourse at the time, the sacrifices were usually in the arts or outdoor or collaborative times.

When I approached life from an ontological position of rigidity and control, expressions of intense emotion in a classroom were unacceptable. I had not developed the emotional intelligence to accept and navigate uncertainty. I still remember discovering the subconscious belief that I was responsible for “fixing” the challenging emotions of my students, though I struggle to understand this thinking now.

I feel I would be remiss at this point if I did not acknowledge that welcoming emotion comes with what one could perceive as “risk.” In my classroom, I do not promote the dysregulated, emotional sharing potentially more common to counselling, yet I have learned the importance of validating emotion. Yes, it is difficult to focus on academics in the face of a child’s meltdown, and I maintain that successful academic achievement must remain a goal of education. However, as Tranter et al. (2018) explain – and as I know from classroom experience – when emotional needs are unmet, a child will struggle to learn. Noddings (2012) reminds me that providing this type of care must be the foundation to classroom learning. What are we to do

then, as educators? It is true that we are not psychologists, social workers, doctors, physiotherapists, or the parents.

I wish I had many, absolutely *right* answers to offer to the challenges educators face within dysregulated classrooms. In the face of student dysregulation challenges, I offer what I have. I offer my peace and I stay regulated, because I no longer view the emotions of others as dangerous (barring, of course, physically threatening situations). I validate the emotions being presented, and I work to de-escalate the emotions – not through control, but through listening and setting empathetic limits. When a child is “picking a fight,” I understand this as insecurity and fear seeking release. Often, that release is anger.

In the first half of my teaching career, I could not have supported emotional awareness as it was not a part of my epistemology. In this latter half, I build emotional awareness into breath work, visualizations, dialogue, social learning, and – when necessary – de-escalation. I understand that some children have no other opportunity within their life circumstances for this learning. Of course, this learning falls outside of standardized curriculum delivery.

Questioning: Standardization

There are many proponents of standardized testing, and I agree that there can be a benefit to these processes. In my practice, I see that standardized testing can give a baseline glimpse at students' possible capacities within given subject areas. Placed within this critique of neoliberalism in education, however, standardized testing must also come under review. Standardized testing measures only an extremely specific skill set. Within this critical research, I wonder what an increase in scores indicates: are the tests measuring the ability to take tests? The ability to narrow oneself to narrowed curriculum? The socio-economic class of a student's

home? Alfie Kohn (2000) takes this argument further, asserting that a *rise* in scores is, in fact, cause for concern, as we must remember that there is an inherent sacrifice of other learning.

Kohn (2000) elaborates further:

But here's the problem: even results corrected for SES are not very useful because the tests themselves are inherently flawed. This assessment is borne out by research finding a statistical association between high scores on standardized tests and relatively shallow thinking. One such study classified elementary school students as "actively" engaged in learning if they went back over things they didn't understand, asked questions of themselves as they read, and tried to connect what they were doing to what they had already learned; and as "superficially" engaged if they just copied down answers, guessed a lot, and skipped the hard parts. It turned out that the superficial style was positively correlated with high scores on the Comprehensive Tests of Basic Skills (CTBS) and the Metropolitan Achievement Test (MAT). (p. 1)

As an educator, I hope to teach in ways that promote the "engaged" learning described in Kohn's quote. I support learner strengths and increase engagement when I design math assessments with the choice of manipulatives, word problems, and technology all looking to meet the same curricular expectation. When I can offer the choice to write a paragraph, prepare a presentation, or make a project, all geared toward demonstrating the same learning, I begin to know my students and I support them in knowing themselves as learners.

Coming to know themselves as learners, students begin the process of reflexivity that underpins critical thinking. I contend that promoting critical thinking requires me, within my classroom practice, to encourage my students to check themselves for understanding, and to question and challenge what they are reading and learning. Critical thinking requires me to

privilege the kind of interconnectedness in learning seen in holistic education (Miller, 2019). In a sense, this reflexivity relies on skills like those I am describing in building self-awareness toward increased regulation. I needed this reflexivity as I journeyed into motherhood and began to question the superficial, standardized expectations I held of myself and of my daughter.

I look around the house. The broom beckons me to dance, the clean dishes wish to be released from their cage, and the washed laundry cries out to go home. There is a trade-off to be made now. I envy those other moms who seem to be able to accomplish “the perfect home.” I remind myself of my current affirmations: “The point of power is the present moment,” (Hay, 1999) and “I am more than enough.” The dinner ingredients are already out; bellies will be full of nutrition today.

My daughters’ giggles spill over from the table. Their apples and peanut butter are devoured. I make my choice for the present moment. My deal with myself is that I will come back to finish one of the three other “less necessary” tasks later today. I let go of the chains of society’s expectations and don, instead, the cloak of the human my children see in me. Lighter now, I burst into the kitchen. Shrieks and giggles erupt as we flee and tumble, chase, and delight in one another. (Lived 2016, Recorded 2021)

This vignette is difficult to analyze. I think it is because it encompasses so many trials, shifts, and new frameworks I have embodied. Through motherhood, I became what Noddings (2012) refers to as a “relational carer” (p. 773), meaning that I began to prioritize connection and listening versus being a “virtue carer” (p. 773), when I assumed I knew best. This transformation was so profound in my home that it became my new ontology and impacted my teaching identity as well. I maintain connection with my students when I show clearly that I have heard and seen their uniqueness, even when I cannot meet their needs.

Connection fosters regulation, peace, and engaged learning. Noddings (2012) acknowledges the struggle, however, in prioritizing this type of interaction in a classroom.

To provide clarity, Noddings (2012) adds:

In talks with teachers about this approach, I am often asked how they can ‘do this’— establish a climate of care— ‘on top of all the other demands’. My answer is that

establishing such a climate is not 'on top' of other things, it is underneath all we do as teachers. When that climate is established and maintained, everything else goes better. (p. 776)

Noddings corroborates my experiences that humans, particularly small ones, can only be at their best when their needs, their selves are validated. This is the lens through which I now view all of my interpersonal interactions, with extra attention to teaching and mothering.

This vignette also highlights my shifting epistemology from the extrinsic knowledge of priorities to the intentionality that developed when I gave myself permission to seek my priorities from *within*. I moved away from an ontology of perfectionism: away from the belief that I could not accomplish all that I believed to be a standardized ideal. Instead, I moved in a direction of building relationship and staying regulated within intentional choice. Within the context of neoliberalism, I believe perfectionism to be the most intriguing aspect of this vignette from both an epistemological and ontological perspective.

Standardization supports a narrow, "only one right way" belief system. Coupled with competition – yet another component of the neoliberal narrative – it is easy to see how I may have fallen into a dysregulated scramble. Competition indicates there *must* be scarcity. The understanding that I had of grading, as a student, centered around figuring out what the narrow standard was, and performing as closely to that standard as possible to obtain the "perfect" grade.

As I have mentioned, perfectionism worked well for me within the academic setting. Outside of the academic setting, however, my emotional dysregulation meant that my relationships stayed at a more superficial level. I had trouble shifting my thought patterns to be open to new possibilities. In the ontological shift away from standardization, I learned to seek

that which is life-giving, and learned that there are almost always multiple “right” answers. I became better able to respond to the diverse needs others presented to me; I wanted to stretch for the prize of lifetime connection with my daughter.

With this way of being in the world, epistemological freedom opens to me. The anxiety inherent in struggling for the elusive “right” way releases when I connect to multiple ways of knowing to decide what the best decision is for me. The surrender of tension bridges into the second half of the vignette. A completely unexpected benefit of my new ontology is play. I have learned that play is only possible within a space of psychological safety, or relaxed regulation. While I can imagine myself and my life without play, having lived that ontology for a few decades, I would never wish to return. Humor allows me to sidestep power struggles with my students and my children. Without imagination, I cannot dream of new possibilities. Critical thinking disappears into “one right way” and the human spirit is dulled.

My pile of marking is nearly complete. Most of my students have achieved in the expected ways. I furrow my brows. My rubric was excellent; clarity in all the boxes and clear descriptors with success criteria and learning goals included. Yet, there is this one assignment. I chew my lip and reread her words. Her work does not fit in my boxes! She's served up stylistic sophistication with a side of atrocious grammar. Frustration builds, and I am paralyzed. My student slides into the divide of beautiful intentions and “not-there-yet” execution. I grapple with what professional means – and what humanity means. (Lived 2009, Recorded 2020)

I was into my thirties before I began to trouble the notion of perfection. I had bound myself so tightly to standardization that I believed there to be only one right way and I pushed, at times too hard, to mold myself to it. The grading vignette above comes from a time of questioning what the best interests of my students were, and how to serve them best. I had begun to feel the discord I now associate with seeking to rank students, and the pressure I feel around assigning grades that students and families can perceive as final. Slater and Griggs (2015) clarify this concern, stating that,

The dual-action disciplinary technologies of standardized curricula and high-stakes testing coerce teachers to adopt pedagogies that satisfy the performance expectations of the neoliberal managerial state, and subject students to demoralizing practices that sort them into categories of success or failure that confer grave social consequences. (pp. 438-439)

As I continue to teach within a framework that values summative evaluation, making my philosophical position explicit to students has become a top priority in increasing the humanity in my classroom. I share with students that I value their process over their finished product, and I seek out their intentions. I remind them often, in dialogue and woven into breath work, that “we can do hard things.” Early into my time with any given class, I am quick to share with them that I expect they will make mistakes because if they do not, they are simply repeating the same skills they have already mastered. Learning involves risk. We have different strengths and growth points as individuals, and we are on individual timelines. I expect my students to grow from wherever they begin. As such, we can build a classroom community where we are safe to play, explore, and learn.

This thesis is, in part, an exploration of the “non-standardized” practices I have developed to respond to student needs. Consequently, I have focused exclusively on that which falls outside of neoliberalism. The grading vignette offers me the opportunity to clarify that I include many “conventional” classroom practices, as well. When a rubric is the best tool to support student achievement, I develop a rubric with confidence. The difference is in the widening of my awareness of other choices. When I choose to administer a math test to Grade 8 students, I do so with intentionality and because I believe it to be the fairest, best-fit practice for the outcome I hope to promote in learning.

I persist in my questioning, however, as the dominant discourse is the one most familiar by virtue of its dominance. Rasco (2020) illuminates the concern of subjective standards becoming entrenched:

The danger lies in the fact that even from within the very field of education we accept and think that without standards education might become a weak, confused and arbitrary process. But it is precisely standards which obliterate any process of dialogue, finding, innovation or creativity in education. (p. 245)

To me, this quote highlights the tension underlying the question of standardization. At times, I struggle professionally with the balance of evaluating according to standards and yet honouring creativity and intention. I begin to wonder, however, if the honouring of both, *together*, may well be enough. I have developed a professional identity that prioritizes service to students, from a place of relational care. This professional identity supports the use of diverse strategies for diverse students. I do not have to exclude the neoliberal tools – though I also have other possibilities.

For example, there are times I choose to forego the more “positivist” type assessments or evaluations, and to focus on learning process. Again, this decision is made with intentionality towards the greatest benefit to learning. An example is the integration of small group revision cycles into my writing programs. Before I complete any summative evaluation, I use the formative feedback I glean through student writing to identify areas of strength and areas of need. From there, I disrupt the neoliberal position of competition by differentiating into small group or individual instruction based on need. It is true that my students produce fewer pieces of writing over a term. It is also true, however, that I find professional fulfillment in balancing grading and humanity with this practice of non-standardized, acquiescent, process-based

teaching. The process-based teaching tends to yield higher quality work as well as more confident writers. It is the best choice for that context.

Breathing Together: Theory Prioritizing Connection

My eyes scan the horizon. The mustards, crimsons, and ochres of fall blend into the landscape of the rushing 403. There is a heaviness in the truck with us.

I maneuver the grey truck into its parking space, surrendering to what I expect will come next. In stillness now, my eyes slide to the right and meet my daughter's sad, blue gaze. Without speaking, we acknowledge her resignation. The heaviness coalesces into the awareness we share. Usually the news is scary; often there is more surgery. We have come to expect challenging news.

Now, though, I am present. Gently rubbing my daughter's fingers, I remember the belly-churning nerves of early visits. I'm still not sure how to go about making medical decisions for another person's body – decisions with risks on both sides – without some nerves jangling. Somewhere in the jangle, though, an orchestra has developed. My daughter's unique path has emerged out of years of doctor's office decisions.

Her hand still warm in mine, I relax. Breathe. My fledgling practice of gratitude takes over: "I am grateful to have medical experts available." I have wished many times over for elements of her life to be different, to be easier. I no longer wish that. She understands in the squeeze of my hand that it's time to go in. I cannot choose her path, nor should I. I put my nerves aside, and marvel in the trust she places in me to walk her path alongside her. (Lived 2015, Recorded 2020)

Again, this vignette highlights my shifting ontology: the change from a place of fear and control to a place of regulation and connection. My personal epistemology is turning away from a single source of dominant knowledge towards many ways of knowing and perceiving. Yet, this process of increasing awareness, of questioning and re-defining love, has not been linear. I wish it had been as simple, for me, as trading one list of worldviews for another. But might there be beauty – contentment, even – in seeking to stretch into what serves from each of the paradigms? Earlier I wondered: what would I create in this space? I begin to believe that perhaps it is not so much about filling spaces I have created as it is about learning to be curiously comfortable stretching into many possibilities. From there, maybe I can offer an abundance of practices and experiences relationally.

Even this far into my autoethnographic research, I find it difficult to theorize around my current ontological and epistemological positions. These positions do not fit neatly into a box. Might the box simply be an illusion? I have positioned this vignette within the context of dysregulation and standardization because of the emotions I experienced with each doctor's visit. I was so accustomed to the perceived comfort of standardization that I did not wish to explore into what non-standardized choices could look like. Yet, I was thrust into a situation that would require me to stretch. A few years would pass before I would accept that my daughter's unique path reflects her individual journey. In that time, my ontology came to include a deeper spiritual focus. I wanted to lead my family in life-giving directions. Again, my reflexivity grew, and I began to integrate the critical paradigm into my ontology and the ways I viewed the world. While there are many right paths, there are some wrong ones, too. Thinking critically through a lens of wellness and connection helps guide my intentionality within my home and my classroom. I seek the direction of peace.

Exploring: Reflexivity and Liberation in Critical Pedagogy

The goal of critical pedagogy is to effect change and to educate towards a more democratic society (Darder et al., 2017). I find that when I am dysregulated and narrow, I seek out standardization rather than stretching into the lofty possibilities of critical pedagogy. When I was younger, I struggled to listen deeply to others because I did not yet know how to listen to myself. When I am connected to my body, emotions, reflexivity, and spirit, I am better able to be whole and support students from a relational position. bell hooks (1994) insists upon educators' commitment to being whole and present as foundational pieces in building liberatory education. Liberatory education requires being open to possibilities, questioning, and exploring. In my own states of dysregulation, these were not concepts I prioritized. Throughout this chapter, I have

discussed the importance of self-regulation in the ability to learn. Self-regulation and emotional awareness work to support each other. It is my wish to support my students in wellness and academic learning; emotional awareness is a foundation to both aspects.

Shudak (2014) elaborates on the nature of critical pedagogy, reminding me that, “Again, it is a way of being in the classroom and not a method of teaching” (p. 997). Teaching relationally is my way of being in the classroom. When I support regulation and creativity alongside quality academics through my classroom practices, I increase the likelihood that I can connect with every child. I agree with Shudak’s (2014) assessment that critical pedagogy is not a method of teaching. I believe that to effect change within my classroom – the goal of critical pedagogy – I must consider and respond to the wide variety of human needs that are presented to me. I do this through listening to all needs, whether I agree with how they are expressed or not. I do this through thoughtful consideration of how to choose the best tools and strategies, neoliberal or otherwise, for the specific humans I have in my classroom. I do this through dialogue and listening, rather than assuming I know best for all. I do this through my intention to continue learning and staying open to new possibilities, as Noddings (2012) suggests is crucial to being a caring teacher.

Tranter et al.’s (2018) *Third Path* echoes many of the principles I describe in this work, as a teacher who cares relationally. This study focuses on well-being in the classroom, moving towards engaged learning. The emphasis within this work on *all* layers of wellness – emotional, psychological, physical, and spiritual – matches my ontology. In the words of the authors,

The Third Path represents a different paradigm in education, its goals, and the role of the educators. It seeks to place both academics and well-being at the center, with the assumption that neither need be in competition with the other. On the contrary, the Third

Path holds that academics and well-being are inextricably linked, when approached properly. (p. 4)

My experiences as a mother support these scholars. When I did not know how to support the emotional needs my daughter brought to me, her dysregulation escalated. For engaged learning, at home or in the classroom, curiosity and creativity must be mentally and emotionally available through regulation. Engaged learning supports strong academic achievement. Academic achievement and wellbeing are interdependent and work together towards emancipation.

The Space Between Breaths: Widening

As I wish for a greater good for all, how can I keep what I have learned to myself? This privileging of reflexivity, connection, and of humanity, has become part of my ethical code. In the next and final chapter, I discuss the challenges of upholding this relational code while conducting my research.

To respond to myself: I believe that yes, when I am regulated, I can respond creatively and be open to further possibilities. I can choose to incorporate neoliberal tools when they are the best fit. I can also investigate other paradigms. I began this research viewing this space as liminal, with neoliberal constraints at one pole and the sacredness of humanity at the other. I begin to wonder if, rather than liminal space, I am referring to the widened ontology and epistemology my lived experiences have created in me. From these widened spaces, I can more easily consider the varied facets of critical pedagogy. In the final chapter, I explore intentionality and the deeper connection of more harmonious relationships offered within critical pedagogy.

In my classroom, I conclude that I began to build emotional awareness with students through listening, naming, and validating. Though certainly a necessary component of relationship, the empathy I offer students contributes to emotional awareness and regulation,

theirs and mine. From a more emotionally regulated space, students took more risks and shows greater engagement in learning. Together, we learned more and laughed more.

CHAPTER FOUR: THE SPACE BETWEEN BREATHS – POSSIBILITIES

To conclude this research, I summarize the shifting stages I have experienced, both personally and professionally. I explore relationship through the lens of neoliberalism and critical pedagogy, as well as the ethical concerns around relationship in autoethnography. I reflect on my research questions and the impact of this research on me, my family, and my students. I become open to the liberation available in intentional possibilities.

This chapter also is the investigation of my research sub-question: *How and in what ways have I explored relationship in my classroom practice?*

Letting the Breath Flow

One, two, three goes my daughter's closed fist on my thigh. Her tiny fingers are curled into a fist. She is full of frustration. Agony washes over me; this is not the relationship I want with her! Breath catching, I accept that I built this relationship. The slumping of my shoulders holds the experience of powerlessness. I do not know what to do now. (Lived 2012, Recorded 2021)

Many months of Yoga softens my neural highways and down-regulates my nervous system. In the freshness of spring, my glass bead bracelet keeps me anchored to love and compassion. The beads, blue and bronze, patterned by my daughter, became more than symbolic. I reprioritize and center, as if touching their smooth, cool surface leads me to a well-spring of new possibilities. I seek out new ways of thinking and doing, training myself and striving for my family. Within my center, ephemeral and fragile, intention grows as fears recede. (Lived 2014, Recorded 2021)

This vignette couplet captures the threads moving through this work. Reflexivity brought me an awareness that my relationship with my daughter was not what I wanted for us. With this knowledge, I began to seek out alternative perspectives to take, different thoughts to think, and alternative ways of relating to her. My daughter made the bracelet in this vignette: turquoise, gold, and deep blue glass beads. She offered it to me as a Mother's Day gift when she was 4 years old.

When I rubbed the beads with my fingertips – which I recall doing multiple times every day – I was using my physical body to first return to breath, and then, to regulate my nervous system and emotions. I have come to see that in this research, I am describing how I began in my head, and then slowly incorporated first my body and breath, and then, my emotional being. In my personal life, the next step was an interrogation of relationships, using the reflexivity of my “head.” The more I learned, the more intentional I became in the way I responded to the present and to the decisions that lay ahead for the future. For me, intentionality encompasses choice, reflexivity, and learning/information/education. Intentionality is a major theme in this work. Through it, I can be more present and more confident in my decision-making towards a future that I desire. In the face of life’s uncertainties, I feel comfort in this intentionality.

In this closing chapter, I attempt to answer my research question: “How have my lived experiences impacted my teacher identity and classroom practice?” The preceding chapters have been my process work, exploring how my lived experiences have impacted my professional identity and teaching practice. Further to this exploration, however, I need to delve deeper into inter-personal relationships. Relationship in the methodology of autoethnography carries unique responsibilities, which I discuss next. I follow with a brief exploration of relationship, viewed through critical pedagogy and neoliberal ideology, and then my own shifts in this area.

Letting the Breath Flow: Ethics in Autoethnography and the Pitfalls of Memory

The air is cool today, unseasonably cool for July. I sit on the black deck chair, once again, with my laptop balanced precariously. Beside me rests the remains of my peanut butter and raspberry jam toast, my violet research journal, and an underwater swim mask – you know, the kind that covers your nose. I am immersed in this telling and interpretation of my story when my daughter joins me.

She plops down beside me, stretching out her long legs. In this quiet space, I begin the process of requesting her permission. Tentatively, I remind her of the profound impact she has had on me as a person. She nods. She knows this already. Secure in her role as one of my teachers, she listens as I share that part of my thesis is her story, too. Does she mind that I am sharing

information about the reasons I needed to grow? Is it alright that I mention some of the ways that she is unique, and what that has meant for me?

She considers. I am relieved when she returns to the conversation with questions. My daughter asks that I leave her name out, and that specific medical details be kept private. Inside of me a calm builds in this negotiation. I needed this reciprocity. We agree that she will have full access to the final draft, and that I will publish this work under my own family name, different than hers.

I intend for this to be an ongoing conversation. After all, this work is second and my relationship with her is first. I clarify this position to her, and she smiles. I remind her that I will never intentionally hurt her. A crepe-scented hug later – she loves to try new recipes – I am again awash in deep connection. (Lived 2021, Recorded 2021)

The ethical considerations of autoethnography can be very complex. There are challenges in both researcher vulnerability risks and relational ethics (Ngunjiri et al., 2010). Ellis (2007) defines *relational ethics* as a way of relating that "...requires researchers to act from our hearts and minds, acknowledge our interpersonal bonds to others, and take responsibility for actions and their consequences" (p. 3). For the purposes of this research, I focus on the inter-personal perspective common in autoethnography (Edwards, 2021; Turner, 2013). I conceptualize relational ethics as a prioritization of connection through honest, open, developmentally appropriate dialogue and negotiation with my daughter. That said, I acknowledge that my choices regarding ethics are also for myself and I endeavour to carry them over into a unified professional identity as well. As an autoethnographer, I write my life; thus, friends and family are implicated. To add to the complexity, my memory of any given event will be unique to me. I will follow with an exploration of ethics in autoethnography. There are ethical concerns to address in this methodology around both memory and relationship.

As I highlighted in this vignette, one of the roles I see within parenting is that of protector. Many ethical considerations arise when I contemplate sharing this work and upholding my role as protector. How can I be sure that my daughter will find these disclosures acceptable, now *and* as she matures? I hope that she perceives this research as a testament to her impact on

my life. I hope that our relationship will become more intimate as we continue to dialogue around her needs, boundaries, and comfort. Ellis (2007) recounts similar worries when contemplating and confronting the ethics in writing about family members. Ellis (2007) seems to arrive at a point of comfort, sharing that a closeness emerged out of her struggle to write autoethnography ethically. Given that this research is motivated by my stretched perception of the gifts of connection in relationship – and the resultant learning – I am attending to the relational ethics as ardently as possible.

As I outlined in the vignette, it is important to me to engage my daughter in conversations around my research. Medford (2006) recommends that autoethnographers write as though the research will be read by those implicated. In sharing my writing with my daughter, I am closer to a position of full disclosure. I wish for my daughter, both of my daughters, to see and know their incredible role as catalysts of change for me. I cannot know how my experiences will be read. I must trust that in seeking to preserve my daughter's dignity, and to honour our sacred connection, she will see my love for her in this work.

Arthur Frank (as quoted in Ellis, 2007) says:

We do not act on principles that hold for all times. We act as best we can at a particular time, guided by certain stories that speak to that time, and other people's dialogical affirmation that we have chosen the right stories.... The best any of us can do is to tell one another our stories of how we have made choices and set priorities. By remaining open to other people's responses to our moral maturity and emotional honesty...we engage in the unfinalized dialogue of seeking the good. (p. 23)

This quote parallels my research in its focus on stories around making choices and setting priorities. I have attempted to trace the ontological and epistemological challenges I have lived

through my vignettes. My stories do speak to a time in my life. As the quote above highlights, it is likely that perspectives will shift around stories over time, my own included. This quote brings another ethical consideration of autoethnography to the forefront: memory. Is seeking the “good” enough in the uncertainties of memory? I have based this research project on stories and memories as my data. Is this an ethical way to proceed?

Though a proponent of autoethnography, Chang (2016) warns of the dangers of using memory and recall exclusively as data sources. Holt (2003), too, warns of the challenges when a researcher's subjectivity is the only source for data. Yet, I do not know of a way to access the internal experiences of human beings within socio-cultural contexts *without* relying on memory. Thus, I proceed while acknowledging the limitations of memory.

When self-awareness has me investigate current experiences and find multiple layers and nuances of perception, how can I hold to one version of the past? This is a valid concern for me as an autoethnographic researcher, as highlighted by Freeman (2015). Many scholars, such as Poulos (2021), openly recognize that memory is unreliable. Poulos (2021), however, contends that memory is still formative in our construction of meaningful narrative. To this, I would add that memory offers me a way to relate to the past. For me, memory also provides clear and powerful reminders of my deep desire to do better for the people I love and care for. More poignant still is the memory of the pain of loved ones, which serves as a powerful motivation in moments when choosing love is a struggle.

That memory is an imperfect tool is without refute. Though, might the degree of perfection of the tool depend on its intended use? In this case, my memories serve as stepping stones, bridging my lived experiences and the socio-cultural context of myself within education. Without memory, I could not know just how different my thoughts of 10 years ago are to those

of today. Holding steady to my goal of exploring the impact of my lived experiences on my professional identity and classroom practice, memory becomes a way to compare, allowing me to ground my lived experiences in time and space (Poulos, 2021).

Breathing Together: Relationship Within Critical Pedagogy

In my personal relational shifts, I began to first see – and then, question – power dynamics. My relational critical thinking began with a necessary re-evaluation of the power dynamics I held with my daughter. The ripples from there were many and far-flung. Most of the relationships in my life, with both people and other facets of life, underwent examination. According to Freire (2005), this is not unexpected, as a critical consciousness demands a grander and deeper type of “radical” love (p. xlvi). I examined my thoughts, words, actions, and values to move towards greater connection and peace within all aspects of my life and being. I am surprised now in this writing that I did not expect these shifts to carry into my professional identity and practice. Somehow, though, I was amazed when I returned to a classroom after a few years on leave with my second daughter. I walked back into teaching as an entirely different person. As is required in critical pedagogy, I underwent the process of examining power in relationship with my students. Desiring a partnership based on connection, particularly in instances of correction, I changed many of the ways I interact. I began to validate and sought understanding of students’ perspectives and priorities. I corrected more softly, from a place of positive regard. I assumed the best of my students and looked for their strengths. As could be foreseen, these changes had a profound impact on my interactions with students. With greater connection in my classroom came greater satisfaction professionally.

Gratitude is relationship. Stripping away layers, smoothing edges, gratitude flows and humbles. With grateful eyes, I notice the softness of my daughter’s hair. Before, I would have noticed only the peanut butter clumped up in the shorter strands on the left. With grateful eyes, I slow into

presence with her. The noise of life falls away, and I see and love her as she is. I stroke her softness and melt humbly into the only moment that ever exists.

Outside of thought, she sighs and pulls me closer. Her embodied gratitude is effortless. It is a boat that rocks us both. In the gift of her embrace, I am seen and loved as I am. In the reflecting pool of my child's gaze, I am better able to see and love myself. Gratitude flows, humbles, and connects. (Lived 2016, Recorded 2020)

This vignette illustrates my shifting intentions. The way I saw my role as a mother, and later as a teacher, was changing. To grow into these changes, I would need to cultivate new qualities in myself. I rely again on Paulo Freire's (2005) work, *Teachers as Cultural Workers*, to explore one of these. I admit to finding comfort in Freire's view that these are "qualities acquired gradually through practice. Furthermore, they are developed through practice in concurrence with a political decision that the educator's role is crucial" (p. 71). I needed to decide that the changes required of me could matter. Now, I find it exciting to contemplate how I might grow through further teaching practice.

In this book, Freire (2005) speaks to the importance of humility, particularly as it pertains to the ability to listen to others. For me, the deepening of relationships meant a shift to listening with the intention to seek an understanding of a perspective different than my own. Alongside humility and other qualities, Freire also urges the progressive educator to cultivate courage. Opening my identity – which was protectively rigid – required courage. I would need to learn to "be in control of my fear, to educate my fear, from which is finally born my courage" (Freire, p. 76). With that courage in place, I can fight and love (Freire). I learned a new depth of love when I chose to fight for my relationship with my daughter. I acknowledge that fear played an important role also.

Questioning: Performativity

This exploration of relationality is a crucial final piece in my spiral of head, body, emotions, and relationships. Freire (2005) has provided me with insight into relationships

through a critical pedagogy lens. I am also including a short exploration of *performativity*, a component of neoliberalism, as it pertains to relationship in teaching. Ball (2003) offers this definition of *performativity*:

Performativity is a technology, a culture and a mode of regulation that employs judgements, comparisons and displays as means of incentive, control, attrition and change based on rewards and sanctions (both material and symbolic). The performances (of individual subjects or organizations) serve as measures of productivity or output, or displays of 'quality', or 'moments' of promotion or inspection. As such they stand for, encapsulate or represent the worth, quality or value of an individual or organization within a field of judgement. (p. 216)

Ball elucidates a contradiction within performativity. The contradiction lies within the time and effort given and required for differing types of activities. Activities that are at the core of teaching, such as working directly with students, and planning and research for curriculum delivery, are termed "first order" (Ball, p. 221). Performativity has brought about an intensification of "first order" responsibilities. Paradoxically, however, performativity also demands effort and time sacrificed to the care of the more visible, or performance, aspects of professionalism.

Within the performative expectations of educational professionalism also fall what Ball (2003) refers to as the "second order activities" (p. 221). Examples within this designation are "accounting for task work or erecting monitoring systems, collecting performative data and attending to the management of institutional 'impressions'" (Ball, p. 222). In this exploration of process and outcome, I question the rationale of performativity. Is education simply a means to

an end? What happens to relationship when I teach towards performance-based goals? What if students take longer to learn? What about students with special needs?

I am concerned that relationship could be a casualty of performativity. What happens to the foundational processes that build engaged learning when the educator's focus shifts to the "show?" Dadvand and Cuervo (2020) share my concerns that:

schools' caring practices driven by performative agendas fail to respond to the more complex relational needs of some students. The mismatch between the caring intentions of the institution and the actual needs of the students leads to relational tension paving the way for the breakdown of the caring relationships. (p. 139)

I can only speak from my own experience: I believe process and relationship to be foundationally important to outcome, and my experience tells me that formal education can (must) have both.

The Space Between Breaths: Removing the Labels with Intentionality

Legs folded, spine straight, I sit. Breath flows. It's funny how in meditation, I drip simultaneously more into my body and deeper into the folds of my grey matter. With my worldly blinds closed, experience bubbles. Brain gurgling, I rest back into my center and view the parade of the day's moments. The meditation works; the perspectives of me I imagine others may hold foam over into consciousness. I visualize my daughter's carefree giggle collapsing, interrupted by my control. I rise. The shine of the azure meditation cushion is abandoned in favour of lumpy pink construction paper. I construct both a heart and the human I wish to be in the simple apology I write. Royal blue Crayola marker in hand, I sigh at the 29 apologies I've offered daily for the month already. At the center of me rests a contentment. It is a peace that seeps into cells, words, ways of being, choices. I smile in the quietude of becoming. (Lived 2015, Recorded 2020)

An important theme running through this research is the idea of stretching into new ontology and epistemology. It has been my experience that transformation requires time and energy. For me, considering life, teaching, and learning from varied paradigms can be challenging. Building the self-awareness to be open was a first step. Is openness enough, though? I do not know. From the rigid ontological perspective I lived at the beginning of this work,

perhaps it would not have been for me. Venturing profoundly into the work of becoming, my reflexivity required that I incorporate educated intentionality into the choices I make when moving forward.

Following the idea of becoming, I return now to my research question: How have my lived experiences impacted my teacher identity and classroom practice? I provide a summary of the changes I experienced in my way of being (ontology) and way of knowing (epistemology), as I work towards a conclusion. As these shifts saw me begin in my head and then move into the body, followed by greater emotional balance, this is the order in which I proceed now.

My stomach in knots, I sit through another staff meeting. I breathe. Try to remind myself that I am capable: even when what's being asked feels like a betrayal of what my heart tells me.

Dissonance. Harmful, destructive, immune-stripping stress.

When there is an opportunity to speak, of course, I know and share my high-yield strategies. You want me to demonstrate a "model/think/share/read aloud?" Of course, I'll do it. I am a "model student." There is a right way and a wrong way, and I will do whatever is required to ensure that I will be perfect at the task chosen for me. The language of performativity? Tell me once and I'll implement. I am forever meeting someone else's ideals of perfection. Whatever has been decided by (insert authority here) must be for my and everyone else's benefit in education.

Then, why do I feel so awful?

Sugar, alcohol, adrenaline. These are just part of a teacher's life, right? Naturally, as an academic success story, I brought these ideals into my professional identity – except that fear, pain and joylessness bleed through it. My students must slip on the puddles, sometimes...

More sugar, more alcohol, more adrenaline. Give more. Do more. Achieve the system's desired outcomes. (Lived 2008, Recorded 2020)

This vignette describes my professional starting point. As a young teacher, I approached life and teaching from a positivist perspective. I taught and lived from my head, dismissing other ontologies and epistemologies. At the time, I needed the certainty of knowing that what I was doing was "the best way." It was protective for me.

Ontologically, my identity was narrow. I moved in the world in limited ways, protecting myself through a disconnected, limited definition of professionalism. I knew only a few ways to relate to others. This caused strife in my communication with families of students, though I did

not understand my role at the time. I began to understand when my daughter signaled the need for me to explore the different ontological and epistemological possibilities in other paradigms. Ironically, the value I placed on education, grades, and academic-style learning contributed to my epistemological view that schools were the only source of valid learning (Slater & Griggs, 2015). I was committed to the neoliberal version of formal education, ignoring differing perspectives, such as holistic education (Miller, 2019). Noddings (2012) presents another perspective: “the notion that economic motives should drive schooling undermine the richest aims of education: full, moral, happy lives; generous concern for the welfare of others; finding out what one is fitted to do occupationally” (p. 778).

Perhaps had I considered Noddings' (2012) perspective, I may have begun to reflect on what a “happy life” (Noddings, 2012) constitutes. However, as my self-awareness was still very limited, I did not practice reflexivity yet. I had built an identity, both personal and professional, around academic achievement exclusively. Being “unsuccessful” – or, not knowing the “best” way to accomplish a task, as predetermined by others – in my professional life was too threatening to the identity I had constructed. My classroom practice was structured to the point of rigidity, and I struggled when an alternative was needed or requested. Control was also protective for me.

To be fair to the “me” of this age, I cared deeply about the academic success of my students. I still hold this professional value. A significant difference, however, is that I believed that academics were most important, above all else. My intention to prepare my students for success in the next grade is a piece I have brought with me from this paradigm. At this time, I also planned and worked diligently to identify and address gaps in understanding so that my

students would have the foundations necessary to build their learning. Effective use of diagnostic and formative tools is another valued piece of my current classroom practice from this period.

In reflecting now, I sadly accept that there were students who I did not serve well from this professional identity and with the teaching practices I knew. I presented only the academic side of myself to my students, and that left little room for connection – which I have now come to view as a gift of the profession. To effectively teach more of my students, and interact more positively with their families, I would need to begin the transformation my daughter asked of me. Reflexivity began as I pondered my values. What mattered more: being right or prioritizing relationship? Was the answer situational? How would I respond when the values of another did not match my own? Could I accept learning new ways of being and knowing? Would I begin to choose from a place of intentionality?

Exploring: Blurring the Paradigm Boundaries

Learning to embrace the wisdom held within my body was a first step into opening to new ways. I had accepted that some of the ways I had of interacting and knowing were not producing the results in my life that I desired. My daughter was showing me that I needed new ways of being to be in healthy relationship with her. I learned to relax physically, and then to move my body in creative ways. From there, I learned that I could use my body to deconstruct patterns. This physical way of learning about myself and my world added a new dimension to my epistemology. I began to wonder what other ways of knowing I had excluded. Curiosity bloomed.

As my perspectives widened, I found myself within the interpretivist paradigm – without yet knowing the names or categories associated with the paradigms. The more I learned, the more I became aware of how much I did not know and how limited my understandings were. For a time, I approached every new idea with “Why not?” rather than dismissing a concept simply

because it challenged what I thought I already knew. My daughter began to show me that there were skills she would need in life that I had been unable to teach her – simply because I did not know. I sought out ways to regulate the nervous system through the body and to balance emotions. To teach my daughter, I would need to face many of the protective, yet ultimately destructive, emotional patterns I had built into my identity.

My daughter stares into the mirror. She is 2 years old. Her eyes are wide and questioning. She has noticed that she looks different than other children. I look away. I busy myself avoiding the shame of not having answers for her, of feeling powerless. Struggles are meant to be private; she must learn to be strong. (Lived 2012, Recorded 2021)

My daughter is 5 years old now, and I am journaling around that moment at the mirror. I am alone and a wail of anguish tears free. Acknowledging how my fears and limitations hurt her threatens to drown me. I turned away from a relationship with her. Shadows are cast on former ways of being and doing. I confront the hurt I have caused because I was unwilling to look inside of me.

I think of this place as the “well.” I enter and sink to the depths. Occasionally, I seek out this place – but more often, I find its dark depths through triggers or bodily sensations that tell me it is time for a visit. I used to be afraid of this intangible, deep unknown. Now, I come here with surrender: I have learning to do.

I also come here with peace now. This dive I execute imperfectly brings gifts. My breathe returns to a place of ease. New sensations spread: confidence in myself, comfort in discomfort, resilience.

I wait for the right moment. Not the perfect moment, because I am not allowed an excuse. This time the mirror is witness to the widening of her blue eyes and my tentative, soft smile as I validate her unspoken question. I make space for the conversation, and she knows that, finally, I see and love all of her. Our bodies soften together into bonds of trust. (Lived 2015, Recorded 2021)

In this vignette, I attempt to illustrate my process of listening to my body and emotions. I began using reflexivity to identify where I was narrow and rigid. As awareness grew, becoming reflexive opened me to new perspectives and experiences in life. Reflexivity would bud into intentionality, and I would return to professional practice as a different person.

I returned to a classroom after a few years home with my children and much personal growth work. My professional identity now valued wellness *alongside* academic achievement, and I understood that learning is improved when wellness is prioritized. I intentionally chose to keep many of the practices from my former, positivist identity. Structure and clear expectations are beneficial. Assessment and evaluation tools provide data that allow me to meet unique student needs. I have now added embodiment and movement designed to improve the quality of learning to my teaching toolkit. Depending on the students in the class, I use emotional intelligence and mindfulness concepts to increase regulation towards improving learning.

As this vignette highlights, I benefitted from greater connection with others as my self-awareness grew. I began to relate to others in ways that made my levels of caring more visible and more accessible. This was true both personally and professionally. Experiencing life differently continued to increase my curiosity. When I changed how I responded, my relationships changed. I entered a professional questioning period. How would I decide which pieces of identity to bring with me into the classroom and which practices to include?

For me, the awakening to emotions as indicators of values guided me into the critical paradigm. I was already confident in my professional “head” identity and professional practices. Including feedback from my body, breath, and emotions helped me to stretch into the critical paradigm. For me, emotion signals when I am betraying my values. Thus, emotion indicates when I need to use the reflexivity of my head. Within the critical paradigm, there is a prioritization of questioning dominance, of making visible power structures. Critical pedagogy works towards liberatory action. While my epistemology has shifted to add knowing from embodiment and emotional awareness, I have required my “head” knowledge at every stage of stretching and choosing. It is my head that drives intentionality: my head allows me to decide

what to leave behind and what to select from the possibilities. There is always the possibility that I need to learn something new, as well.

I see now that I have not rejected the positivist paradigm in its entirety. There are times when firm, kind limits are the most effective approach in my home and classroom. There are also times when negotiation brings the greatest benefit. Of course, there are always endless other options that I may not see in the moment, or even know yet. This is also where my head returns. It is my head that functions from that critical place of wondering what I need to learn to smooth my side of an interaction, or to make the material I am attempting to present more accessible to the learner. There may be one best way for a child who is struggling; I may know it, or I may need to lean into the ontology of the interpretivist paradigm and choose curiosity.

Noddings (2012) affirms this finding, noting that:

This kind of disciplinary and interdisciplinary thinking is actually generated by a thoughtful consideration of what it means to be a caring teacher. If we are to take the expressed needs of students seriously, we must continually build our own store of knowledge in order to respond intelligently to their needs and interests (p. 776).

My lived experiences have offered me new ways to listen and respond. I am certain there are many, many more.

Part of my purpose in this work was to trouble neoliberalism in formal education and I have done so. Yet, as I contemplate shifts to my professional identity in this concluding chapter, I see that there has been more adding than there has been rejection. I am grateful for the increased awareness I have now around neoliberalism in education. I am grateful to know the dangers; I am also grateful to have intentionality around my use of neoliberal classroom practices. When I choose to post success criteria, *because it supports children*, I do so with

confidence in my professional decision. Understanding and intentionality in my choices mean that my professional practice is not just teaching one way because that is the only way I know. Stretching into all layers of being means just that: *all* layers of being, my head included. Professionalism means considering using *all* tools at my disposal – yes, even the neoliberal practices critiqued earlier.

Reflexivity towards intentional choice means choosing practices that best serve the learners in the room, awareness to know when I do not know and need to learn more to support a student, choosing efficiency towards academic goals, and prioritizing relationship. Professionalism means being able to position myself in any of the paradigms for any situation and make an informed decision about what will best serve the needs of the student(s) involved. I find great beauty in responding to any circumstance from any of the paradigms, with intentionality towards beneficial outcomes driving my decisions. Feeling capable to respond with skill and clarity brings me the awareness and confidence I seek.

At this point, I reimagine the murkiness that opened this research. Could it be that the murky indicates I need to learn? Perhaps I do not have the skills I need yet. I believe the murky may be a sign of Freire's (2005) "insecure security" or "uncertain certainty" (p. 73). Maybe it is less about labels, and more about continuing to add to my professional repertoire so that I can respond with greater skill, greater professionalism, and greater curiosity. "Uncertain certainty" (Freire, p. 73) leads me to believe that the murky is a place of possibility, where I humbly address what I do and do not *yet* know. I believe it may always feel murky because of the diversity and abundance in humans, relationships, and communities. That said, I know I have developed a greater degree of clarity. I am grateful for the knowledge around paradigms and neoliberalism. Knowing myself better and the education system better guides intentionality.

The Space Between Breaths: Fulfilment Available

In Chapters 2, 3, and 4, I have investigated how and in what ways I use embodiment, emotional awareness, and relationship with the classroom context, as my research questions suggested. The key findings I wish to highlight from each of these sub-questions is that I am able to support self-regulation with these practices and thus, work towards improved student learning. As an additional benefit, I have found that students who feel better, who feel connected, seen and heard, tend to be more willing to collaborate and to seek understanding. I believe this is crucial to meeting the collective, liberatory goals of critical pedagogy.

To answer my over-arching research question, my lived experiences increased my reflexivity and built intentionality into my classroom practice. I am better able to observe what a student or group of students may need to improve learning. I feel more confident in responding to needs and knowing when I need to learn a new way to respond. To me, this shift is a natural extension of the changes to my teacher identity.

Understanding the fulfillment available in prioritizing relationships is the main impact of my lived experiences on my professional identity. I have become a “relational carer” (Noddings, 2012). I make space to see students as unique human beings when I am prepared to meet them in relationship. I come into the classroom with an identity that values how we relate to each other, and I know they will pose unique challenges. My relational identity is the precursor to intentional classroom practices that run the gamut of paradigms. My relational identity fuels the reflexivity of questioning what is needed to support student wellness and learning. This reflexivity and intentionality are the qualities I developed to learn how to love my daughter well, in ways that would be relational for her.

It is through the process of autoethnographic reflexivity that these conclusions have risen and become knowable. At each turn, each revision, this research has pushed the limits of my reflexivity. The process of writing, questioning, reflecting, and re-writing has reminded me of the importance of valuing process-work and outcome together. I did not know at the outset where this work would lead, nor what the conclusions would be. Writing an autoethnography allowed me to preserve the artistic integrity of my work, while making it accessible to different audiences such as teachers, and parents, as well as researchers. There are similarities, after all, in being a parent and being a teacher. The responsibilities are enormous in both roles; the potential for fulfilment can be too. In seeking fulfilment for myself and the children involved, balancing and considering each of the paradigms in moderation seems to offer the most stable and whole learning environment. Learning to give and to receive within these learning/teaching environments brings me fulfilment. From this place, a cycle of reciprocity, learning, and wellness builds. This is a process with the potential to improve the outcomes of education, whether in a formalized school setting or around a kitchen table.

Exploring: Implications

Through this research, my advisor has continued to probe for clarity. She has wondered repeatedly *what*, explicitly, motivated these transformative changes in me. Critical pedagogy insists that reflexivity is a prerequisite to liberatory action – and I agree. My transformation broke open when my fear of losing my daughter to the ideals of a system that was not designed for her outweighed my fear of losing the identity I had built within that system. I felt so acutely the danger of losing what could be a beautiful relationship throughout the course of life that it was greater than my attachment to my identity. Reflexivity and awareness grew into curiosity and intentionality. I find it liberatory to approach new learning with mental, emotional, physical,

and relational space, and to cultivate intentional practices and identity. I have come to understand that ontological and epistemological changes do not have to be only a rejection or acceptance, that they can be an intentional adding of possibility.

Through my Yoga practice, I feel that I have a deeper awareness of the divinity around me. Becoming unified within myself—physically, mentally, and emotionally well— allowed me to stretch into meaningful relationships and out into the world. I understand that I have a role in shaping the world around me and that I can influence others, in negative and positive ways. I wished to have a positive impact and I required skills and perspectives I did not yet have to meet that goal. There is still much to learn collectively, and so I have included implications in this work.

Firstly, I believe that more research is required. Hopefully, there may be subsequent policy changes and professional supports so that educators might have greater access to these career-changing perspectives. I would love to see further emphasis on understanding wellness and connection as precursors to quality learning within the formal education system in Ontario.

However, I realize that I am not a policy maker, nor do I hold a position within education to decide current or future foci. To me, the most important message of this work is that if I can make these types of changes, anyone can. An understanding in Yoga is that no amount of effort is wasted. Small changes matter. I encourage my colleagues to look outside of professional development for the types of exploration I have described in this research. Further, I urge other teachers to seek the fulfilment available through listening, validating, and knowing both themselves and students. The reward is possible with the courage Freire (2005) recommends. Courage may take the form of counselling, coaching, attending workshops, and spiritual guidance. Dare to connect deeply with nature. Sing, dance, paint, draw, or write. Bravery could

look like prioritizing physical and emotional wellness in ways that benefit the body or release emotional burdens, rather than attacking the body and locking emotion away as in some forms of exercise. Be playful. The choices are endless, though I will offer a few of my trusted resources here: Dr. Laura Markham's work for perspectives on connection and regulation, Dr. Siegel's research for deeper understanding of the brain and regulation, the work of Dr. Bob Butera and Erin Byron for perspectives on Yoga, and the following website for additional mindfulness resources – thichnhathanhfoundation.org. Above all, be brave and curious. Be willing to engage deeply with relational care and transformation. Commit to loving yourself and others well.

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Appendix: Definitions

This appendix consists of definitions of key concepts included in this research. These definitions are included in the body of the work, though I have isolated them here for the reader's convenience. For *autoethnography*, I have included two, reflecting different dimensions of the methodology.

Autoethnography, as defined by Ellis et al. (2011):

... a systematic analysis of personal experiences, with a goal of understanding culture (p. 273)

Autoethnography, as defined by Holman-Jones, Adams, and Ellis (2016):

Cultivating reciprocity with and expecting a response from audiences thus becomes the means by which our autoethnographies embrace vulnerability with purpose, make contributions to existing scholarship, and comment on/critique culture and cultural practices. These four characteristics respond to several perceived needs in research: to create particular and contingent knowledges and ways of being in the world that honour story, artfulness, emotions, and the body; to treat experience and individuals with responsibility and care; and to compel all who do, see, and listen to this work to make room for difference, complexity, and change. These characteristics also hint at the history of how and why autoethnography developed as a qualitative, *interpretive*, and *critical* research method. (p. 25)

Critical Paradigm, as defined by Scotland (2012)

As it is culturally derived, historically situated and influenced by political ideology, knowledge is not value free. The critical paradigm asks the axiological question: what is intrinsically worthwhile? Thus, the critical paradigm is normative; it considers how

things ought to be; it judges reality. The utopian aspirations of the critical paradigm may never be realized but a more democratic society may materialize. (p. 13)

Critical pedagogy, as defined by Raithby (2023):

Critical pedagogy is a philosophy of teaching and learning that prioritizes reflexivity towards an increase in liberation from external and internal limitations. The liberatory potential of education is prioritized and cultivated towards the ideal of individual and collective life-affirming intentionality. This liberatory potential is built on reflexivity and self-awareness, which can grow into critical consciousness as the teacher/learner cultivates greater peace first across the layers of being, physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual, and then across the layers of relationship/society.

Epistemology, as defined by Carter and Little (2007):

Epistemology contains values, in that epistemology is normative. It is the basis for explaining the rightness or wrongness, the admissibility or inadmissibility, of types of knowledge and sources of justification of that knowledge. (p. 1322)

Interpretivism, as defined by Scotland (2012):

The ontological position of interpretivism is relativism. Relativism is the view that reality is subjective and differs from person to person (Guba & Lincoln, 1994, p. 110). Our realities are mediated by our senses...Reality is individually constructed; there are as many realities as individuals... The interpretive epistemology is one of subjectivism which is based on real world phenomena. The world does not exist independently of our knowledge of it (Grix, 2004, p. 83). (p. 11)

Neoliberalism, as defined by Brown (2009):

...neo-liberalism...is not only about facilitating free trade, maximizing corporate profits, and challenging welfarism. Rather, neo-liberalism carries a social analysis which, when deployed as a form of governmentality, reaches from the soul of the citizen-subject to education policy to practices of empire. Neo-liberal rationality, while foregrounding the market, is not only or even primarily focused on the economy; rather it involves *extending and disseminating market values to all institutions and social action*, even as the market itself remains a distinctive player. (p. 39)

Ontology, as defined by Leavy (2017):

...a philosophical belief system about the nature of the social world (e.g., whether it is patterned, and predictable or constantly re-created by humans). Our ontological belief system informs both our sense of the social world and, correspondingly, what we can learn about it and how we can do so. (p. 12)

Paradigm, as defined by Guba and Lincoln (1994)

A paradigm is a set of *basic beliefs* (or metaphysics) that deals with ultimates or first principles. It represents a *worldview* that defines, for its holder, the nature of the “world”, the individual’s place in it, and the range of possible relationships to the world and its parts, as for example, cosmologies and theologies do. The beliefs are basic in the sense that they must be accepted simply on faith (however well argued); there is no way to establish their truthfulness. (p. 107)