

**ENTANGLING OUR STORIES: A JOURNEY THROUGH THE EXPERIENCE OF  
ARTS-BASED EDUCATION**

by

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## **Abstract**

Current research literature reveals that there are numerous benefits such as personal growth, academic success and exposure to multiple perspectives surrounding arts-based learning (Brice Heath, 2001; Cole, 2011; Cote, 2010). According to McMahon, Klopper, & Power (2015) it is important for students to “see themselves as decision makers and understand that they can influence their own learning experiences” (p. 19). Additionally, these same researchers emphasize that teachers need to “focus on the learning experience of the students and understand that the greater value of engaging in the arts resides in the students’ art making process” (p. 19). Current research has concentrated predominantly on studies of student experiences at the time that they are enrolled in arts-based programs. My study is unique as I engaged participants retrospectively on their former experiences of learning in an arts-based program. More specifically, my research question asked “what are the effects of attending an arts-based secondary school program on the subsequent lives of six former students, including myself, who graduated two decades ago?” To answer this question, I used narrative inquiry and arts-based methods supported by a social constructivist theoretical framework. More specifically, I analyzed my research through the use of an online whiteboard entitled Miro, and then expressed my findings in the form of a “factional” story (Kallio, 2015) co-narrated by myself and my participants. This ‘factional’ story is told through fictional characters based on my research analysis, and also includes fictional elements. Though participant stories varied, key themes emerged as they grew as people through the experience, carrying with them lingering memories that continue to influence their lives today.

## Acknowledgements

In conducting this study, I have not only reconnected with people who were part of a very important time in my life, but have also come to renew and prioritize my passion for the arts. Their impactful stories have further strengthened my commitment to the arts and arts education, my own creative writing, and my advocacy for access to the arts in schools. And for this, I am grateful.

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This project has put in motion a passion to advocate for the arts not just as a tool for learning, but a tool for student well-being. To those key individuals, namely Kelly Holmes, Michael Wilson and Anna Bowles, I thank you for your care and support as I arrive at the end of this incredible journey. To my family and friends, your support and love was immeasurable as I struggled through the pandemic to continue writing. Thank you for reminding me that I am capable of overcoming any obstacle, and for always believing in me even when I did not. To my beautiful children, I hope that I have set an example for you that dreams can come true. I wish for you to always fight for what you believe and to never give up on the things that you want for yourselves. Regardless of how challenging the journey may seem. I love you endlessly.

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## Introduction

*As I step out onto the stage, clad only in a tight body suit and thin skirt and apron, my hair whisked back with a small tied piece of fabric, my feet bare on the cold, familiar ground, I become less aware of the audience and more in tune with the story. Her story. My story. Our story. I am Yonah, a poor servant girl, consumed by a forbidden love with Japheth, son of Noah, who is a descendant of the race of Cain. I can feel the energy of my cast mates, and can feel real tears streaming from my face as I take a deep breath and begin to sing – softly at first, gradually building into a magnificent crescendo ....*

*Hush now stop trembling  
We've got to do something  
Before all we are is a skeleton crew...*

*I am pleading for our lives, and renouncing my guilt for the floods that will not cease. There is not a sound from the audience, and I can almost feel them holding their breath in the dramatic essence of the moment. They, as well, have been sucked into this space, this story. They are on this journey with me, and it is in this moment that I recognize that fact and fiction are not binaries, but rather can be entangled together in a third space.*

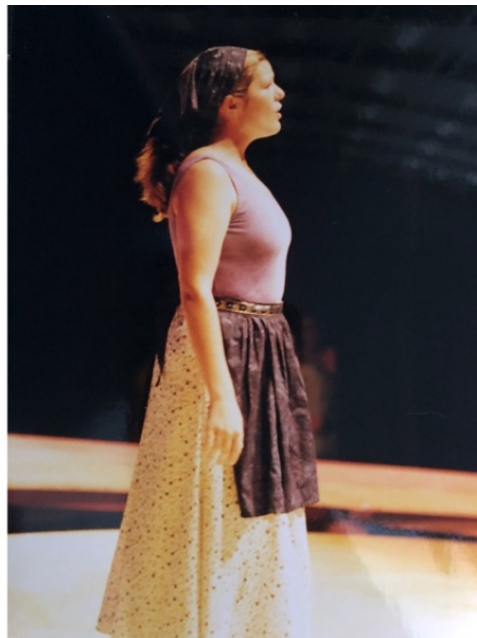


Figure 1: Growing up on the Stage: Me as 'Yonah', Children of Eden

The arts can be a space of great emotion; a space that is both freeing and cathartic. It can challenge you and push you to your limits. It can be a great support, but also open you to vulnerability. It can provide you with socialization, but also time in solidarity. But above all, it is a space that “is still marginalized or even neglected when it comes to such things as allocation of resources, scheduled time, teacher education, etc.” (McCammon & Osterlind, 2011, p. 86). For bystanders looking in, the arts seem like a fun extra-curricular or elaborate hobby. But this could not be further from the truth; the arts are a culture. A way of thinking, being and knowing. A safe space for expression and personal growth. Now, more than ever, I feel it necessary to share an experience that not only shaped me as a person, but allowed me to develop a concrete skill set and tools that I use on a daily basis. Having access to the arts and arts-based ways of thinking has encouraged me to have a different worldview, and has made me conscious of factors such as accessibility in education. As our educational system continues to face financial cuts, I will be a voice supporting arts-based learning, and the potential benefits to students and educators.

As current research literature reveals, there are numerous benefits of arts-based learning such as personal growth, academic success and exposure to multiple perspectives surrounding arts-based learning (Brice Heath, 2001; Cote, 2010). However, what does it specifically offer individually, long after graduation? Does this unique educational experience provide explicit benefits to students, and if so, how does this contribute to the student experience? My research seeks to understand student experiences of learning through the arts, as well as any implications of policy and practice.

This study was rooted in arts-based narrative inquiry, supported by a social constructivist theoretical framework, to explore the stories and experiences of participants who had attended an arts specific secondary school program almost twenty years ago. Academic literature has concentrated predominantly on studies of student experiences at the time that students are enrolled in arts based programs; my study is unique, as I engage participants retrospectively. More specifically, my research question asks, “what are the effects of attending an arts-based secondary school program on the subsequent lives of six former students (including myself) who have graduated two decades ago?”

*How it all began...*

I remember being eight years old, in third-grade, sitting at an old computer in the back of my classroom, completely disengaged from the confines of reality.... just writing. I recall being so lost in my own thoughts that I believed for a moment that I was a character in the story that I was writing, and that I had the ability – the power – to create life. I could construct a world exactly how I envisioned it, with characters and storylines that I designed. This type of power was intoxicating, and I knew that this state of fiction, this trance between the worlds of make-believe and reality, was where I wanted, I needed, to be.

That year I had a very dynamic educator. He was eccentric, teaching outside of the box and pushing all of the boundaries. With him, everything was larger than life, and nothing was conventional. That year was transformational as his passion for theater and his contagious artistic thinking captivated me, and provided a platform for stories to truly come to life. This moment was pivotal in my development, not just as a student, but also as a person. I realized that things did not have to be black and white, as I felt the educational system wanted them to be. They were in fact more beautiful in shades of grey...

From that year on, I submerged myself in the arts, both inside and outside of formal schooling, eventually attending an arts-specific program throughout my secondary years. They were memorable to say the least; I became very close with my fellow students and teachers. We travelled, performing in shows across Ontario, and participated in countless competitions. In addition, we spent our summers in a theater program at the school, for which we received a course credit. When I reflect on that period of my life, I feel joy, and am grateful for an experience that prepared me for who I am today.

I often wonder if these early experiences of education are what triggered a lifelong interest in the arts, orchestrating the spiral of my thoughts from being linear to oftentimes limitless. Was it an innate hunger, waiting to be satisfied, or was it more than that? Did my third-grade educator create a domino effect in my elementary years, or was it a combination of the two? What I do know, is that these experiences of learning through the arts have shifted the way that I engage in learning and teaching, and have inspired me to understand the experiences of others. In true storyteller fashion, I wanted to know and become a part of the narratives of others who have been immersed in learning through the arts. For my doctoral research, I

critically inquired into my own narrative, as well as the narratives of others who have experienced arts-based education, and learned what has been significant about their educational experiences and how that experience influenced their lives today. Throughout this document, you will see short, italicized passages that serve as my internal monologue, shared with you. Through poetics, short inquires and researcher observations I allocate my research diary in a meaningful way, inviting imagination and wonder as my study unfolds. These vignettes are my arts-based contribution entangling my personal narrative, my participant stories and voices.

*A note about the arts-based secondary school...*

A significant point to mention about the arts-based secondary school that I attended is that this program was offered through public education, and was completely free, making it accessible to all students, irrespective of their financial situation. Moreover, this was not an audition-only program and was open to all students, regardless of skill level and background in the arts. There was no audition, no required portfolio, and classes under the arts umbrella were not limited to those enrolled in the program, but rather welcomed students from the regular programming stream as well. It is fair to note that while entry into the program did not require an audition, the theatre and dance companies (which were extra-curricular), were by audition; however, those that did not find a home in the limelight on the stage nestled into secondary spaces, creating set pieces or joining the band. Needless to say, there was a space and place for all students, and an opportunity to explore all facets of the arts as opposed to being restricted to one stream. I enjoyed daily drama, dance and music classes as part of my programming, and was a member of both the dance and theatre companies outside of school hours. In the summer, an extra theatre program was offered, for which we received additional course credit towards the secondary school diploma. Upon graduation, students who completed the required amount of courses in the arts program (and maintained the minimum average in these courses) received an arts diploma which accompanied the OSSD awarded to all students at graduation from an Ontario secondary school. These arts courses were as well offered in my OAC (grade thirteen) year, however this year has since been removed from public school programming.

*We had just made it to regionals. Our theatre group had a long history and reputation for performing well and placing in the top 3 in these competitions. Other schools anticipated*

*competition as our director settled for nothing less than perfection. We were a family; a well-oiled machine that worked tirelessly at rehearsals, and supported each other copiously. This particular performance would be the last of my high school career. It had been five years of shows, training, lessons, and love. We laughed, cried, pushed the boundaries of what was possible and grew as people. This space – these people – was less a theatre group and more a support system. As we came together for the last time to huddle and warm our voices, we could feel the energy surge from our circle. We were going to win one last time and go out on top. We were all uncertain of what was to come next on our individual journeys, but what we knew for sure was that this experience, this company, changed us. Where many began as passive, unsure and under confident ninth graders, we all emerged as autonomous, strong and determined young adults that built ourselves in the safety of this little club. I looked around the circle, soaking up the ambiance from the space. I knew this moment would forever be engrained in my memory, locked away with so many others in a world that I may never again experience. In this state of euphoria, I felt blessed to be a part of something bigger than ourselves.*

According to Alfred Adler (2013), “impressions which grown-ups might consider unimportant or commonplace, may have an enormous influence on the child’s soul and entirely shape his impressions of the world in which he lives” (pp. 44-45). As an educator I often speak to the idea that teachers really have no idea which moments are going to be significant to students. We cannot identify those moments that may shape lives or inform or alter entire courses of action. And this is a very powerful reality. I know in my story, a very significant part of my experience in an arts-based program, was the leadership and support of the educators that opened the realm of possibility. Possibility in learning, possibility in relationships, and possibility within myself. This research is necessary to open the door of possibility to current and future students. So sit back, relax, and I will tell you a story. *Our* story.

In the section that follows I will be reviewing pertinent research in the field of arts education that is relevant to answering my research question. In addition, I will provide an overview of the framework and the lens in which I will be approaching the research, and set the stage for my use of arts-based narratives as a methodology.

## **Review of the Literature**

To answer the question, *what are the effects of attending an arts-based secondary school program on the subsequent lives of six former students (including myself) who have graduated two decades ago*, I will use arts-based narrative inquiry to explore the stories of six former students (including myself). In preparation for my study, I conducted a review of the literature, and have included relevant works and research in the section below. I will begin by exploring how the learning environment can reinforce a meaningful student experience, and how this environment impacts student engagement and learning.

### **Student Experience**

Importance of environment on learning has received substantial support through literature (Dewey, 1938; Bruner, 1996; Davis, 2000). In particular, Torrance (1966) states that student experience is “strongly influenced by the way the environment responds to a person’s curiosity and needs” (p. 168). An engaging and nurturing environment that assists in supporting student learning is encouraging when establishing a healthy educational experience. A review of literature surrounding adolescent perceptions of success and academic achievement revealed that student ‘achievement’ dictates how students view their success and academic ability (Andrelichik & Schmitt, 2014). More specifically, student success is influenced by parental, peer and teacher ideologies and definitions of achievement, impacting the student’s perceptions of self (Andrelichik & Schmitt, 2014). The student experience, then, is deeply rooted not just in the learning environment, but also in the relationships within that environment.

To lend an example of the impact of the environment on learning, environmental or ‘Forest’ schools are emerging as alternative approaches to learning and education. In one study on forest schools and children’s environmental attitudes, researchers found that “there was a statistically significant difference in environmental attitude between groups of children that had participated in a Forest Schools program and those that have not participated” (Turtle, Convery & Convery, 2015, p. 1). Through environmental and experience-based learning, ‘pro-environmental’ attitudes were developed as a result of the influence of learning in a nature setting. Through flexible, open-ended play, the Forest Schools experience offered “motivation, trust, use of all senses, exploration and discovery and provided opportunities for deep play” (Knight, 2011; Turtle, Convery & Convery, 2015). An additional longitudinal research project

analyzing the impact of environmental studies programs suggested that a good approach to learning would be “grounded in authentic ‘real world’ experiences and provide students with opportunities for critical and holistic thinking” (Breunig, Murtell, Russell, 2015, p. 268). The results of the three case studies discussed revealed that increased student engagement, memorable, practical, and relevant learning and opportunities for the development of social and interpersonal skills were all benefits reported by students (Breunig, Murtell, Russell, 2015, p. 278). Students “emphasized their appreciation of participating in a learning environment that they felt was inclusive and accepting of different opinions” (Breunig, Murtell, Russell, 2015, p. 278).

Outside of the current educational frameworks found within public schooling, Miller (2010) describes a “whole child education”, which builds on many of the foundations promoted by Forest Schools. In this study, the researcher reviewed the holistic environment and teaching and learning strategies used by an alternative school in Toronto, Ontario that aims to “nurture, inspire and educate the Whole Child” (Miller, 2016, p. 284). The vision for this school involved the physical, spiritual and mindful development of students, by encouraging student involvement in the learning process, as well as establishing a well-rounded approach through six basic connections: thinking connections, body-mind connections, soul connections, subject connections, community connections and earth connections (Miller, 2016). Some of the successes of this school were associated with a strong curriculum, delivery of holistic education and a strong community connection. The principal says that the schools’ successes are the result of “how we meet the unique needs of the kids...I see successes in the kids. They are happy” (Miller, 2016, p. 297). Through interviews with students, parents and staff, Miller (2016) reinforces the importance of experience on learning, making the observation that “we live in the day of outcome-based education, but often these outcomes are limited to a few skills that sometimes are put within the framework of being ‘marketable’. Education can be more than this” (Miller, 2016, p. 300).

As discussed earlier in this section, Dewey (1938) suggested that educational experiences should build upon one another, and that “everything depends upon the quality of the experience which is had” (p. 27). He goes on to suggest that not all educational experiences are equally “educative”, but that all experiences become part of what he has coined the “experiential

continuum” (p. 28). This continuum suggests that each experience of a person is shaped by those experiences that came before it, and in turn will affect future experiences. Objective conditions (such as curriculum, peers, teachers, schools) interact with internal conditions (such as prior knowledge, needs, motivation of the learner) and mutually adapt and interact with each other through these experiences (Dewey, 1938). The *experience* of education, then, should be at the forefront of priorities and considerations for educators as these experiences are part of a continuum, influencing future beliefs, values and ideologies, as well as the student’s relationship with learning.

When we speak about the student experience and learning environment, it is important to reflect on not just what this space looks and feels like, but *how* we as educators can contribute to and initiate a space that is conducive to meaningful learning and constructive student engagements. The arts, specifically, postulate a unique canvas to fill; students are welcomed to share their thoughts, beliefs and narratives through multiple modes of expression...and they are free to share as much or as little of themselves as they like. Next, I will discuss the culture of arts environments and what is special about these settings.

### **The Culture of Arts Environments**

*Halls do tell a story. Often many stories. In fact, the writing is on the wall. Sometimes on the surface. Sometimes hidden.*

*(Morawski & Palulis, 2009, p. 7)*

In the study, *Where are They Now? Graduates of an Arts Integration Elementary School Reflect on Art, School, Self and Others*, Steele (2019) explores the narratives of six students who had graduated from an arts integrated elementary school, retrospectively, as participants engage with their memories and experiences of attending the elementary school. This study followed the students upon their departure from the school, building on an earlier study (2017) when the students were at the intermediate stage of their education. Now secondary students, what was found were “patterns converged around the participants’ ongoing interest in the arts, including engagement in arts ensembles and development of artistic sensibilities” (p. 1). Additionally, participants attributed the development of their social skills, their love for school and respect for teachers to these early experiences. More specifically, they “connect their value for school and

their sense of belonging in school to the strong sense of enjoyment they had as young learners” (p. 14). It was also found that “the families felt ownership within the school, the environment was open and welcoming, the faculty were connected to each other, and there was a strong sense of interconnection between all parts and the whole” (p. 15). What, then, is particularly unique about the *culture* of arts-based programs, and how do these experiences aid in the development of social/emotional skills in adolescents?

Steele makes the important observation that “the arts are vehicles of communication for culture, society and humanity” (p. 3). Within our educational structures we see the undeniable integration of the ‘hidden curriculum’, whereby students start to understand the social frameworks in which humans operate. It quickly becomes evident that social hierarchies do exist, and that we navigate these spaces delicately and with precision. Our approaches and attitudes towards socialization shape the culture of school environments, including student (and teacher) engagement, acceptance, and openness, and orchestrate the realm of possibility. It can be said that “communities that embrace arts integration strategies embrace coinciding philosophies that support a healthy, thriving learning environment” (Steele, 2019, p. 5). A strong sense of community, a safe environment and social acceptance are all key in artistic culture; all factors that can only be established alongside supporting philosophies. Of her participants, Steele notes that these students “believe they see the world through artists’ eyes”, and that they believe their experiences at the school “influenced how they appreciate difference, understand creativity, and express empathy” (p. 12). The culture of the school, and these formative experiences, have shaped their worldview.

In her research on arts-based education and creativity in a public elementary school, *Armstrong Academy*, Cote (2010), describes a “philosophy of creativity”. This philosophy includes constructing a school environment that nurtures the development and implementation of creativity. She describes a school culture committed to “fostering an interdisciplinary approach that is heavily laden with the arts”, emphasizing that both teachers and students “must be allowed to experiment in a safe environment” (p. 135). These philosophies are rooted in learning theories supported by Dewey, Piaget and Bruner, with the teacher acting as “a facilitator for learning, instead of as a depositor of information”, with the rationale that “learning through the arts addresses the individual’s need for personal relevance in the curriculum” (p. 129). Students are

invited to explore their ideas through assignments that welcome individuality and infuse multiple modes of expression. Additionally, students are welcome to share their successes through showcase opportunities such as an annual exhibition at the Museum of Fine Arts, as well as exhibitions that are held at the school itself. In her reflections, Cote notes that “it’s stirring – an entire school of self-confident children who know they are good at *something* and are not afraid to take risks or share themselves with outsiders. The same applies to the teachers” (p. 142).

A current study exploring music and movement through inquiry, based in Ontario, explores the use of different “languages” used in the classroom to encourage young children to express themselves and communicate through multi-modal mediums. McLennan & Bombardier (2015) utilize arts-based practices in the classroom to enable students to communicate their learning, and to interact with the world around them. The young children in the study began with grass skirts, adopting creative movements through music and emotion, bringing their own perspectives and unique experiences to the learning environment (p. 72). Moreover, the educators quickly noted that “this inquiry proved to us that when teachers are willing to look beyond the planned curriculum and honor the children as learners, children’s interests can drive instruction far beyond what a rote-learning task or prepackaged theme might accomplish” (p. 71). The connection among emotions, experiences and environment encouraged deeper and more critical thinking and reflection, concluding that “when offered a wide array of materials and opportunities to aesthetically explore them, children construct their own meanings and interpretations about their world” (p. 75). A central point to my study, which will be addressed in greater detail later, is the idea that we (as educators) become part of the student narrative, and not the reverse. Our students have lived in the world long before they arrive in our classrooms, and we ultimately become a part of their story – not intending to construct a new one. Curriculum is material that contains expectations and learning goals appropriate for the age and grade level of the student. How that curriculum is interpreted or internalized by students, is completely individual, and the culture of the school either fosters a space open to exploration, or closes the door to possibility in favour of a one-size-fits-all approach.

According to Alfred Adler (2013), “impressions which grown-ups might consider unimportant or commonplace, may have an enormous influence on the child’s soul and entirely shape his impressions of the world in which he lives” (pp. 44-45). As an educator I often speak

to the idea that teachers really have no idea which moments are going to be significant to students. We cannot identify those moments that may shape lives or inform or alter entire courses of action. And this is a very powerful reality. I know in my story, a very significant part of my experience in an arts-based program, was the leadership and support of the educators that opened the realm of possibility. Possibility in learning, possibility in relationships, and possibility within myself. The experience of arts-based learning is deeply rooted in the individual narratives and the unique lives of students, making the arts a space intricately connected to the emotional development of students. In the next section, I will elaborate on the point of arts-based learning for social and emotional development.

### **Arts for Social/Emotional Development**

*No matter what we are teaching, whether it is spirituality or science, meditation or methodology, what is often remembered is what is captured between the words – the echoes and whispers, the gestures and sighs, the quality of presence*  
(Snowber, 2005, p. 217)

In his article entitled *The Art of Learning to be Critically Literate*, Harste (2014), suggests that “art allows us to explore who we are, how we are different, what makes us unique, what contributions we might make to the ongoing conversation” (p. 97). The arts invite us to explore our emotions, narratives, values and thoughts, and interact with information on an individual level. This research focuses on literacy, to which Harste advises that “the arts must be included in all aspects of a critically informed literacy curriculum” (p. 90). A central point to his claim, Harste, a literacy scholar and artist, suggests that “art renders back to us but does not imply what we see, but how we react to what we see and what we know as a consequence of that seeing” (p. 96). By viewing literacy as a *social practice*, “discussions around texts are cultural practices that an important segment of our society values and...are mandated to pass on to future generations” (p. 98). Art, then, provides an opportunity to question and re-confirm or deny culturally embedded values, responding to taken for granted values in a space of exploration and creativity. It permits students to have a voice and employ multiple literacies to share messages and have an opinion.

Harste reinforces the importance for young people to see themselves not only in literature, but also aesthetic representations of characters. He suggests that students need to think critically about literature, and also view literature in a wider scope, incorporating the arts as language and another means to share information and stories. Further, he posits that “infusing the curriculum with art as seamlessly as possible... is a first, but critical, step” (p. 101) towards ensuring students are critically literate. Understanding how images speak to us and from what position is very important as students navigate the world around them, developing social tools and skillsets; being literate, then, “is to be able to elect what identity one wants to take on” (p. 101). Becoming socially literate through text, images, music and other modes of information and sign transfer, is integral in understanding and engaging with the world around us. Further, incorporating additional “languages” (music, movement, art) in the classroom invites students to explore their identity and that identity in relation to others.

To further the conversation of emotional and social development, Magro (2009), describes ‘emotional literacy’ as “the ability to recognize, understand, and express our emotions in ways that are beneficial to ourselves and others” (p. 2). In her research and discussion in *Integrating Emotional and Social Intelligence in Language Arts Education* she discusses the unique opportunity that language arts teachers have in terms of utilizing tools to mobilize and empower students by teaching from an emotional intelligence framework. By integrating social and emotional aspects into learning, students can explore their own thoughts and values, monitor their own emotional responses, and address controversial issues and social injustices. Magro suggests that a strategy for approaching sensitive issues is to incorporate the arts into the curriculum. She gives the example of theatre and readers theatre whereby students can “act out scripts and plays that focus on themes relevant to their own lives” (p. 5). By closely examining and interacting with characters in novels (or plays) for example, *transformative learning* can be promoted, whereby students achieve a deeper level of understanding of themselves, others, and worldviews (p. 7). More specifically, Magro explains a “process in which learners reflectively transform existing beliefs, attitudes, opinions, and emotional reactions that may be limiting their ability to achieve their personal and intellectual potential” (p. 7). Exploring different teaching strategies, including infusing the arts within language arts curriculum, empowers students in a space where “self-expression, experience, and creativity are valued” (p. 7).

In their study entitled *Emotional Development in Adolescence: What can be Learned from a High School Theatre Program*, Larson and Brown (2007) examined the emotional experience of young adults in a theatre program as they collaborated on a production “with the guidance from two experienced and emotionally attuned adults” (p. 1085). As the adolescents attended rehearsals and came together to share the story of *Les Miserables*, researchers quickly acknowledged the vibrant sense of community that was exclusive to the members of the theatre group; Larson and Brown noted that they “found that it had its own internal culture, with distinctive ways of thinking, feeling, and acting” (p. 1088). The authors cited three fundamental aspects of the culture that contributed to the emotional development and well-being of students. The first point mentioned was emotional support. They observed ongoing support from key staff members, as well as emotional-modelling. The positive emotional development, openness, and support resembled that of a family, being referred to by a cast member as being a ‘family-type group’. Next, they acknowledged the recognition and acceptance of strong emotions, and the importance of providing a safe and supportive space for students to work through these emotions together. Finally, the researchers discussed the commitment and expectation to construct a high quality production. The culture of the members anticipated and celebrated teamwork and effort, enthusiastically encouraging and supporting one another.

A key component of Larson & Brown’s 2007 study, was the opportunity for youth to learn how to use “positive emotions to motivate their work, but they were also learning to follow cultural rules for the acceptable expression of these emotions” (p. 1094). Recognizing emotional sequences, the roles of leaders and the reciprocal power of community, were all beneficial factors of being a member of the cast. Regardless of their role in the show (lead, supporting cast member, etc.), these students developed a sense of self and a sense of community through their involvement in the production. The adult role models provided a framework for social conditioning, and helped facilitate the process of emotional learning (Larson & Brown, 2007).

In addition, Larson & Brown consider how theatre arts not only invites students to share their own narrative, but conversely orchestrates a space for them to “step into someone else’s shoes and have someone else’s emotions” (Larson & Brown, 2007, p. 1092). In a time of uncertainty and wavering autonomy, adolescents are searching to be heard and understood. The only difficulty is, they themselves are still unsure of who they are, as they are still working through the motions of self-actualization. This being said, they each face unique and complex

obstacles on that journey, and all facets of the arts provide an outlet to work through these big emotions.

Gonzalez (2018) discusses the idea of *connectivity*, stating that “connectivity happens in a classroom or rehearsal space when kids feel safe enough to take big risks that strengthen their self esteem” (p. 31). Coining the term *intentional wakefulness*, she goes on to suggest that there are “powerfully energizing and internally compelling aspects of theatre education that build students from the inside out” (p.31). Acknowledging that adolescence is intense emotionally and socially, this researcher questions the rapport that students hold not only with their teacher, but also with each other. Teaching theatre, Gonzalez has recognized the importance of building connectivity in a time when “technological advancement is both beneficial and detrimental to kids’ education and overall well-being” (p. 33). Today our students face additional obstacles (such as social media) in their social and emotional growth that complicate maturation and overwhelm sensory systems. She notes that, “though frequently connected, what kids are connected *to* are their devices more than their surroundings” (p. 32). Theatre education encourages deep thinking and stronger connections as “theatre education by its very nature is an endeavor of the mind, heart, body and soul” (p. 42). This space manifests intentional wakefulness and connectivity through 4 identified areas: breath, stillness, community and presence. As she unpacks these concepts through her research, Gonzalez leaves us with the suggestion that further research between theatre education and stimulating connectivity “will broaden our understanding of theatre education’s uniquely significant qualities” (p. 42).

Shifting from theatre to visual arts/visual literacy, we find evidence of emotional and social development through interacting with images in the classroom. Considering that students are well versed in visual literacy – being subjected to images daily through media, social media and advertisements found in our consumerist society – it is fair to assume that students have experience interacting with images as text. A large part of social engagement in today’s world involves interacting with images, and constructing social narratives from those images. Thomsen (2018) utilizes the heavy emphasis of images in our social world, and “considers the implications of composing with images for students’ agency, intellectual engagement, and community investment” (p. 54). Visual engagements not only help students understand the social constructs around them, but also how they fit within the paradigm, including who they are. Thomsen asks us to rediscover the power of images in a ‘visual culture’, and recognize that “images have the

power to construct students' realities and identities, so it's essential for students to develop strategies to "reveal and rewrite" with both images and words" (p. 55). A key aspect of visual literacy is not just being able to read and compose images, but also to develop strategies to deconstruct and reconstruct images, particularly when they share a narrative about ourselves.

Students are plagued with images from the media depicting values that society has projected to represent individuals. But are these images accurate, and is this, in fact, the way that students view themselves? Thomsen assigned students the task of composing the *self as composition*, which was a daily activity whereby students created an avatar that represented themselves. Initially there was evidence of conformity, as the avatars shared considerable similarities in appearance, however, over time there was a stronger sense of a progression towards greater sense of agency. By the final week of the assignment there was a "divergence rather than a convergence in how these students saw themselves and wanted others to see them...they had the power to choose the aspects of self to make more prominent, exerting agency over their representations of identity" (p. 56). Producing images allowed the students to make "complex discoveries about self-representation" (p. 56), and as well enabled students to interact with course materials on a deeper level, both as an individual and as a collective. Composing these images also connected students to themselves and each other in more meaningful social interactions, enabling students to build a greater sense of community.

*As I sift through the literature, I am acutely aware of my preference for physical copies of literature; I sit cross legged, in the middle of the floor, surrounded by stacks of journals. I feel distracted, listening to a compilation of show tunes. Each song brings its own memories – so many shows, so many rehearsals, so many friendships, so many emotions. I close the carefully tagged and highlighted page that I am working from, and retreat to old yearbooks. There are spaces designated for the Arts, highlighting years of theatre, dance and music performances. I flip the pages and recall that there was a student-run school radio station and disc jockey club, artistic associations, and ongoing events...even a dance group that performed at intermission at the city-wide high school hockey tournament. It was impossible not to become immersed in social activities as they were so intricately intertwined with the academics. The school culture was intoxicating – it sucked you in and set the bar for what a community should look like.*

Judson (2017) speaks to the idea of education being meaningful for students, and reminds us of the *educational relevance* required to spark interest in students and hook their attention. She suggests that “what we tend to most often remember from our past educational experiences are those times when we were most emotionally and imaginatively engaged” (p. 48). Emotional significance in education can be possible only in spaces where students are free to express themselves, have a voice, are learning curriculum relevant to their specific lives, cultures and interests, and are afforded the opportunity to grow in a nurturing space. Arts-based learning provides a strong basis for social and emotional development, and encourages a meaningful student experience. In the next section I will speak to arts-based learning, and how these approaches foster student engagement and meaning in education.

### **Arts-based Learning**

Arts-based learning offers a variety of approaches and possibilities (Barone & Eisner, 2006), by blending “authentic learning theories and arts-informed pedagogy” (Ogden, DeLuca & Searle, 2010, p. 370). These educational approaches integrate the arts in ways that construct meaning, engaging students by promoting meaning-making and encouraging them to be “more different, not more alike” (Cornett, 2006, p. 234). These types of programs aim to connect “experiences of past and present, inner and outer, self and others” (Ogden, DeLuca & Searle, 2010, p. 369), building upon the students’ prior knowledge and personal narratives.

Through her research on arts-based literacy, Cornett (2006) describes the use of “multiple bodies of research – academic, cognitive, motivation, and social – to inform and increase the strategy repertoire of teachers” (p. 234). By providing examples of teachers who use music and drama as key learning tools, Cornett demonstrates the transdisciplinary benefits of the arts, filtering past just the academic, and into the personal and social lives of students. She suggests that the arts are central to student communication and the construction of meaning, and that “without the arts, learners are limited to reading, writing, speaking, and listening to process ideas” (p. 235). She discusses research supporting integration of the arts, connecting the arts with academic progress, as well as emphasizing “the unique cognitive, affective, and social contributions the arts make to learning” (p. 235). She references Rod Paige, former U.S. Secretary of Education, as he acknowledges the arts as being central to the *No Child Left Behind*

*Act*, crediting the arts with encouraging academic success in all students. Cornett’s research also supports the “unique cognitive, affective, and social contributions the arts make to learning” (p. 235). Meaningful arts integration in the classroom allows students to express thoughts, ideas and feelings, and “give life to life and can give life to learning – especially literacy learning” (p. 240).

Bussert-Webb (2001) builds on these ideas in her research, describing how arts-based strategies supported her in building trust with teens who were reluctant to indulge in self-revealing writing. Students were invited to engage with art outside of just visual imagery and drawing; photography was also introduced, and ‘self-revealing’ photos were taken as an instrument of conveying emotions. Through the “Photo Story Project” students were able to capture snapshots of themselves at their most vulnerable moments, as well allowing them to share in that vulnerability with others. Through art, middle school students were able to express themselves in a medium that allowed them to *tell a story*, without actually telling the story. Of this project, Bussert-Webb has said that “art became a means for us to express our values and contexts because we had difficulty relating through spoken and written language” (2001, p. 518). The artistic platform allowed participants to develop trust with one another, and allow space to share their experiences in their own ways.

In an additional study on arts-based learning, Nutbrown (2013) expresses the idea that “human beings need the arts for holistic development” (p. 239). Her research on arts-based learning in the early years revealed that “the arts are central to human life. People draw, sing, dance and tell stories because it is part of the condition of being human” (Dissanayake, 2000; Eisner, 2002; Nutbrown, 2013). Historically, people have (and continue to) solidify their human identity, communicate with others and make sense of the world around them through self-expression in the arts. According to Nutbrown (2013), we are “to attend to what research tells us about children’s learning encounters with the arts and how children’s aesthetic appreciation of the arts also might support a range of learning” (p. 246). As we begin thinking about education in a more interdisciplinary fashion, “we need to loosen, although not discard, the shackles of the disciplines” (Hursh, Haas & Moore, 1983, p. 43).

In her study on meaning-making, Knudson (2018) explores how students express meaning-making through explorative approaches. By combining social media with arts-based

approaches to learning and teaching drama, Knudson is able to demonstrate the complexity and multiple layers of the meaning-making processes (2018, p. 9). She shares that the meaning-making process is not static; rather, “it is immanent, transformative, self-reflexive, embodied and becoming” (Knudson, 2018, p. 10). Likewise, in a study on children’s spirituality and music learning, McCarthy (2013) concludes that “the quality of the psychological space that is created for music learning is particularly important, a space that at once contemplative and alive with art making” (p. 12). She goes on to suggest that how adults respond to children’s expressions are particularly important, and that we (as educators and researchers) must honour the individual characteristics of each student. Arts-based learning offers a flexible and nurturing environment in which to learn and explore, and such methods can be applied across all disciplines, outside of just the arts.

Thomas (2007) states that “youth engagement is fostered in authentic learning experiences; it also grows out of positive relationships with peers and adults” (p. 790). Through her study on student engagement and learning in a community-based arts classroom, Thomas reflects upon the role of the arts not just in personal growth, but also social transformation. Via a printmaking workshop, she leads a group of previously abused and neglected young men through alternative teaching strategies to (re)engage them in learning. She discovers the arts as a space of belonging, as well as a space that promotes confidence and meaning-making for learners.

In discussing the arts as a foundation for learning (both in the written and hidden curriculum), we can see the importance of allowing a space to nurture student abilities, including creative choices. In the next section I will demonstrate how arts-based instructional methods can be a useful approach in education, more specifically as a process to facilitate cross-curricular engagement.

### **Cross-Curricular Benefits**

According to Hughes (2011), “art is about making an idea into a reality... That is art’s life skill. It applies to everything from the telling of a story, to the functioning of a home, to the building of a business” (p. 12). The arts (dance, drama, visual arts and music), help develop skills that are pertinent to the social-emotional well-being of the individual, such as confidence, autonomy, self-esteem, self-worth and self-actualization. Developing a sense of self is key not just for educational successes, but also to develop the ability to engage with learning on a

personal and ongoing level. The arts afford students the unique opportunity to “create an alternate version of themselves from their imagination” (Marcus, 2011, p. 48), and explore the multiple possibilities in self-construction.

In her research *Inquiring into the possibilities of Multimodal Novel Study: Teacher Candidates Respond to “Whirligig” With Resolution Scrapbooks*, Morawski (2012) explores the artistic possibilities in teaching and learning as she opens the door to multiple modes of expression, interacting with the arts for deeper engagement with literature. Through her work with teacher candidates in her English methods class, Morawski introduced the ‘resolution scrapbook’ whereby students were invited to interact with the novel *Whirligig*. A powerful adolescent novel, *Whirligig* no doubt stirs many thoughts and emotions in the reader; a resolution scrapbook provides space to journal thoughts before, during, and upon completion of an event in the novel. Utilizing multimedia and recycled supplies, teacher candidates participated in an arts-based inquiry, responding to events within the novel through art. Of this experience, Morawski noted one teacher candidate as expressing that “the resolution scrapbook was one activity that challenged me to come up with more interesting and creative lessons for my students to produce” (p. 411). An additional student commented that the scrapbook was “a challenging yet comforting alternative for students who aren’t strong writers” (p. 411). Bringing the arts into the classroom opens the door to different ways of knowing and thinking, allows space for independent thought and expression, and bridges curricular components.

In their research on creating multimodal stories about a familiar environment, Kervin & Mantei (2017) engaged young children in a storytelling assignment that would focus both on geography and language arts curriculum expectations. To merge these topics, the researchers created a task that would utilize arts-based learning both in physical and digital formats; a map and corresponding story about their school and community. The children were invited to create paper puppets, representing themselves, and draw a ‘bird’s eye’ view of their school environment, using paper and coloured markers. The children then collaborated to create and tell stories, audio recording themselves on classroom iPads. As a next step, students then used google maps alongside their paper drawings and cut outs to create a digital story. Of the experience, the researchers commented that “the collaborative nature of the task was important to the final multimodal story...they negotiated their selections when the images from Google Maps were introduced” (p. 727). The multimodal story provided a platform for the students to embrace

both paper and digital tools, allowing them to experience “self-expression through the creation of unique maps” (p. 728).

Moving outside of language arts, we see evidence of cross-curricular arts engagements as the arts support many ‘core’ curriculum subjects. In the study *Weaving the Arts into Math Curriculum*, Trimble (2019), uses “math skills already mastered, as well as new skills just at the edge of their level, in order to learn how a four-harness loom weaving is planned, measured, and executed” (p. 62). A fiber artist, Trimble worked with a school principal and teachers to develop a residency program for third grade students, whereby students would practice their addition, subtraction, division and percentages through the process of weaving. Trimble introduced to the class the concept of drafting a weaving pattern, “graphing the exact design to be programmed into the loom and subsequently woven” (p. 63). Students were familiarized with the warp/weft relationship in weaving as they collaborated to complete a four-harness loom. An additional study as well describes the use of art in math education, having created a program called *The Art of Math*. Briscoe & Van Kesteren (2018) describe a bundled course in the Thames Valley District School Board (in London, Ontario) that falls under what their board refers to as ‘Sch(school)ool’, whereby secondary school students can earn both their grade 9 visual arts credit and their grade 9 math credit (either applied or academic) simultaneously. Through this program, students use “exploration and experimentation with traditional and non-traditional materials” and “the curricula are blended and intertwined to create deeper and more deliberate connections” (p. 21). Students remain together for the two periods, removing the divide between the subjects and aligning the learning expectations. Using art, students “analyze or visualize a math concept after it is completed” (p. 21). Concepts such as measurement and perimeter are taught using images and artistic shapes; sculpture creations help students comprehend mass and volume. Team-teaching has allowed educators to pay attention to detail and provide flexible, small group instruction. Art projects define the math units, helping students to develop deeper appreciation for design, while softening fears and anxieties surrounding math education. The Art of Math program is a cross-curricular opportunity for students to develop 2 skill sets that may not be so different after all; students are connecting mathematical concepts to the world around them by viewing math in a different way (p. 23).

Drawing from, and building upon many of the concepts uncovered and developed through the studies noted in this review, I focused my study on the specific narratives of former

students and the impact that the arts has had on the subsequent years of their lives. Developing a methodology combining both narrative inquiry and arts-based research, I encouraged my participants to share their experiences and express them both in words and through the arts. Having experienced arts-based education personally, I was interested to share in the stories of others who had experienced such an inimitable opportunity in education, as well as share my own.

In the section below, I will outline my conceptual framework, including my rationale for using a social constructivist lens to inform my study. I will unpack the term *social constructivism* and provide some context for the framework of my research. Additionally, I will provide definitions as well examples of other studies that have used social constructivism as a framework.

### **Conceptual Framework: Social Constructivism**

To frame my research, I used social constructivism as a lens to understand my participant worldviews. In the next section, I will unpack the term *social constructivism* and provide some context for the framework of my research. Additionally, I will provide definitions as well examples of other studies that have used social constructivism as a framework.

Constructivism, though widely used as an umbrella term, has various tenants and approaches; however, my theoretical framework will be positioned from the lens of social constructivism. This term originated through the work of Berger and Luckmann (1966) in their publication of *The Social Construction of Reality* where they discuss “the *sociality* of reality and the *social* processes of its *construction*” (Knoblauch & Wilke, 2016, p. 51). This publication started the conversations on social constructivism, and has been widely read and interpreted across disciplines. In the field of psychology, for example, Vygotsky (1978) “argues that learning is not purely an internal process, nor is it passive, but that culture and context are highly important in forming understanding and hence the beginnings of deep learning” (Bryceson, 2007, p. 191). It is also important to note that *social constructivism* and *social constructionism*, although both postmodern and subjective epistemologies, are different approaches and schools of thought. Hyde (2015) makes the distinction that constructivism is the “result of the individual’s action and interaction in the world either alone or with others, while constructionism emphasizes the characteristics of social participation, relationships, the setting of activity and historical

change” (p. 289). In his study entitled *Social construction in music studies*, McKerrell (2016) describes social constructionism as “a broad-based epistemological approach to understanding (largely) how talk and text work to construct our social lives” (p. 425). Although there are many different definitions and uses for the term ‘social constructivism’, I will be using a definition outlined by Psychologist Kenneth Gergen (1985), suggesting that “social constructivist inquiry is principally concerned with explicating the processes by which people come to describe, explain or otherwise account for the world (including themselves) in which they live” (Velody, 1994, p. 81).

In his work on EFL (English as a foreign language) writing, Jim McKinley (2015) uses social constructivism as his theoretical framework to understand “the interrelationship between the elements of cultural practices in academic discourse, writer identity, and critical thinking” (p. 184) and how sociocultural values of academic discourse affect the process of learning. McKinley claims that “constructivist learning has significant implications for the construction of cultural identity in that, for adult learners with many years of experience and accumulated schemata, new information must be connected to neurological structures already in existence” (p. 188). McKinley draws upon Vygotsky’s theories of scaffolding (1978), explaining that students can participate in their own learning by interacting with others that have more expertise, and constructing meaning from these social interactions (p. 194). This study demonstrates that a “fundamental link between the theories/components...is the social constructivist understanding of an interpersonal collaborative construction of knowledge” (McKinley, 1978, p. 204). By drawing from writer identities, building upon prior knowledge (including culture, the self and experiences) and utilizing peers as a source of knowledge and resource, students can successfully complete writing tasks in EFL classrooms.

Schreiber & Valle (2013) also draw from Vygotsky’s theories of social constructivism in their study on small group and teamwork principles. By focusing on collaboration and the sociability of learning, this study aimed to review teaching strategies and teamwork methods that could be used in classrooms to encourage social learning. What they found was that “the most important outcome of this pedagogy is that in working with others to accomplish a socially worthy goal, students are empowered, they learn about citizenship and building a better world, and they develop confidence for future interactions” (Schreiber & Valle, 2013, p. 409). Bryceson

(2007), as well, explores these concepts in her study on the online learning environment, embracing social constructivism and the concept of scaffolding to understand how the internet can best be utilized as a learning tool. Contrary to arguments that online learning is not desirable to students, or a beneficial learning environment (Simonsen, 1995; Reeves, 1994), Bryceson found that establishing a ‘socialization mechanism’ was key to student success and satisfaction. She concluded that “by itself, the facility does not perform the function – it is necessary to have a structured approach to use” (Bryceson, 2007, p. 202) and that “a good learning environment for students involves some form of socialization” (Bryceson, 2007, p. 203).

In her work, Keddell (2011) discusses how constructivism “does not simply reflect a real external world, but creates and constitutes what comes to be known as reality” (p. 401). In other words, the interpretation of life events and experiences is a narration constructed by the individual, and it is this internal coherence which navigates his/her understanding of the world (Keddell, 2011; Freedman & Combs, 1996; Gergen, 2003). This consistent transaction between the individual’s activity and the surrounding environment is the formative process for knowledge and learning (Sutinen, 2007), and meaning arises from those experiences which are grounded on freedom, support and interest. Research supporting the importance of environment on learning (Dewey, 1938; Davis, 2004; Bruner, 1996), suggests that “a poor learning outcome for students can ensue with none of the socialization needs being met and without deep learning taking place” (Bryceson, 2007, p. 204).

Meeting students’ needs and altering our teaching practices to explain concepts in ways that make sense to students opens the door to possibilities in education. Breaking down rigid spaces and creating more fluidity in learning allows educators to approach teaching from a different perspective. In turn, loosening the boundaries in learning encourages a more thoughtful and meaningful student experience.

In the next chapter I will further address the methods that I used to answer my research question, followed by how these methods were implemented in my data analysis.

## Methodology

I utilized arts-based narrative inquiry as my research methodology to answer the following question: *what are the effects of attending an arts-based secondary school program on the subsequent lives of six former students (including myself) who have graduated two decades ago?* Employing a social constructivist framework, I inquired into the experiences of former students retrospectively, to further conceptualize the role of the arts within the student experience and student engagement.

In this chapter I will explain my research approach, including how and why I will be using an arts-based methodology, rooted in narrative inquiry. More specifically, I will discuss why this methodology aligns well with my research question and purpose, and I will provide examples of researchers who have also elected to use this method. Next, I will outline my research design, including an overview of my project and how I set up and collected my data. Finally, I will summarize my use of arts-based narrative inquiry as a methodology, and introduce my participants in participant profiles.

To begin, I will give an overview of arts-based narrative inquiry.

### Arts-based Narrative Inquiry

*They lay on the side of the small hill watching the grass against the bright sky shuddering with the wind. "It's trembling", Lindy whispered. "I can feel it trembling. This moment, trembling around the world forever, over the whole surface of the world". She turned towards her friend. "Can you feel it Clare?" Clare looked back at Lindy, startled, but for a split second, she could feel it.*

*(Yardley, 2006, p. 2)*

In the very simplest form, narratives are stories that help people to “think about, and understand, their personal or another individual’s thinking, actions and reactions” (Ollerenshaw & Creswell, 2002, p. 329). The experiences shared and narrated (or re-narrated) serve many different purposes including social mobilization, entertainment, education, and persuasion just to name a few (Kohler Reissman, 2008). Though initially developing from the examination of literature (Kohler Reissman, 2008), narrative has expanded and transformed into a pragmatic

methodology used to conduct qualitative research. Leggo (2008) describes our engagement with narratives as being “epistemologically and ontologically engaged in using stories as an integral way to sort who we are as people in relation to other people” (p. 3). Whether a narrative researcher is engaged in action research, ethnography, or other methods of research, “what narrative researchers hold in common is the study of stories or narratives or descriptions of a series of events” (Pinnegar & Daynes, 2007, p. 4). How the researcher chooses to enter the narrative is completely dependent upon the personal comfort and preference of the researcher and the participants. I will acknowledge that there are limitless possibilities and various facets of narrative as a methodology, however I wanted to limit the scope for my research to narrative inquiry in partnership with arts-based methodologies. I propose that the two are not divided entities, but rather complement one another and can fuse into a single methodology to support the researcher through *arts-based narrative inquiry*. By allowing narrative inquiry to be open to arts informed possibilities, researchers can delve deeper into their research.

In the article *Getting in tune through arts-based narrative inquiry*, McGarrigle (2018) reflects on his recently completed PhD thesis in Education, and speaks explicitly about his use of arts-based methods in narrative inquiry. Through his struggle to find balance between researcher and participant voices, the researcher turned to arts-based narratives as a means to make space for alternative and unique voices by utilizing strategies and methods that would preserve identity within a collective (McGarrigle, 2018). Researchers using arts-based methods to interact with stories reinforce the idea that creative expression allows for an authentic freedom of individuality and voice (Holman Jones & Harris, 2016; Grisoni & Brigid, 2012; Bar-On, 2007). As an example, Kay (2013) uses ‘bead collage’ as an arts-based research method to tell stories. Through the interaction with the beads and found materials, participants were invited to reflect and express themselves through the art-making process. Kay describes this method as a means to “allow students, art teachers, and researchers to link their ideas in a non-linear way that brings a deeper understanding of a given phenomenon” (p. 14). Opening participants to multi-modal possibilities granted them the freedom to communicate their experiences in ways that spoke to them as individuals. Through a ‘prayer bead workshop’ the researcher observed the art of narrative through beadwork, an exercise that she later introduced into her art therapy program at a special education school. Of these experiences, Kay (2015) concludes “we should consider the

limitations of words and reflect on the unique opportunities the arts provide in facilitating expression of what people know, think, and feel” (p. 15).

Arts-based narrative inquiry, as a methodology, offers techniques that researchers can utilize to broaden the experience of interviewing. In her research on identity and migration in England and Italy, as well as her study on ‘young lives and times’, Bagnoli (2009) employs visual methods for interviewing and engaging participant narratives. Using drawing as a basis for her data collection, she introduces the self-portrait, arts-based projective techniques, and graphic elicitation methods to explore further into the layers of human experience and consciousness (Bagnoli, 2009). These methods included the use of diagrams, reflexive journals, relational maps and other image based strategies to allow for creative reflection in participants. Bagnoli (2009) asserts that “focusing on the visual level allows people to go beyond a verbal mode of thinking, and this may help include wider dimensions of experience, which one would perhaps neglect otherwise” (p. 565-566). Taking into consideration the expressive styles and unique needs of participants when developing her research design, Bagnoli aims for a broader, more holistic approach in her investigations.

Glass (2011) embraces arts-based narratives in her research on pre-service teachers, inquiring into the personal journey and experience of becoming a teacher. Through arts-based methods, Glass employs drawings and graphs to document a student’s twelve months of study, as well as the past professional and personal experiences that inform and impact the process of becoming a teacher. The life stories, relationships and histories unique to the pre-service teacher are part of the context of the developing teacher narrative, and impact the developing teacher self (Glass, 2011). Glass describes how the use of narratives, drawings and graphs provide a deeper insight into the ‘multiple contexts’, which contribute to the experiences of the pre-service teacher.

Narratives are made up of stories, and stories are a way in which we understand ourselves, our lives, and how we fit into the continuum of the world around us. Stories help us to know ourselves (and each other) on an intimate level. An important function of storytelling is the very unique and often fluid process that can be supported through engagement with the arts. By being open to multiple mediums, we as researchers allow for a richer and meaningful experience for both the participant and the researcher. For my research, I engaged participants in arts-based

narration, encouraging them to share their experiences retrospectively in multi-modal ways such as art, poetry, writing, and other arts-based approaches. More specifically, I used ‘factional’ stories to re-create and express the narratives, allowing room for my voice and my personal narrative. In the following section, I will describe factional stories, and discuss my plan to include this within my research.

## **Factional Stories**

*My favourite time is early in the morning, in the space where my dreams are fresh, and I am not yet fully cognisant of the world around me. In a state of half-consciousness, my thoughts are free and floating; swimming in a space that is limitless and without boundaries. I dread that moment of clarity, to truly come alive, to leave the lucid state of weightlessness and join the waking world. To stop that moment, and to live in the space between – in the unknown – seems irresistible but also impossible. To re-create this moment of freedom, of possibility, is intoxicating. In our everyday lives of ritual and routine, when are we afforded the opportunity to exist in the space in-between? What spaces encourage abstract thinking and unconfined creativity?*

In her work entitled *Factional Stories: Creating a methodological space for collaborative reflection and inquiry in music education research*, Kallio (2015) describes a methodological space where researchers and participants can engage and inquire together, sharing their voices. In this study examining the inclusion or exclusion of popular music conflicting with traditional school values, Kallio engages five Finnish secondary school music teachers in two sets of interviews. Using the preliminary findings, she (re)stories the experiences, crafting short ‘factional’ stories using the information gathered. These factional stories were then shared with participants, representing an interpretation of the blending of the participant and researcher voices. A third round of interviewing was then conducted, and a second round of analyses, including the responses of the participants to the factional stories. The factional stories “allowed for reflection to take place through interacting with their own, now distanced, stories, and other teachers’ experiences and narratives” (p. 13). This reflective thinking encouraged participants to disconnect and then reconnect with their own narrative, inspiring further personal inquiry, while facilitating a learning experience.

Kallio describes ‘factional stories’ as being “a bricolage of previously collected data, analyses and fictive elements, combining research participants’ and researcher voices and presented as a short, first person story” (p. 3). By adding researcher-written vignettes, the researcher can draw from the collected information, and have space to insert personal reflections and narratives, as well as (re)interpret and cultivate meaning within the story. To further explain, factional stories are “not the *ends* of research, presenting or communicating data or analyses, but are employed as a heuristic means to gather rich, meaningful data and deepen inquiry” (p. 5).

There is much evidence of the use of fiction-styled interpretations within qualitative research studies. In one such example entitled *Living Stories: The Role of the Researcher in the Narration of Life*, Yardley (2006) inserts herself as a character in the fictional (re)telling of Lindy’s story. This article opens with a beautiful story, *Homage to Lindy: A Narrative*, which shares a moving documentation of the final events leading the unfortunate demise of Lindy, and what transpires following her untimely death. In actuality, the author had not been there on that final day, witnessing those final hours, and she could only speculate, and piece together the full story based on her knowledge of Lindy, and how she may have wanted the story to be told. The events of Lindy’s story were factual, and the fictional aspects helped to create a strong relationship between the author and the reader, allowing us to know and understand Lindy in a way that perhaps we could understand her actions. Yardley herself addressed the issue of ‘truth’ in a candid discussion speaking to proposed criticisms of fiction style narratives. Her explanation was that her “sense of “truth” in the context of Lindy’s story requires generosity of spirit, a willingness to imagine another’s life and to walk for a time in another’s shoes” (p. 5). She acknowledges that this style of biography is “curiously similar to writing fictional narrative” (p. 5). When we share in biography, as in Lindy’s story, it is at the discretion of the author how the story will be shared, and which creative elements will be fused within the piece. The partnership with the storyteller will ultimately define the content; however, the presentation of the ‘facts’ can be developed from many creative elements and include the voice of the researcher in many different ways.

In *Staking a small claim for fictional narratives in social and educational research*, Watson (2011) examines the use of fiction as data, as well as the potential benefits of adopting fiction within qualitative research designs. She suggests that “the potential openness of fictional

narrative forms, which enables multiple interpretations fostering productive ambiguity, provides one justification for their place in social research” (p. 403). The article summarizes many key claims supporting fictional narratives, including the idea that “crossing disciplinary boundaries gives us access to another set of tools which enable exploration of some issues of social and educational interest in – slightly – different ways” (p. 406). The use of fictional elements may in fact help to enhance meaning within the research, and allow room for multiple interpretations of the same data set.

*O, have you seen the Muffin Man,  
The Muffin Man, the Muffin Man:  
O, have you seen the Muffin Man,  
That lives in Drury Lane?*

(Mitchell & Blyton, 1968, p. 43)

A simple child’s rhyme can embody many forms and meanings, depending on the context of how it is told, and can employ three principal dynamics: story, interpretation, and discourse (Leggo, 2008, p. 1). As a child, this rhyme, paired with a catchy tune and sideways illustrations, constructed my first memories of thoughtful engagement with storytelling. I did not recognize at the time that my preschool self, flipping through the pages of old story rhyme books, was the preface for me to begin to make sense of my world through stories.

In his work on narratives, Leggo engages with Fulford (1999), and concurs that “there is no such thing as *just a story*” (Leggo, 2008). To imply that a story is simply that, would be to renounce that this rhyme has stayed with me throughout childhood and into adulthood, shifting meaning and transacting in different ways. I can still picture the dated illustrations of the nursery book, passed down to me from the generation before, and the weathered pages, stiff and weighted, and the hard, plain cover. This book had seen many years and carried many stories, external to those contained within its delicate pages. Throughout the years the story has altered, adding character actions and additional lines to suit the grade or audience, until finally becoming an ongoing joke with my own two children. I frequently ask them, “do you know the muffin man?” as they look at me with confusion. I then continue with “you know; he lives down Drury lane”. It has become an endearing conversation, with them sometimes replying to my first

question, other times they look at me as if to say, *not again*. The inquiry of our narratives can be described as “an ongoing process of understanding how we invest space and chronology with significance” (Leggo, 2008, p. 15).

When we think about the interpretation of stories, we consider also the role that our own stories play in that interpretation. The meaning that we give to stories, and the way that we understand our own truths based on these stories, is significant in and through the discourse surrounding them. The significance of the *The Muffin Man* for me, was the ability for the interpretation and engagement of the story to shift as my story changed, but also that it was a moment that sparked true curiosity in the arts and storytelling, and was a pivotal moment for me as a young human, recognizing my interest to be artistic. It was only a few short years after this memory that I became very engaged in the world of the arts, and I recognize that these moments of opportunity are vital to the growth of students.

### **Research Overview**

*As I walk through the forest on this damp, dreary day, I am acutely aware of every crunch of the leaves beneath my feet; I feel a slight chill and an energy that suggests that someone is standing behind me. The day is drawing to a close, and with the darkness approaching I turn to catch a glimpse of what may be company, only to realize that my imagination has gotten the best of me. I take out my earbuds and breathe in the crisp after-rain air; I know I am alone, yet I can feel the energy of the space. I return to listening to my participants’ voices, upbeat and familiar; a welcomed reunion.*

In this study exploring the lives of students who have graduated from an arts-based secondary school nearly two decades ago, I explore my own and participants’ life stories and experiences of learning through the arts. Through retrospective narrative, we share our stories and experiences of the years that we spent attending an arts-based program, and make connections from those experiences to our ongoing lives. According to Lewkowich (2016), “when we ask our students to remember, perhaps we should also ask them to approach their memories in unconventional terms” (p. 587). Using arts-based approaches, I give participants the opportunity to recall and share their narrative in the medium that speaks to them.

## From Stories to a Study: Designing My Research

For this study I made use of in-person and computer synchronized interviews, followed by the construction of individual arts-based narratives, ending with a group composite novelette. When feasible I met with participants in person (three interviews were conducted in this manner), at a location that was convenient for them. Two of the three face-to-face interviews were conducted at a small coffee shop in the northern Ontario town where the school resides. I specifically selected this location as it holds many memories and much nostalgia for both myself and my participants. The third face-to-face interview took place in a YMCA, while the participant's children enjoyed their swimming lessons. I travelled to the town to conduct the interviews, pre-arranging the meeting times with the participants. The remaining two interviews were conducted via technological methods, using FaceTime as this was the most convenient, reliable, and safe method of online communication. All interviews were audio recorded for later review, transcription and reflection, and consent was given to me to record them. Interviews were 30-45 minutes in length, and were conducted using open-ended questions (found in Appendix 1). Interviews were completed over a span of three months, as availability of participants varied. My questions were developed in a manner that would give the participant prompts to recall their experiences and reflect upon them; the purpose was to determine if there were, in fact, connections between these experiences and memories, and the skills and abilities that they (the participants) had developed throughout and following their studies.

*I drove back to that town, to the place where the magic happened. To where time seemed slower and people seemed friendlier. The coffee was free-trade and the pastries dripped with sweetness and nostalgia; a simpler time. A space for dreamers and poets and artists and lovers...but where did these dreams go? I want to know.*

Wolgemuth et. al (2015) suggest that “conducting ‘good’ interviews requires epistemological and practical *flexibility*, rather than paradigm-driven adherence, on the part of the researcher” (p. 367). When conducting the interviews, although I did adhere to my approved questions, I did not restrict the conversation. Some participants dove into particular stories and memories in further detail, while others made connections and offered information outside of my guiding questions. For my research, the questions that I have provided in Appendix 1 offered more of a framework for the interview, ensuring that the conversation stayed focused, and as

well warranted at minimum covering questions that I had asked to help answer my research question. An argument can be made for “a participant-responsive, epistemologically informed flexibility in which qualitative interview researchers experiment with methods while seeking to maximize participant benefits and grapple with the theoretical implications of methods decisions” (Wolgemuth et. al, 2015, p. 369). I made the decision to include an arts-based narrative as part of my research design to further enrich the interview experience for the participant and deepen the research, employing this step next in the data collection process. I wanted to allow participants a creative outlet to reflect on their memories, and produce an imaginative piece organically and without too much guidance or restriction.

For the arts-based narrative, I invited each participant to reflect on their memories of being a student in an arts-based learning program, and how this has transcended into other areas of their lives, up until the present. I suggested that this could be as detailed or as simple as they chose, and could involve many different multimodal elements. For example, perhaps participants could choose to share their journey in a series of photographs or artistic work, or in the form of a short story, a musical composition, a digital story, a video or poetry. The purpose was for participants to be free in their expression and further encourage recalling their experiences of arts-based learning. I, as well, joined in with this activity and created my own narrative story, journaling my own experiences as a secondary student in an arts-based school and the series of events leading up to until the present. These memories were recorded in short journal entries, and have been included as small vignettes throughout this dissertation.

Using ‘creative narratives’ in her research on teacher identities, Leitch (2006) discusses the limitations of language and how arts-based methods deepen research by awakening the ‘unconscious’. By employing ‘multi-dimensional’ strategies, the researcher combined narrative and arts-based methods to work through the layers of memory, exposing hidden emotions affecting the professional identities of the participants (p. 549). She concludes that:

The creative narratives demonstrated the ways in which the teacher participants imputed meaning and power to childhood influences, early defining moments, epiphanies and critical incidents, all of which were emotionally laden. These unconscious dimensions were central to their professional identities. It is unlikely that such thick emotional descriptions of their professional life and the relationship between the personal and

professional biographies of these teachers would have been possible through the use of spoken or written language alone (p. 566).

She goes on to suggest that narrative, as a methodology, should broaden its definition to include arts-based methods, as I have, to capture the “dimensions of experience which normally lie below the horizon of conscious awareness” (p. 566).

### **The Evolution of the Factional Story**

Using both the audio recordings and transcriptions of the interviews in conjunction with thematic analysis, I created a single ‘factional’ story using fictional character composites that share a meaningful journey that is based on true events. As previously discussed, ‘factional stories’ are “a bricolage of previously collected data, analyses and fictive elements, combining research participants’ and researcher voices and presented as a short, first person story” (Kallio, 2015, p. 3). This story is fiction, but is inspired by the non-fiction interviews and arts-based narratives. There is much evidence of using creative fiction within qualitative research (Price, 2009; Luna, 2015; Leavy, 2013; Hammond, 2009), and I have included this factional story as part of my data analysis.

*Like language, fiction is a collective, piecemeal human invention. Like language, and like narrative, it has shaped the niche into which human minds are born and the societies in which they mature, to the point where humans almost from birth have story-craving minds.*

*(Boyd, 2018, p. 11)*

In his research on the evolution of stories, Boyd (2018) approaches storytelling from a cognitive science perspective, recalling the sequence in which the humans have developed stories through language and play, and how current niches have developed in sequence over time. Rooted in factual events, Boyd describes how complex thinking such as memory, language and comprehension has allowed our ancestors to ‘invent fiction’, enabling them to “explore the full range of human possibilities in concentrated, engaging, memorable forms” (p. 1). The researcher further suggests that narratives give a ‘far greater range of experience’, extending that experience as well to others, both existing and imagined. Further, he posits that “fiction permits

us access even to characters' inner lives, or at least to storytellers' imaginings of inner lives, to their attempts to render these more plausibly than other storytellers have done" (p. 10). Fiction, then, takes what we know, internalizes and makes sense of it, and then continues to a place of the unknown, offering possible or alternative versions of how that story may continue or possibly end. Moreover, fiction is a safe space to audition different versions of ourselves, teach lessons, find sense in the mysterious, but most of all interact with our surroundings on an intimate and imaginative level. For the analysis in my work, I interact with participant stories in a retrospective nature, and construct composite fictional characters that represent my participants today. These characters take on the personas of the participants, and tell a story that infuses actual events within a fictional and imagined tale.

## **Recruitment**

For this study, it was imperative that I used purposeful sampling, recruiting persons who had attended the same Northern Ontario Secondary school that I had, and had also attended the school during the same (or overlapping) years. My study included six participants, including myself, all from different disciplines and areas of employment, who share two commonalities: a) they have graduated from the same arts-based secondary school program, and b) they have graduated at least two decades ago. There is evidence of researchers applying purposeful sampling techniques in their research (Crawford, 2017; Fontanez, 2017; Suri, 2011), granting access to "key informants in the field who can help in identifying information-rich cases" (Suri, 2011, p. 66). It was important for my participants to not be selected at random, but rather be selected because our individual narratives are collectively shared; though experienced individually, we all shared in an educational experience that was collectively created. What I mean by this, is that all teaching staff, programming, extra-curricular opportunities and program details were the same; for this research it was also imperative to examine the arts-based program with consideration for these factors, and then take a closer look at the individual experiences of former students. Suri (2011) refers to this strategy as *stratified purposeful sampling*, and suggests that this can be "useful for examining the variations in the manifestation of a phenomena" (p. 70). I was keen to determine if my experience was unique, or, if it was in fact an experience that was so significant that other students also carried residual effects from this type of education.

And, if they did, was it the program itself, the social opportunities that it enabled, or something else that was so memorable?

*A colleague once asked me, what is the difference between drama and theatre? At first I could not answer, as drama is its own skill, or part of the bigger production of theatre, particularly musical theatre, which is my background. But the more I thought about it, my answer became more developed and thoughtful; drama is something that can be done independently, with or without an audience. Theatre, on the other hand, cannot exist without all of the moving parts, working together to create a whole production, as a team. From the set designers, to the band, to the dancers, to the director and the tech team – theatre brings people together from various different backgrounds and with varying skillsets, highlighting each of their talents to create something together. And although the show can go on with missing pieces, it is...different. It is not whole.*

*What is an experience if not with others? Can we experience great phenomena if there is not anyone to share it with, or at the very least, validate it? Are our experiences dependent upon a collective cohesion, and is there something different when we share in mutual experiences? In music, when voices are in perfect harmony, it gives the illusion that other voices are present; but this only happens when the voices are in perfect pitch and unison. This phenomenon sends goosebumps down my body. I question, then, what would happen if an educational experience was this in sync? Would a unique or additional energy be present?*

## **Participant Profiles**

On one of my visits home to conduct an interview, I could not help but to stop in to visit my favourite rustic used books store; a gem amongst the town core. As a child my father would surprise me after work with a brown paper bag, scrunched and shabby, filled with *Archie* comics. Because the comics were used, they were beautifully worn, crinkled with excitement by the children whom had read them before me. That store became a second home when I would visit as I grew. Without google, sources such as *National Geographic* magazines were key to the completion of school projects, sharing pertinent information about the world around us. I recall

the images of the pages; so vibrant and glossy, and quite pleasing to disseminate. I would carefully cut out the pictures from the pages and paste them onto large pieces of card stock. The smell of that old book store was intoxicating. From the narrow hallways to the retro runway carpets, it shared a story of my youth (and growth), and always seemed to carry exactly what I needed. This visit was no exception. Hidden in a back room with *Classics* and *History* sections, was a small shelf with books that appeared too new to be a part of this back area. I selected a book from the shelf entitled *The World of Post Secret*, a book imagined by Frank Warren (2014) when he invited people to share with him secrets that they held, anonymously, through artful postcards to be presented as a collection in his book. The pages were delectable. Vibrant images, just like the National Geographic magazines from childhood. The allurement in secret-sharing is the sheer relatable nature of the secrets. I felt very inspired by this idea, and decided to select a postcard for each of my participants (including myself) based on the story that each of us has shared.

## Carrie

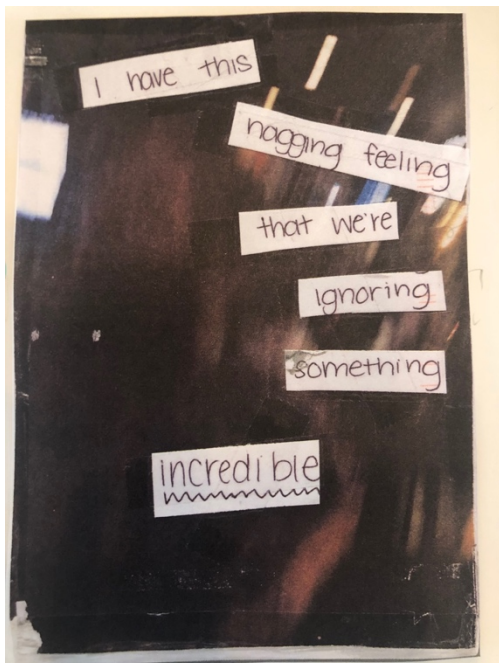


Figure 2: Postcard Selected for Carrie

I selected this postcard for Carrie as she is a very passionate supporter and advocate of alternative and experiential learning. She is a 40-year-old single mother of two (previously married, currently separated), and is an educator. She studied theatre and gender studies in Toronto following graduation from the arts-based secondary school, and later attended the teacher education program in our hometown following post-secondary graduation. Carrie has a strong theatre background, and has sought out opportunity to engage with theatre and artistic practice throughout her young and adult life. From small town productions to small groups at Sunday school, Carrie infuses her artistic

pedagogies into her world, and supports accessibility of the arts in learning.

## Sabrina

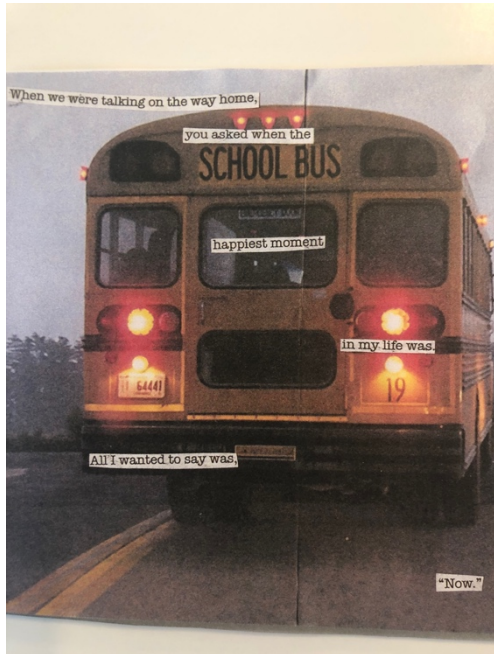


Figure 3: Postcard Selected for Sabrina

I selected this postcard for Sabrina as she and I have known each other since we were in middle school, and have many memories riding the school bus together to the arts-based secondary school. Sabrina is 38 years old, and is single with no children. She studied English in Toronto following graduation from the post-secondary school, went on to pursue a Masters and recently has completed her PhD. Sabrina has worked as a research assistant and part-time professor. Of all of the participants, I was closest with Sabrina, and spent many years engaged in the arts together both inside and outside of the school setting. From listening to the Beatles to upcycling clothing, Sabrina has a unique style, and engages with the world around her in meaningful ways.

## Charlie

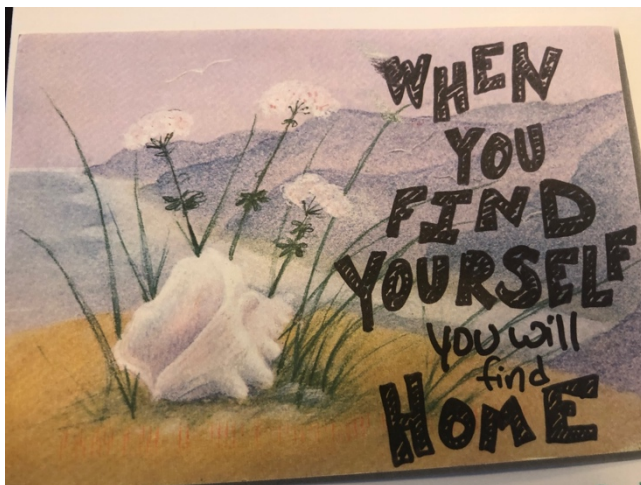


Figure 4: Postcard Selected for Charlie

Charlie revealed to me something about himself during our interview that I had not known, even though we have been in each others' lives since we were in elementary school. After secondary school, I had only seen him a handful of times, and it was beautiful for him to disclose that this school, this program, helped him to become comfortable in his own skin. I selected this

postcard for him to represent his growth as a person, and his journey through embodiment.

Charlie is also 38, and was in the same grade and many of the same classes as myself and Sabrina. He and Sabrina are close friends, and remain close to this day. Charlie is also single

with no children, and studied in Toronto for post-secondary school following graduation from the arts-based program. He is currently working in communications. Charlie has a contagious personality, and is a very creative person. Though he is unable to find time for theatre as a busy adult, he has taken to visual arts as a creative outlet.

## Ellie

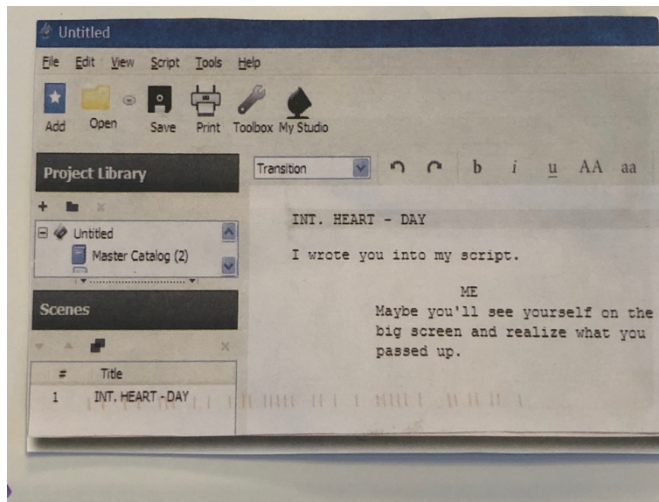


Figure 5: Postcard Selected for Ellie

Ellie is the only participant that I was not directly associated with during our secondary years. Although she attended the school at the same time that I did, Ellie was a few years my senior, and I was closer in age to her sister. We did, however, participate in the same summer programs and extra-curricular activities connected with the arts-based program. Ellie still lives in our hometown, is married with two

children, and is a secondary school teacher at a different secondary school than the one that we attended. I selected this postcard for her because she spoke so candidly about wanting her son to be connected with the program, and engaged in the arts-based narrative by writing a letter to her son as he approaches entering secondary school. Ellie is an educator in the arts and an advocate of the arts for students, sitting on committees supporting arts-based education. Her family has been long-time contributors to the arts programs that we enjoyed.

## Jolene

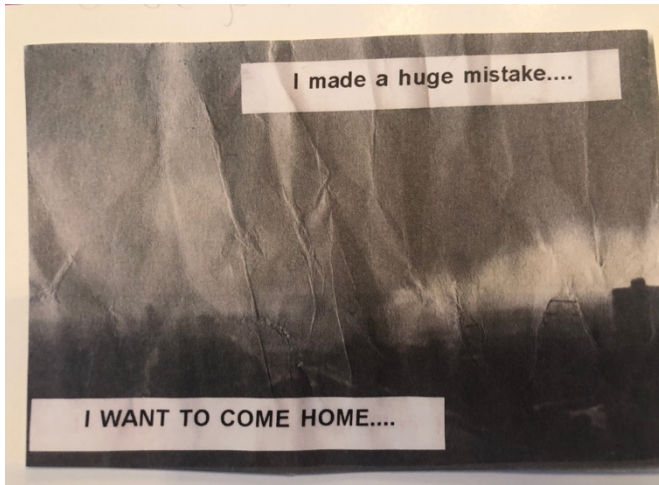


Figure 6: Postcard Selected for Jolene.

Jolene moved away from our sleepy small town, as did most of us, only to find herself returning over a decade later. She attended theatre school in Toronto following graduation from the arts-based secondary school and worked in film and television before moving back to our hometown to work at a community center. Jolene is 40 years of age and is single, and has no children. I selected this postcard for her to

represent her connection to home and her community. She was happy to return back to a space that holds so many memories and so much history. To this day, Jolene enjoys rich friendships with other graduates of the program, whom she had met while she was a student.

## The Researcher

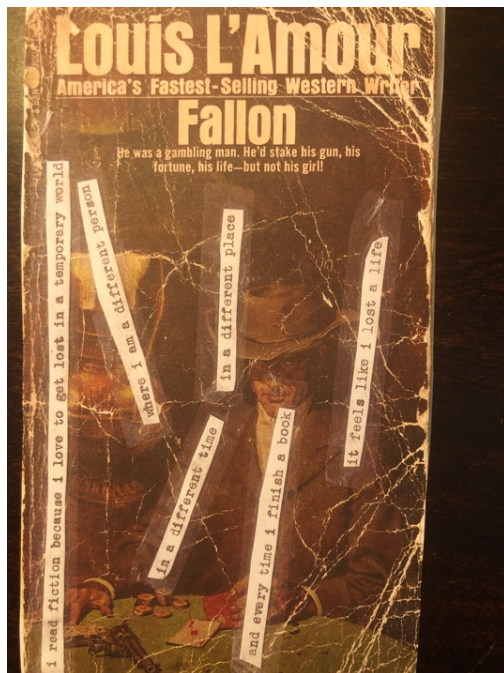


Figure 7: Postcard Selected for the Researcher

I selected this postcard for myself as it reads:

*I read fiction because I love to get lost in a temporary world where I am a different person in a different time in a different place and every time I finish a book it feels like I lost a life...*

Having a profound interest in fiction and fact-based fictional stories, I use this innate desire to inform my research and teaching practices. As a mother of two, a part-time professor and an elementary teacher, the world of stories has become the lens in which I view and interpret the world, having a particular interest in the

truths that lurk within creative works. The arts (including creative writing) is an opportunity to share a piece of ourselves through an alter-ego, leaving the audience to imagine which elements hold truth, and inviting them to interact with the story in ways that perhaps uncover some of their own truths. I believe that fiction allows us to be anything we want to be when we are not yet sure who we are.

### **Analyzing the Research**

I employed a general inductive analysis approach to answer the research question: *what are the effects of attending an arts-based secondary school program on the subsequent lives of six former students, including myself, who graduated two decades ago?* Thomas (2006) describes this method as being one that uses “detailed readings of raw data to derive concepts, themes, or a model through interpretations made from the raw data by an evaluator or researcher...The primary purpose of the inductive approach is to allow research findings to emerge from the frequent, dominant, or significant themes inherent in raw data, without the restraints imposed by structured methodologies” (p. 238). Consistent with the analytic strategies outlined by Thomas, my analysis was carried out “through multiple readings and interpretations of the raw data” (p. 239). I engaged in multiple audio interactions with the data, listening to the interview recordings several times, and also transcribed my data to enable me to use the physical transcriptions in the coding process. Each interview ranged from 25-45 minutes, as some participants gave richer and more detailed responses than others, and were recorded with a voice recorder application on my iPad and iPhone, with permission from participants. To analyze my data, I followed the steps outlined below:

1. I listened to the audio recorded interviews through headphones while walking in a natural setting. I listened to each of the 5 interviews 3 times per interview, on different occasions, careful to lend time in between to thoughtfully reflect on the words of my participants. I would stop and replay sections of the conversations, actively listening to their words, without bias or pre-conceived ideas about what I thought the themes could be.
2. I transcribed the interviews without the assistance of any transcription software. I wanted to connect and engage more closely with my data by completing the transcription by hand. The transcribed interviews ranged from 3-5 pages.

3. Next, I took the transcripts and cut them into meaning units. I wanted to achieve an overview and understanding of the continuum of my participants’ stories, and I did so by first cutting apart the physical transcripts, initiating what Saldaña (2013) refers to as the “First Cycle” coding process. I clumped together text that represented one key idea or “meaning unit” from the data. The meaning units were thoughtfully derived from the raw data, and ranged from a sentence to a small phrase, and represented one key idea. Below are the meaning units I used:

Participant	Meaning Units
Sabrina	52
Charlie	60
Jolene	47
Carrie	78
Ellie	72

Table 1: Meaning Units per Participant

4. Using the meaning units that I collected from the participant transcripts, I began to construct mind-maps. Beginning with the selection of a postcard for each participant (Warren 2014), I proceeded to use the mind-maps (Linneberg & Korsgaard, 2020) to conceptualize my data. In preparation for coding, I used the meaning units that I had collected from my participants transcripts to create the mind-maps. This step was necessary for me to complete in preparation for my coding and analysis, as this was a preliminary step and a way for me to become more familiar with the data. By first arranging the participant stories in a manner that represented their experiences as a continuum, I was able to dive deeper into burning questions such as *who were these individuals before enrolling in the program?* and *how did they grow and change in response to it?* (see below an example, additional Mind-maps in appendix)

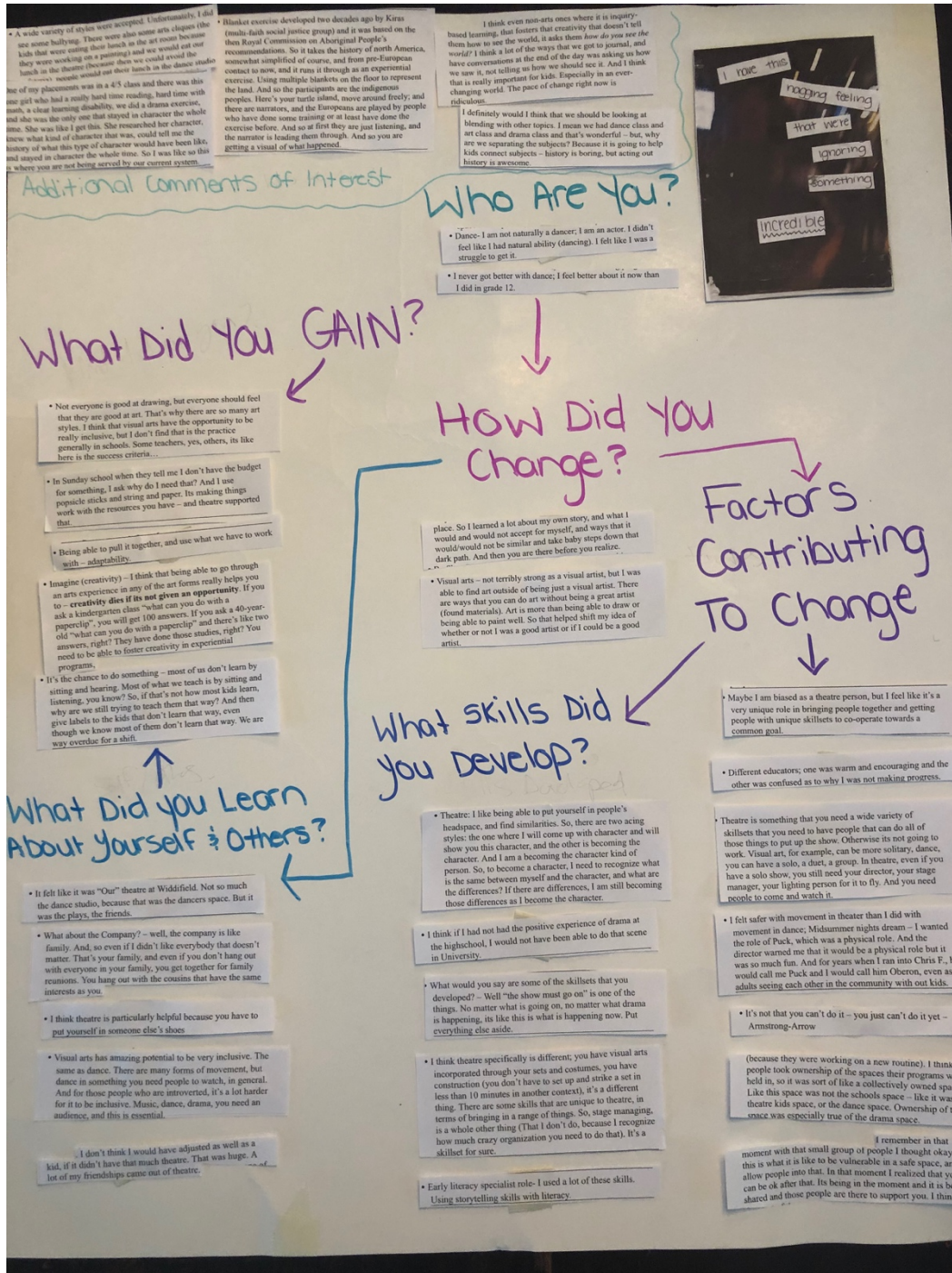


Figure 8: Mind-map for Carrie

5. To conduct my individual and cross-case analysis, I used the program Miro. Miro is an online whiteboard tool that enabled me to create and move labelled sticky notes. Through this initial analysis, or "first cycle" of my coding process, I sectioned out my meaning

units onto the electronic sticky notes within the Miro program. I began with 10 categories in my initial analysis, narrowing the categories throughout the different iterations. Below is a table providing a reference example for the categories that I used, a description of the code, and an example from the data. This table was adapted from Glaser-Zikuda, Hagenauer & Stephan (2020).

<b>Code</b>	<b>Definition</b>	<b>Reference Example</b>
Confidence/Self-Esteem	During/after the program, the participant developed a greater sense of confidence/self-esteem that he/she attributed to the program itself.	“I left a shyness back in grade 9 and it never really returned. I notice that other people are nervous to do a presentation in front of peers in a meeting, and I don’t feel like that. I am well spoken” (Jolene)
Inclusive Space	Feeling the opportunity for self-expression and difference; being accepted for who you are.	“A wide variety of styles were accepted” (Carrie)
Safe Space	Understanding that the space was free from judgment and supported you.	“You could be yourself in the theatre and feel safe” (Charlie)
School Culture/Environment	Philosophy or mindset that is a driving force; overall belief system in the program.	“We don’t see this kind of experience in other schools, this type of synergy; it’s a culture that can’t be replicated” (Ellie)

Creativity/imagination	Opening your mind to possibilities in learning. Encouraging deeper and abstract thinking.	“I think that being able to go through an arts experience in any of the art forms really helps you to be creative– creativity dies if its not given an opportunity” (Carrie)
Social Cohesion	Forming deep friendships ad connections with people. Connecting with other students on a more intimate level.	“What I got out of the program was the ability to make friends, form friendships and connections with people, in a deep way” (Charlie)
Supportive Role Models/Teachers	Teachers/supportive adults that were instrumental in helping students achieve personal goals and successes.	“The difference is who it was in the building – some of the biggest mentors of people’s lives were the people running the program” (Ellie)
Personal Growth	Achieving personal goals and challenging yourself to step outside of your comfort zone.	“I may be ignorant but that is something that I feel you would not get from playing a basketball game. That self-expression, that I think is so important” (Jolene)
Cross Curricular/Multi-modal Learning	Adapting skills learned in arts to courses to other curriculum components or classes; utilizing arts-	“Drama impacted other classes; for example, English – we would do full performances pairing drama with Shakespeare, or pretending to be authors giving an author’s talk” (Sabrina)

	based approaches to learning.	
Transferrable/lifelong skills	Skills that developed that the participants was able to utilize or benefitted them in some way after secondary school.	“One of my (teaching) placements was in a 4/5 class and there was this one girl who had a really hard time reading, hard time with math, a clear learning disability, we did a drama exercise, and she was the only one that stayed in character the whole time. She was like I get this” (Carrie)

Table 2: Description of Codes

6. Following this first and second cycle of my analyses of the individual cases, as well as a cross-case comparison, I was then able to employ a thematic narrative analysis both within and across cases. I first examined the individual narratives, identifying key themes and patterns, and then moved into a comparison of the themes across all of the narratives. The overarching themes narrowed throughout the coding process, moving towards identifying the final key themes.
7. Using the stories of my participants, I then constructed the factional story, based on the data collected from my interviews and the arts-based narratives completed by my participants. The arts-based narratives were used as artifacts within the factional story, and the story contained details from my research, as well as additional elements of fictional nuances.

## Introducing the Factional Story

In their research, Chandler, Anstey & Ross (2015) utilize ‘data visualization techniques’ to incorporate “additional modalities to further push the boundaries of qualitative research dissemination” (p. 4). Kawano (2017) “attempted to transform the participants’ verbal survey data into a dance/movement narrative” (p. 61) and Trayes, Harre & Overall (2012) employed a graffiti board as a qualitative measure for analysis. I am presenting my data analysis as a ‘factional’ story. A factional story, as I have outlined in the previous chapter, is a fiction story that encompasses factual events. My analysis for my study will unfold as a factional story entitled *To Get to the Other Side*. In this short story, I include myself and my participants in the journey of a PhD student who attends a celebration of life for the untimely passing of a young friend, and in doing so sparks a very clear idea as to how she will conduct her doctoral research. This story documents my experience completing my doctoral research, including following me through my research process, however details of the story have been changed. For example, while the celebration of life did occur, only one participant had been in attendance. Each of my five participants are introduced; their profiles and the details of their interviews are included, as well as their arts-based narratives. I use real quotations from their interviews and provide true details about them and their current life situations. Their names have been changed to pseudonyms, and the overarching sequence of the story is fiction. While the details are true, the construction of the story is imagined. As noted by Kallio (2015), stories and narratives are “seen by many researchers as a means to attend to the complexity and emotionality of educational phenomena” (p. 3). What we experienced as secondary students cannot be deduced to collected stories. Rather, I will share our story through a story...

*This morning I sat outside and watched the sun rise. I took in the coolness of the air, as the dawn of fall is fast approaching. I drank piping hot coffee, enjoying the company of nature. Around me tiny little pebbles were dropping like rain; I quickly realized that they were, in fact, the partial pieces of acorns. I looked up to see a giant black squirrel- it was dangerously close to the edge of the branch, forcing the branch to bend forward in such a manner that I questioned the laws of physics. How had he not fallen? Suddenly and briskly he leapt from that branch, landing safely in the solace of another branch of the giant old oak tree. Lucky jump, I thought, relieved that he had not fallen as the branch*

*was quite high from the ground. It was not until later in the day, reflecting on that experience that I realized something quite significant: the risk of potential benefit (food) outweighed the potential consequence (death). The squirrel had a choice to make- take a leap of faith or go hungry...*



Arts-based methods have allowed me to explore alternative and creative approaches not just in my data collection, but also in my analysis. Pushing the boundaries of what traditional research prescribes has led many researchers to deeper discoveries. It has led to more meaningful engagement with data, further connectivity with participants, and most importantly, innovative methods that unlock the possibilities not just in research, but also in learning, teaching and education. As an educator, a key component of any learning opportunity, is accessibility. And in my study I wanted to ensure accessibility was extended not just to my participants, but to myself. Arts-based methods have given me a space to conduct this study in a manner that allowed all of my participants (myself included) to connect with our past selves, retrospectively.

*I can pinpoint the timeframe that I realized I learn differently; by different, I mean less traditional. The linguistic measures employed by traditional schooling offered surface learning – memorization, recalling, reciting. However, music evoked a different level of understanding and meaning. Through music, I could explore stories and connect with the narratives of others. I could feel the emotion in their voices and connect with their*

*stories. I understood very early on that it wasn't language that was limited – our definition of what was considered to be language is what was limited.*

Leggo (2008) advises that “the pressing challenge with advising a person about the craft of story-making is that much of the process defies guidelines and rules” (p. 10). Artistic work is messy and does not follow a prescribed method; rather, it is in the unconventional that meaning can really be found.

In the section that follows, I will discuss the overarching themes from my data as I take a closer look at what these numbers mean through the exploration of our stories. I will offer a means of further data analysis through storytelling, and the fictional story that has been created from my research. In the six chapters of my novella, I include myself and my participants as characters in a ‘fictional’ story. In this story I am the main character (Flora), documenting my research journey to answer my research question, *what are the effects of attending an arts-based secondary school program on the subsequent lives of six former students (including myself) who have graduated two decades ago?*

## To Get to the Other Side

### Scene 1: In the Beginning

I remember the day I got the call. I can still feel the sickness in my stomach as I clenched my phone and tears streamed down my face. It was late in the evening, my children were snuggled in their beds, drifting further into dreamland with each shallow breath. I stood in the kitchen, fooled by my own whirlwind of optimism, and wondered if perhaps such optimism was in fact misplaced hope, fueled by my desire for a happy ending. In case you are wondering I am speaking of a passing. A tragic, untimely passing of a beautiful young soul, barely into her 20's, who had succumbed to an illness that robbed her of her youth, her life, but not her dignity. Even in her final days her true heart gleamed through her defeated body, refusing to face death in fear and anger. I had watched her grow, just a child myself when her mother carried her within her womb. Her mother, Mary, is a very close friend. Our friendship is beautiful, and is ever-changing and ever-growing as we move forward throughout the different phases of our lives. Phases her daughter has not been afforded to know or experience.

I met Mary when I was 10 years old, an elementary student with a big voice and even bigger dreams. My mother had hired her to give me singing lessons, which I attended weekly over the course of the next 8 years, before leaving that sleepy small town to attend University in the city. She saw something special in me – a spark, a talent to be nurtured. And although her initial interest was to develop my craft, our relationship is far from professional. She is a friend, a confident, a support system – she is like a second mother to me. She helped shape me into the person that I am today. I did not think it was possible to mourn so deeply for another person; the devastation I felt for her when her daughter passed was overwhelming. I could not comprehend how something so precious could be ripped away from such a loving and selfless woman. Her strength throughout this tragedy is admirable. In true theatrical fashion, she maintains her composure and has carried through her daily activities in a manner consistent with our mantra – *the show must go on*. In our life of theatre, regardless of what happens or how you are feeling, the show...must...go...on. Without props, with wrong music and even without actors – we must go on. And this is where our story begins. With death comes reunion, and a new beginning for friendships.

My name is Flora, and I am a mature graduate student with a laundry list of responsibilities. I have two young children, two dogs, multiple jobs and against better judgement my biggest dream is to become a celebrated fiction author. Not the stuffy kind, but rather one that has a huge imagination, questionable sanity and overall is a bit of a mess. People like interesting people, and I have always been a bit quirky, with my big ideas and social anxiety. When I was a kid I was overweight, and so I was teased and ostracized. I would free myself through my writing, in the characters and the multiple lives that I could be living. Writing your own story is very powerful, and it lifts the burden of the social hierarchy. But when my peers finally broke me, I succumbed to the pressures bestowed upon women by the media, and I developed an eating disorder that held me captive for the next fifteen years – until I became pregnant with my first child. With the considerable weight decrease came a new-found increase in popularity, and a screeching halt to my stories. I was moving up in the real world now, and middle school is no time to appear different. During this time, however, and throughout my secondary years, I had a group of friends that shared my love of theatre, my passion for fiction, and had a desire to entertain. Over the years my stories slowly came back to me – that is, until adulthood, when I was robbed of them for good. Or so I thought.

Mary decided to celebrate her daughter's life the following spring. Her death had brought such sorrow to our close-knit community, and it only seemed fitting to celebrate in the spring, a season that brings promise of a new beginning, and the growth of something new. I had written a poem for her daughter, on a plane to a conference a few weeks before her passing. Mary had informed me that things were not looking good, and that her daughter was now living on borrowed time. The news weighed on my heart like a ton of bricks, and I carried with me a heaviness that stole the air from my lungs, and left my stomach in knots. I boarded the plane that chilly morning, and I remember feeling guilty that while I was traveling to a beautiful venue, she was suffering in a hospital bed. It felt unfair. It felt wrong that she would not experience birthing a child, or getting married or graduating from post-secondary studies. She had left her program when she fell ill. I could not come to terms with the possibility that a life so premature could come to a conclusion without having the full story written. Without being given the chance to play out. And so, with warm tears streaming from my face, I gazed out into the miles of beautiful clouds, and I wrote this:

***Where the Sky Meets the Trees***

*I know a place where the love never ends,  
It sweeps further and wider and longer and bends.*

*Up over the mountains and down to the sea,  
Over the treetops and back down to me.*

*Through narrow streets and up through the park,  
Shining light everywhere, even in the dark.*

*How you may ask? Well I will tell you why,  
People don't leave even after they die.*

*They live on in our hearts as their spirit roams free,  
Soaring and smiling and laughing happily.*

*And if you are quiet and perfectly still,  
And open your mind and your heart then you will*

*Here the soft whispers and feel the cool breeze,  
And capture the voices in those moments you seize.*

*You see people don't leave they just simply move on,  
To a beautiful place, they are not really gone.*

*They live in the air and swim through the seas,  
They live in the space where the sky meets the trees.*

*So dry your tears, this is not the end,  
Simply farewell for now my dear friend.*

I read this at the celebration of life. I could barely choke the words out and stood red-faced and blubbing in front of the hundreds of people that had come to pay their respects, share stories and give performances. Mary had asked me to participate in a musical number at the event, to which I happily volunteered. But little did I know that this gathering would resurface a period of time that I had laid to rest to move on with my life. An earlier version of myself that I had sacrificed to move into a more professional role and live up to backwards expectations that I had placed upon myself. This celebration brought a new beginning alright. It opened the door to a continuation of a time that I never forgot and had always carried with me. I was home.

I looked around the room at all of the familiar faces – faces that appeared to not have aged, though two decades had passed since the last time that we were together in the same space. Memories flooded back to me as the beautiful sounds of harmonized voices carried through the basement of an old church that held many memories. A church where I sang in the choir, and forged many long-lasting friendships. A church where I later performed in a Christmas show as an adult mother, now bonding over nighttime routines and breastfeeding horror stories, with people I once knew as an adolescent. I can smell the fragrance of essential oils, and am overwhelmed by the beauty of tiny lights, strung together intimately, creating a small glowing ambiance that filled the room with light and wonder. As I take my seat my heart begins to race.

“Jolene?!” I call out to a dark-haired girl sitting just a few rows ahead of me, adjacent to where I am seated. She is sitting alone, still wearing her coat as though she is unsure whether she plans to stay. Her hair is much shorter than I remember, but in any case it is still her.

“Flora?! Oh my God, how long has it been?”

Her curly hair bounces as she rises from her seat and rushes over to take the empty seat next to me. We enjoy a long overdue hug, and from the embrace I can sense the mutual excitement of the moment. “I didn’t know that you were coming to town”.

Jolene moved back to town recently, after having lived in the big city for many years. She had attended a college for the performing arts, which I envied because that never seemed to be an option for me. It was the expectation that I would study in a more traditional stream, as school and studying came easy to me and my parents had high expectations for my future. But Jolene

had followed her heart, and wanted to see where her talent would take her. And she had a good run, too, but people grow and dreams change.

“You look amazing!” Her skin was milky and her hair still rich with colour. She looked healthy and happy and not much different than I remember her.

“Not having kids will do that to you”, she said with a chuckle and a soft nudge. She was right, though. The curl had fallen from my once full-bodied hair, my grey highlights peeking through. I had not had time to dye it before this event. My skin looked aged, slightly blemished with the lack of sleep and improper nourishment. But I had two small kids, and if I am honest had let myself go a bit.

“Are you singing tonight?” I asked, although I knew that she was. I was two hours early, as Mary had asked all performers to come early to rehearse before the celebration of life was scheduled to begin.

“Of course I am. Just like old times eh?”

We were singing a group number from one of Mary’s favourite musicals, *Les Miserables*. She had sent us each the sheet music to review on our own, and we were coming together to piece the harmonies.

“I have not been on stage in forever”, I said, half because I was nervous but mostly just excited.

“Can I have all performers for the musical number to the stage please?”

“I guess that’s us”. Jolene stood up and started towards the stage. I put my purse and jacket on my chair and followed her. I felt a warm hand touch my shoulder. I turned around.

“Carrie?”

Now this was definitely a reunion. But I knew that before even coming. On the long drive back home, I had anticipated seeing familiar faces, and wondered who would be able to make it to the celebration. Carrie was another fellow arts alumnus who went on to become a teacher after studying the arts post-secondary. She also had two children, who, despite her dark hair, were

blonde-haired and blue-eyed angels, cute as can be. She had grown up in the church, not that one though, and to this day is still very active in her family's church.

"Jolene, look who it is! It's Carrie Swanson!" The three of us embraced.

"Am I late?" Carrie asked.

"Nope...just in time". The three of us ushered up to the stage to prepare for the most beautiful rendition of *Epilogue*. It was like old times. I looked out at the sea of chairs, eagerly awaiting an audience. I remembered that feeling, during the final dress rehearsal before a big show, a mix of fear and excitement, a surge of energy and an overwhelming sensation of accomplishment. We had so many theatre experiences, the three of us, and at that particular moment I was thinking of our last show together, *Children of Eden*. That show was my most memorable, and also my last, before going away for university and leaving the stage behind me.

I had played Yonah, a young servant girl who experiences a taboo love with Japheth, son of Noah, who is forbidden to love a descendant of the race of Cain. A biblical tale, this show featured detailed costumes and sets, and was a turning point for me on the stage. After many years and countless productions, it was in playing this character that I fully absorbed the story, and on the stage I was sucked into a different world. I forgot all about the audience; I was Yonah, and I was terrified of my looming fate and the flood that was to come. I remember feeling engrossed within the story...a story that felt real. It was a magical experience, and I think that was a pivotal moment for me. A recognition that 'fact' and fiction were not binaries, but rather could be entangled together in a third space.

In later conversations, Carrie confirmed this same phenomena, but in a different experience. She spoke with me about 'putting yourself in other peoples' headspaces', and talked about how she 'becomes the character' when she is on stage. She had explained that her process in doing this is to first recognize the similarities and differences between herself and this other person, and then absorbing those differences to become the character. She had given an example of a dark character that she had once played, who was a woman that had left her child out in the freezing cold to die as a result of being brainwashed by a cult. She told me the experience had felt so real that it took a long time before she could get through the scene without crying. She could not come to terms with why she was making this choice for her baby. She explained that

by understanding these differences between herself and the character, she could then reconcile the differences and start to see things through another person's perspective. In the end she had become so submerged into the psyche of this woman, that audience members commented on the realism that she had portrayed, and claimed to have held their breath during this scene.

When rehearsal ended, we decided to grab a bite to eat before the celebration began. We ventured to a nearby café, *Stix*, a landmark in town that carried so many stories and housed many secrets. From first kisses to late night study parties, this place held so much history.

“Oh my God”, Carrie exclaimed as she swung open the door and ushered for us to go ahead. “Do you girls remember this place?”

The air was dense with the smell of fresh scones and expensive coffee; the good kind, freshly ground. It had a diner feel but was clearly a coffeehouse. Over the years it had been upgraded as well. They now carried flatbread pizza and sold booze. Nothing special, just ciders, wine and some beer. The staple items remained though, and their bagels and scones are to die for. I looked around at the updated décor that had been tastefully restored. A newly finished touch but still authentic – I liked it.

“Where do you want to sit?” I asked as I started towards the back of the room. A silly question, because there is really only one place to sit: the back booth. It was oversized and cozy, nuzzled in the back corner. You could have privacy but were still able to eavesdrop on neighboring conversations. Lucky for us the booth was open and we piled in. Carrie and Jolene on one side, me on the other. If I have the option, I prefer to sit alone. I like the extra space.

“So”, Jolene started, “tell us about your exciting life in the city”.

I rolled my eyes. “I don't actually live in the city. We live in a small town in the country *outside* of the city”. This was the truth. When my husband and I moved back to the city, this was the deal. I wanted my kids to experience small-town life, just as I had. I have such fond memories of my childhood.

“Really? How is that?” she asked, looking casually through a tabletop advertisement for specialty drinks that week. There were no menus, you ordered at the cash. There was no fancy waiting service.

“Good. I...”

“Eeek! Sorry to cut you off, Flora. Look who is here!”

I spun around to see Charlie and Sabrina walking in. The two of them had been the best of friends in high school, and we had kept touch over the years through social media and such. They had both moved down south for school, and still live there. Twenty years since graduation, and they still share a very close bond and see each other regularly. They were never romantically involved, though, which is likely why they are still so close. In fact, the last I heard Sabrina was engaged to be married in the near future.

“Sabrina! Charlie!” Jolene shouted. She motioned for them to come and join us. I scooched over to make room for our friends, and was glad that the big booth had been available so that we could all sit together. I was sad to lose my space, but excited for the welcomed company. Sabrina slid into the booth next to me, greeting me with the warmest hug. Charlie sat on the other side, so at least it was just the two of us sharing this space.

“Hey, Flo, what’s the soup de jour?”

“Very funny Charlie”. I leaned across the table to give him a hug. “Never gets old, eh?”

“Guuuuuys.... this is so amazing,” Carrie said, wiping a pretend tear from her eye. “Let’s get a picture!”

We all leaned in as Carrie held her phone with her arm outreached.

“Carrie, I don’t think we are all going to fit”, I said with speculation.

“Oh stop! We ‘80’s kids know how to get this done – no selfie sticks here!”

We laughed as we squished ourselves against one another and against the table. My leftover baby weight was digging into the table as I smiled the largest, most obnoxious smile possible. My side hurt but my heart was full.

“Say cheese”, she said, grunting as though somehow that would make her arm stretch further.

“Chhhhheeeeeeeeeesssssseeeeeee”.

“Send me that”, I said almost immediately after the flash went off. Relieved, we all collapsed into our seats as though we had just done something triumphant. That’s what happens when you are getting older. Everything feels like so much work.

“What are you guys doing here?” Jolene asked. “Are you in town for the celebration of life?”

“Yes! Are you?” Sabrina replied, taking off her coat.

“Yes, we are singing”, I chimed in. “I didn’t see you at rehearsal today?”

“Oh we are not singing. We are taking a trip to the other side”, Charlie announced with a little wink. Of course he was referring to being an audience member.

“It’s so sad that it took a tragedy to bring us all together”, Carrie said softly.

She was right. We had all been so close in high school. We spent long hours in rehearsal together, show after show, oftentimes touring with the show for various competitions. We were like family then, but once we all left for university, life got busy and everyone was spread out across different cities. I know for myself, a lot has happened since high school. I moved down south for university, went on to teacher’s college, got married, moved back to my hometown to teach, had two kids and completed a master’s degree, and then moved back to the city to work on my doctorate. Quite the whirlwind. I had finished my comprehensive examinations and was in the process of designing my research project. I had an idea of what I wanted to propose, but was still ironing out the details. I was so glad to run into former classmates because I really wanted to flush out my ideas with them.

“Ok, what do you guys want? My treat”. I motioned for Sabrina to get up so that I could get out of the booth. “Want to share a pizza?”

“They have pizza?” Charlie asked, looking puzzled. He and Sabrina had worked here as teens, which was beneficial to all of us because we would score free drinks when we came here to study. “What kind?”

“Flatbread”, I replied. “Not sure what kind, though. I will surprise you. Coffee, too?” I looked around the table to see a unanimous nod.

“I will have a non-fat chai latte made with a combination of almond and cashew milk, not too hot, with a touch of cinnamon on top”, Sabrina announced with a grin.

I just stared at her.

“Just kidding”, she sang with a smile. “Coffee is fine”.

It used to drive Sabrina nuts when people would order something super complicated with a laundry list of requests. We would joke about one day making enough money as adults to afford fancy drinks and feel entitled enough to impose such detailed demands.

“Don’t talk about me while I am gone”, I joked as I walked away to place our order.

When the food came we were pleasantly surprised with the quality of the pizza, and our stomachs hurt from laughing so hard. I had tears from the overwhelming laughter as we shared stories and reminisced about our years together performing.

“Guys”, I lowered my voice as if to share a secret. “I want to share an idea with you”.

Sabrina was also completing her doctorate, though she was studying English and poetry and was ahead of me in her studies. She was doing final revisions and would be depositing her thesis later that year.

“How would you feel about being part of a study?”

They looked puzzled and a bit concerned.

“Not like a study to try out new and unapproved drugs”, I joked. “A study that would tell our story. A way for us to demonstrate the profound impact that high school had on us – to share our experiences attending an arts-based school, and how this has affected our lives almost two decades later”.

They looked interested. We had all gone on to do different things – one a teacher, one a communications expert, two scholars and one environmental and indigenous advocate. We were all successful in making goals and achieving them, and most importantly, we all had a support system that helped us grow as people. When I look back at this period of my life, I can’t deny that this experience shaped me in some way. I may not be the same person without these experiences. And I know that my classmates felt the same way.

“What a cool idea”, Sabrina said, nodding her head. I was happy to have her approval. “What exactly would this study entail in terms of commitment? I have some tight deadlines to meet if I want to graduate this year.”

“I was thinking that I might interview my participants, asking questions about their experiences, and then ask them to create some sort of arts-based narrative piece reflecting on a specific memory based on an experience at the school”, I replied, looking out the window as I formulated my answer. I was still working through how this might look. “Would you guys be interested in doing something like this?”

“Sure”, Jolene volunteered. She was an advocate for alternative and experiential learning, and as a teacher she was feeling the cuts made to arts funding.

“Sounds interesting”.

“I would be down for that”.

“I am in too”.

“Really?” I asked, so happy to have their support. “Let me think this through and I will reach out once I have something more concrete, ok?” I felt excited.

“It’s settled then”. Carrie said with a smile. “What should we have for dessert!?”

That night was a memorable one. We laughed, we cried, but best of all...we were together. Supporting each other and supporting Mary as she had done for us as far back as I could remember.

When I arrived home several days later, after a whirlwind of chats, visiting friends and family, and experiences that I will carry with me forever, it was clear what I needed to do. I went into my basement, pulled out a box of photos, poured myself a glass of wine, and I spent time going through photos and reminiscing. I smiled as I saw the youth in our faces, and the zest for life that I could feel through the pictures. There was something so unique about that time – was it the program? The people? The teachers? Or a combination of them all? Could it be a re-created for other students, and if, so, what exactly was *it* that I was trying to re-create? I sat down at my desk and began writing out my research proposal. The beginning of a story - our story – and I just knew that others needed to hear it.

## Scene 2: See You at the Sun Cat

I spent the next few weeks digging through peer reviewed research, working through the flurry of ideas that I had stewing in my brain. There didn't seem to be many current studies that looked at arts-based education in a retrospective context, and as I put together a review of the literature, I found myself stuck in the process.

A text came in.

“Hey friends, breakfast today? 11ish?”

I was excited. Over the course of my studies I had become very close with a group of colleagues, all in the same program, but in different subject areas. It worked - we could bounce ideas and rely on feedback from one another because each of us was far enough removed from the others' fields and research. It gave us an 'outsider' perspective, and opened us to new possibilities that we may not have otherwise come to on our own. Although very different in their doctoral research directions, my three colleagues all grew from a history background, which I did not. My undergrad was in the social sciences.

“Yep”, I replied, with a little happy face. “See you guys soon”.

I always type out the full word when I am texting. It drives me crazy when people text things like 'u' or 'luv'. At one of our breakfast meetings we had a full discussion about vernaculars, and certain pronunciations of words or structuring of sentences that stayed with us since childhood. We all came from small towns, spread out across the country, and had all developed mannerisms and certain 'isms' that made us remember who we were and where we came from. As I have grown older it is important to me, living so far from 'home', to always be authentic. I am not a big city girl, and that's ok. I remember there was a time when I was trying to be – and my now husband said that he could tell that I was from a small town. And that was a compliment.

I stepped out of my office to walk to our regular watering hole, not giving myself enough time to get there, obviously. I texted the gang but they knew me well- I was always 15 minutes late. For everything. I don't want to be. I try not to be. But since I had the kids...who am I

kidding, even without the kids I can't get myself together. I think I just like to overcommit myself. It keeps me motivated. I work best under pressure and with short time frames.

It was a hot day and I was overdressed. Not my favourite. I prefer the fall when there is light breeze, and I can wear my wrap-around sweaters comfortably. My husband says they make me look like a bag lady, but I don't care. I especially love oversized 'Mister Rogers' style sweaters, that open in the front and have buttons that I never do up. But not today. Today, it's warm, and I can smell the delicious fragrance of grease coming from a nearby chip truck. I always wondered how people stomached French fries in the morning, but let's be honest, the homefries that I plan on ordering are really the same thing. I walk down the street, to the sounds of car horns and firetrucks. I also wondered how there were so many fires downtown, where I worked on campus, but quickly realized they were false alarms. Usually just someone burning toast or cooking in the residence buildings. I arrived at the *Sun Cat Pub*, which is literally a five-minute walk for me. This is my favourite space; it's a dingy diner with the best food and even better company. The man that owns the place is adorable, and to be honest I think that he looks forward to seeing us. We come once a week, and when we have missed weeks in the past he inquires about why he has not seen us. Originally, it was just the three of us, myself, Karla, and Tim, and once Tim brought his new girlfriend, Sam, to the Sun Cat without the gang. Well he didn't hear the last of that for a while – it was cold tea and poor service for him.

I swung open the door and pranced in.

“Hey guys!”, I proclaimed, not concerned about disturbing others that may be there. To be fair, it was usually pretty dead mid-morning, another reason why we liked this particular time. There was only one man there that day, and he appeared to work for the city, likely waiting for his co-workers to take a break. I ushered past him with a small smile as if to say hello, to the far left table where we always sat. Every time we were there I pictured the four of us as characters from the movie *The Breakfast Club*, and would laugh when '80s tunes from the musical score would play on the radio. It was the same feeling that I get when dramatic or ballad type music plays in the car while it is pouring down rain. I can picture myself in a movie, tears streaming down my face as I look longingly out the window, ironic showers pouring down as the windshield wipers work feverishly to keep up with the storm. I am such a nerd. We, did,

however, start calling ourselves *the breakfast club* eventually, and joked about whether we could do so because of copyright.

“Hey friends”, I chirped excitedly, aware of just how annoying I was at this hour of the morning. Although my day starts at five, my childless colleagues bring themselves to life much later, not having to commute or make lunches and get children off to school.

“Coffee?” our owner friend asked.

“Yes please!”

“Tea for me please”, Tim corrected him politely, although he knew this because we were here all of the time.

“Three coffees and one cold tea. Got it”.

I loved that he was constantly bugging Tim. It wasn't in a rude or malicious way, rather, it was quite endearing. We had reached that point in our relationship where he was comfortable with sarcastic humour. I loved it. And I loved his slight accent. We always felt so welcome there.

“So, what's on the agenda today?” Karla asked. We had to literally start making agendas because when we got together it was complete and utter verbal diarrhea, and we never seemed to get through everything we wanted to talk about. We talked about everything, from our studies to politics to gossip in the media, and to people observing our conversations we probably seemed obnoxious. We get very excited and talk over each other and topics switch rapidly – hence the need for an agenda.

“Well”, I started, “I don't want to make the conversation about me, but I have some ideas for my thesis that I wanted to run by you peeps to get some feedback”.

“Shoot, that's why we are here”, Karla said as she poured milk into her coffee. She was so awesome and supportive. I am sure that without her I would have had a breakdown by now.

“Well”, I said, “what do you think of the idea of me writing my dissertation as a fiction novel? Obviously I would go through all of the same processes to collect my data, review peer reviewed literature, etc. But essentially I am sharing a story based on multiple narratives and accounts from past classmates, so why not take those ideas and share them in an actual story?”

“That’s a cool idea”, Tim said with some skepticism. “But what would that look like?”

“I was thinking that once I have collected all of my data and analyzed it, I would take that information and create a fiction story with it, using characters that are based on my participants. Obviously I would be the main character, and it would be first person narrated”.

“That’s pretty cool”, Karla chimed in. “So basically you would be sharing the truth without *really* sharing it”.

“Exactly!” I said. “Isn’t that the beauty of storytelling? Or fiction? Or non-fiction? Or legends? The truth is in there, but which parts? I think sometimes when people write fiction books, there is more truth than the author lets on. I think that fiction is a way to tell a true story without having to share all of your secrets”.

“Truth”, Karla said as she sipped her coffee. “Have you run this idea by your committee yet?”

“Not yet”, I replied. “I wanted to see what you guys thought first, to make sure that I wasn’t going too far off of the deep end”. We all laughed. “But seriously though, I have been doing a lot of research and I am not the first person to think of this. Other well known researchers have brought in fiction elements and written novellas as part of their research. Honestly I can’t picture myself writing my dissertation any other way”.

“Then do it”, Tim urged. “Just make sure that your methods are well supported”.

This is what I loved about Tim. He was very practical and very methodological in this thinking. Not me. My thoughts and ideas are often so abstract that I just need someone else to point out how to reel them in a bit. But the support that I was getting from our little gang made me feel even more excited about the idea, and determined to shape it out.

After breakfast I decided to take the afternoon off. I was feeling rather creative, and I wanted to take this opportunity to really sit with these big ideas. Could I, in fact, write my dissertation as a novel? I decided to go for a walk through the forest behind my home, to gain some perspective. I brought along my headphones, and loaded up a podcast. I like to listen to spooky podcasts – anything from ghost stories to murder mystery to dark teen fiction. I know, by my Netflix “watch again” list, you would think I was thirteen and not a grown woman who is

pursuing a doctorate. Nonetheless, I thoroughly enjoy being scared...in the daytime. I am a super chicken once the sun goes down. Its fascinating that the inviting and playful nature of the forest somehow transforms into a spirit infested torture chamber at night; as the sun sinks further down into the abyss, so does my courage. Do you know what does increase, though? My imagination. I have the ability to take any small crinkle of a leaf or footsteps of a squirrel and turn it into a wildebeest hunting human prey, or a skin walker emerging from the darkness. Nonetheless, I decided to continue listening to what I believed to be a docudrama podcast; turns out after listening to an entire season that this particular podcast was, in fact, not a docudrama, but completely fiction. The writers had carefully crafted the story, infusing elements of conspiracy, science, history and of course myth and mystery...all neatly into a well-told, completely believable fiction series. They even marketed it strategically as a true story escaping government hush, exploring the emergence of evidence of a surfacing ancient myth – a space on Earth cultivating a portal to another realm or frequency. It was not until a fellow colleague and fan of the podcast affirmed, “you know this is fiction, right?”, that I realized that I had been completely sucked in.

Strategic, isn't it? A podcast framing a story so real, weaving true events with fiction so seamlessly that you begin to question what is fact and what is fiction. At points I found myself buying into ideas that seem impossible, questioning my threshold for gullibility. At any rate, I was now well into the second season, had discovered the truth of the writing strategy, and was even more determined to craft a dissertation that allowed me to tell a story. I just wasn't sure how? Do I make the story completely outrageous, and perhaps even tap into the horror genre that I enjoy so much, or do I tell the story how it happened, with embellishments and blurring of events to create a smooth progression and protect the identity of my participants? Decisions, decisions.

I slipped on my headphones and began to walk. I became so enthralled by the story that I was listening to that I let my mind wander; I quickly became obsessed with the natural sounds of the forest, peeking through the musical score that accompanied the coarse voice of the narrator. His story was truly compelling, and although I now knew the truth of the podcast, that didn't make it any less eerie. I began to walk more quickly, more of a brisk shuffle really. I stared up into the forest canopy, breathing in deeply the fresh air. Suddenly I was reminded of a doll I had



meditation, but also an entry for the supernatural and unexplained, as well as a keeper of secrets and mystery. As the steps drew closer my imagination ran further, and I began to walk more briskly. The sound was gaining momentum, and the sensation of my heart pounding vibrated inside of my headphones. Where was I? How far had I ventured into the woods? It was clear that in my daydreaming I had strayed from the structured path, and was now lost in a space that did not at all look familiar. I took out my headphones to prove to myself that I was being ridiculous. I held my breath, reliving the trauma of my primary-aged self, and could hear the faint crackle of twigs snapping and leaves brushing from all directions of the forest, taunting me like a small child playing peek-a-boo. “Hello...” I called out like a half-wit, hardly believing that I could be this fearful in broad daylight. The noise kept getting closer and closer, without any explanation or accompanied by any person or animal. Then, in a state of *déjà vu*, I could hear my name being called in the far-off distance – “*Flooooooortrrrrraaaaaa*”. I started to run, still unsure of where the exit to the woods would be. With each thud of my feet on the forest floor I could hear an equally piercing elevation of my heartbeat. It felt as though someone – or something – was upon me. The energy was drawing closer and closer and I feared that I could not outrun *it*, whatever *it* was. Suddenly I felt a weight on my back, accompanied by a sharp drag of.....nails? I mustered up the courage to spin around, only to find...my dog.

“Flora, did you not hear me calling you?”

It was my husband.

“Why were you running?”

I couldn’t tell him the truth. He says these podcasts feed into my imagination and that they just freak me out. I disagree. I think they encourage creative flow and open the possibilities in storytelling and narratives. As we walked back to the house it became very clear to me how I would design my research proposal, and more importantly, how I would present my research. I had a knack for storytelling, and I was going to tell a story. That night I finished sketching out my research proposal, and many months and several drafts later it was approved by my committee. And I was ready to roll.

### Scene 3: Reconnecting with Past Friends

#### Jolene

Over the next few months I reunited with my past classmates and one by one, I completed interviews. My first interview was with Jolene. She was the most accessible; she did not have any children, lived in my hometown, and was very accommodating and responsive to my e-mails and inquiries. As I had mentioned, Jolene worked in the film and television industry in the big city, and had recently moved back and was working at a community centre. My participants were not selected at random, but purposely, and Jolene was the first of my past classmates to share her story with me. We met at *Stix*, as I had asked where would be most convenient for us to meet. It was winter, and the cold, brisk air invited tasty, hot beverages.

“Jolene! Thank you so much for coming!” I greeted her with a warm hug and much appreciation.

“Of course! I am excited to be a part of this. How does it work exactly?”

“Well, I began, first, we get some drinks. Hot chocolate ok?”

She shook her head in a manner that confirmed that this was a great choice. I walked up to the counter, placed the order, and waited at the end counter for the drinks. Watching the young girl steam the milk I was overwhelmed with a distinct feeling of nostalgia; this moment reminded me of one particular trip to Toronto, when we had made it to the regional level of a drama competition that we competed in each year. As an arts school, we had what I felt to be an advantage over other schools competing as they had only drama classes and departments. Our school was different, as we housed an entire arts *program* that held us to a different level of commitment, interest and determination. During this trip to Toronto, I remember experiencing Starbucks for the first time, as this type of coffee chain did not exist in our small northern town at that time (it has grown since then, and there is one now). I recall being enthralled with the modern look of the building, and the excitement of the busyness and stir in the streets outside its doors; the city is so inviting when you are young. I thanked the girl once our drinks were ready, and tapped my debit card.

“So, how have you been?” I asked in a genuine manner.

“Good. I am glad to be back and I know my mom is happy to see me. I have been helping out in our community. The city was exciting, but this is my home.”

Jolene is from a very small town (even smaller than this one) having moved here just before she began secondary school. Her classroom in elementary school had only nine students in the class, and was in a very small rural community surrounded by trees and water. Jolene has a strong connection to her community, and I wondered how she would fair living in such a large and fast-paced city. She spoke of her post-secondary experience in theatre school, and how our secondary experience encouraged her to further pursue theatre. Jolene described herself as being outgoing and quirky, but felt fearful and shy transitioning to such a large secondary school (in comparison to the intimate classrooms she experienced in elementary school). She discussed the incredible and instantaneous connections that she made with peers through drama and dance classes, describing the experience as being “magical”, finding a support system in the close personal relationships that turned into lifetime friendships. She described how, through this program, she “bloomed” as a person, growing confident and finding her voice. After moving to the big city to pursue theatre at a post-secondary level, she recalls that the other students did not have experiences like what we had during those formative years, and I found this both surprising but also fascinating. We knew that this program was special, but we did not have any idea just how special until we were all grown up.

“Jolene”, I asked, “would you recommend arts-based models of education to current secondary students?” Her response was not as simple as a “yes”.

“Absolutely”. She began. “It’s almost like therapy. Everybody should do it, regardless of where you think you are at. And just to be exposed to these great works of literature. But then also, you have to get in touch with yourself and get real with yourself”.

I found her response fascinating. It is true – theatre is a space unlike any other. It calls you to question who you are and allows a space to try on different characters or personalities. Through these transactions you can start to uncover who you really are. Which characters do you relate to and which conflict with your own moral compass? Allowing yourself to be vulnerable can be very powerful, but also requires a safe and supportive space to open that part of yourself.

“We don’t want to put ourselves out there but we have to just let ourselves be vulnerable”, Jolene said. “And from that moment on you are addicted – you can’t wait to go back up there and do it again. Its such a rush to let people see you for who you are”.

I found this statement to be particularly powerful; to be an adolescent, letting go of the fear and just embracing the trust and support of those around you. That is really something.

I had asked my participants to do an arts-based piece reflecting on their experiences, leaving it open to whatever that may look like. It could be art, interpretive dance, poetry, storytelling...Jolene chose to write a poem.

**One. Single. Memory.**

Words in black and blue  
Paper bruised  
I have gone sailing, the waters in my mind  
A sea of dark ink memories reflects between pink lines  
Had I not gone sailing today would they still be left behind?  
No  
They are a constant  
Charting my course to this day  
This ocean holds so many memories, thousands upon thousands of waves  
Powerful, fleeting, they wash over or lift me, sometimes taking me away

How unfathomable to reach deep in these fathoms for but one  
Single  
Memory

I reach and reach  
Yes  
This is THE ONE

A sunrise is held between my fingers and thumb  
Of all the thousands upon thousands why this one  
Single  
Memory

A dawn in yellow and pink  
A life on the brink  
A journey starts step by leap following my bliss  
A life of joy and friendship, of confidence, of risks  
Had I not seen the sunrise that day what else would I have missed?

*Figure 9: Jolene Arts-Based Narrative*

Her words pierced my memories to lend an affirmation that only those who experienced this program could understand. I have been shaped by this experience and truly believe that had I attended a different school I may be a different person. Every day when I am teaching I display an energy that resembles performing. I feel like I am stepping onto the stage and feel exhausted at the end of the day. I go home and rest and prepare for the next day's show.

### **Carrie**

Carrie was my next interview. It was more difficult to find a time to meet because, like me, she is a mother of two, and is also recently separated and is a single mother. She is an educator and is a supporter of alternative education. She is also very involved in her church, having first been exposed to the theatre and the arts through the church. Unlike Jolene, Carrie moved from a big city to our small northern community at the tail end of elementary school. She has an eccentric style and a very versatile personality; Carrie can fit in with any group, and is drawn to the social "misfits", in the sense that she does not feel the need to impress anyone. She knows who she is and if you don't like it, that's your problem.

I met Carrie at a very unlikely place to conduct an interview – the local swimming pool. Both of her children had swimming lessons that morning, so while they were left in the hands of the instructors, we retreated to an upstairs lounge and found a quiet space to chat.

"Thank you so much for meeting me", I said gratefully. "I know how busy you are". I felt that busy was an understatement. Carrie was raising her children, working, volunteering at the Sunday school at her church, and adjusting to her new life. I could appreciate the tired look in her eyes, and her relaxed body language as she had a rare hour to herself. Motherhood really is an all-encompassing responsibility, and though its rewarding, it is emotionally and physically exhausting. My daughter has never been a good sleeper, and the sleep aspect alone robs you of sanity at times.

"It's nice to catch up", Carrie responded with a smile. "I wish I had more time this weekend, but we have two birthday parties and dinner at my parents". I totally understood the jam-packed weekends, and had driven from the city back to my hometown to conduct the interview (as I had with Jolene). Unfortunately, I could not book both interviews in the same weekend, and so I had driven down again for this interview. As it turned out, I had driven home on separate weekends for all three face-to-face interviews (two were via video call). But, I didn't

mind. It was nice to spend the extra time with my parents, who still live there, and I was happy to be making progress with my research. The community pool was beside the large hockey arena. When I had first pulled into the pool parking lot and parked my car, I thought about all of the fun memories of that place. We used to attend a large hockey tournament there where each secondary school hockey team would compete against each other (there were five secondary schools – which seems like a lot for a town with less than 60,000 people in it). Since our school had a performing arts program, we would do a dance routine during intermission, and students at the school would audition to be a part of it. I can remember being in ninth grade and having the opportunity to participate in the “on-ice” dance. I can still remember the bright green full-body leotard that we had to wear, and the cool chill of the arena wearing such a ridiculous outfit. Ironically, I did not feel ridiculous, though. The arts were such an integral part of our school community, and the dance portion of this event was very exciting and well-supported by the teen population. I recall the roar of the cheers and the stomping in the stands. I am unsure if they still hold this event, but it was great fun.



*Figure 10: Me preparing for "on-ice" dance routine*

“This place hasn’t changed much” I observed, taking out my iPad to record and a notebook and pencil. I used to take my daughter swimming at the town pool when she was just a baby – I actually had both children in this town before moving back to the city for my husband’s job. Nostalgia swept over me as I heard the sounds of whistles and laughter echoing through the building.

I began with my first question: “describe yourself and your life before enrolling in the arts-based secondary school that you attended”. I listened carefully as Carrie told me about her younger self, and her profound interest in the arts from a very young age. Living in a larger city (prior to moving here) she was afforded many opportunities to explore her creative side. I still find it a wonder that in such a small community such rich opportunities would find us. I would compare our opportunities to those of a bigger city...

Of all five of my interviews, I found Carrie’s to be the most interesting and the most detailed. Carrie shared with me details of her experience that differed from my own; first, Carrie did not enjoy dance the way that I had in secondary school, and second, she found solace in the visual arts studio, which is a further extension from the theatre. Her perspective was that because she felt that she was not a dancer, that space was less inviting. I myself was not a strong dancer, but found the space to be fun and engaging. Carrie brought up the idea of the educator creating that safe and welcoming space, and noted that she did not respond particularly well to that teacher. I, on the other hand, had a very strong bond with the dance teacher, which contributed to my sense of ease and enjoyment in that space. I made a specific note about this: the educator sets the tone and energy for the space and not vice versa. And student perspective of that tone will influence their experience. Interesting.

Carrie compared this point to her interest in visual arts. She expressed that “art is more than being able to draw or paint well”, and that she was able to “find art outside of being just a visual artist”. She spoke of breaking the boundaries of structured art, moving into using found materials to create art. She recalled creating an art installation that included broken pieces of glass to re-create a shoreline, and the freeing nature of expressing herself without the worry of being “good” at it. I considered how I felt about visual arts and my own reservations towards visual arts based on the preconception that I was not “good” at it. Interesting how a change in perspective can free a student from the confines of fear. Had I perhaps had a better relationship with the visual arts instructor or felt welcomed in that space, I might have felt confident enough to take risks and try something outside of what I perceived visual arts *should* be or *should* look like. It was in this moment that I realized that fear, not ability, prevents student success. The narratives that we tell ourselves are so profound and so powerful that even with the proper tools and skill sets, fear prevents success. Carrie and I went on to talk about the safety of the theatre, and the idea that the theatre welcomes everyone; the theatre is a space where we can truly be

ourselves - or not - and a space that requires many different skillsets to complete a show. Theatre is also an expressive art that invites interpretation, removing the pressure of being “good” at it. As well, as Carrie had pointed out, unlike visual arts, dramatic arts requires an audience and is a collaborative art, whereas visual arts is an art that can be done in solitary, and does not require a group collective. The collective experience of the theatre, for me, is what makes it so intoxicating. And Carrie felt the same.

After reaching out many times, sadly I did not retrieve an arts-based narrative from Carrie. As I mentioned, Carrie is incredibly busy, and her interview was the richest, and provided the most detailed account of her experience. So for this I was grateful.

### **Sabrina**

Of all of my past classmates, Sabrina and I share the closest relationship. Sabrina lived on a street just behind where my family home was located, and we forged a close bond in junior high before embarking on our theatre journey together. Sabrina was raised by her father, and her mother was a professor in another city. Her father was delightful, and we had cute nick-names for him, and he humoured us by not reacting when we used these endearing names to address him. I always envied Sabrina’s care-free nature, and her ability to be her own authentic self in every social context, never wavering or feeding into social pressures. She loved the Beatles and looked like a flower child. She was upbeat yet calm – and still is. Not surprising, Sabrina was also a PhD Candidate (I say was because she has recently completed her program), and is part of the English department at her university. She always loved literature, and I recall her regularly sitting in the library during our secondary school years, coolly finishing a paper that would be due later that day. I have no idea how she always pulled this off. She would start and finish a paper in a day in one sitting – I have to carry ideas around with me and work through those ideas in sections. Nonetheless, we both loved literature and the theatre, so it was an easy friendship to forge.

As I mentioned, Sabrina works in academia, and lives down south. She has a partner that she lives with, and is the same age as I am. Her interview took place over a FaceTime call, and the reunion could not have been sweeter. Although we have stayed connected via social media, Sabrina and I had years of stories and information to share. We laughed and chatted, sharing

stories and spoke about graduate school. Finally, it was time to get down to business and conduct the interview as it was the only evening that week that worked for both of us.

“Ok, Sabrina, for real we need to get to work. How this will work is that I will ask you questions about your past experience attending an arts-based program, and you will tell me about that experience. I am going to record the interview as well, is that ok?”

“Of course, not a problem”.

“Great! Alright let’s begin”.

Sabrina went on to tell me about bullying that she had experienced in elementary and intermediate school. I was completely shocked as we had become good friends before starting secondary school and I had no idea. Sabrina and I had different groups of friends, with only a few friends in common during junior high, and hung out mostly outside of school. As it turns out, Sabrina had come to the arts school and enrolled in the program to escape the bullies that would be attending the secondary school to which we were assigned. I would not be attending that assigned school because I was attending this special program, and, although Sabrina had an interest in the arts, she had entered the program as an escape from a social circle. We spoke about this, and it is interesting how things could have been so different for her; she could not imagine what her experience would have been like had she attended that assigned school. We have so many amazing memories of the arts school and had travelled together for competitions and spent long hours at rehearsal – it really shaped us. No other school in the city (at that time) offered anything like what we were doing.

Sabrina told me that her original major and minor were music and visual arts. Very interesting considering that we spent most of our time in the theatre. By the tenth grade she had transferred to drama from music, keeping visual arts as a minor. She spoke about her transformation from being a shy student, unhappy about attending school, to a student that loved school – she described the experience as one that “got me out of my shell as a human being”. She explained that the experience of the arts spilled out and positively impacted all of her other courses, pairing drama with language, for example, and giving performances and author talks in English.

“All aspects of my life were coloured by the experience, for sure”.

“Thank you, Sabrina. Do you feel that any of the skills that you learned were transferrable? In other words, did you carry anything forward with you from that experience?”

“Of course!” Sabrina replied. “Some of the skills from drama I continue to use – thinking on the spot, feeling comfortable speaking in front of people, teaching...”

“And would you recommend arts-based models of education to current secondary students? Why or why not?”

“Yes, I think it makes all the difference. The arts are so important, such a safe space for so many different kinds of people. High school can be a brutal time for a lot of people – this gave us outlets for teenage angst – it gave us positive outlets leading us to be well-rounded people, more in touch with ourselves and gave us important life skills. It was more than just school – it was a passion project. When I had drama homework to do, I would go home and do that homework – I would memorize those lines”.

Sabrina was right. The theatre was special – it was a safe space for everyone. And we were all so different, yet it brought us all together, and offered something different to each of us. Sabrina had ended our interview by saying “I think it takes a special kid to be drawn to the arts, but the arts can also change people. Some students just happened to fall into it....and then fell in love with it”.

For Sabrina’s arts-based piece, she decided to complete a composite of different song lyrics that she had memorized “by heart” from different shows that we had been a part of throughout our secondary school years that she still knows to this day.

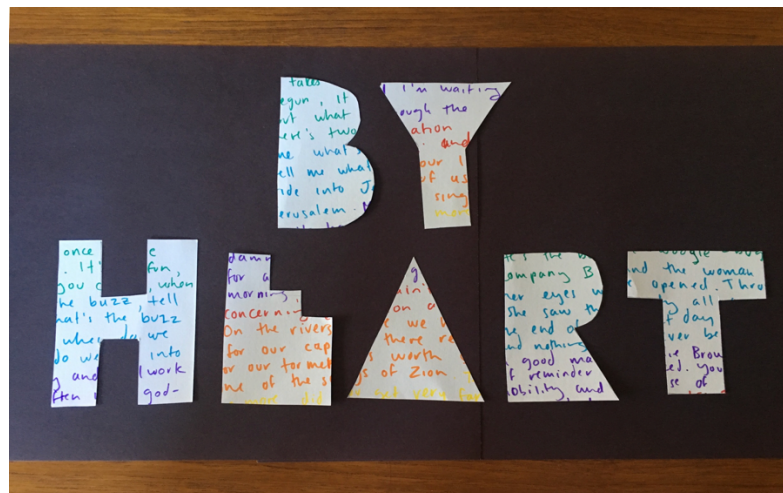


Figure 11: Sabrina Arts-Based Narrative

## Charlie

Although Sabrina and I had been the closest friends, Charlie and I have definitely known each other the longest. Charlie and I go back to the early elementary days, having attended the same elementary school and being in the same class most of those years. Charlie is a very interesting person, very likeable, and can fit in with most crowds – with the exception of the athletes. Charlie was a shy kid with a great personality and a quirky sense of humour, and, like Sabrina, did not truly come into himself and out of his shell until secondary school. Charlie did, however, get bitten by the theatre bug early, third grade to be exact, when he and I shared the same teacher, Mr. Cox. Mr. Cox was truly eccentric, and his passion for theatre filtered into everything that he did; school became a stage, and he taught with such charisma and excitement, that I felt myself drawn to his energy. His arts-based approach to education made learning feel like devised theatre; everything was performative. I can recall doing ‘mad-minutes’ for multiplication, and Mr. Cox made it feel like I was in a game show. His unruly appearance and non-traditional teaching methods made learning fun. Outside of the classroom, Mr. Cox was determined to bring the theatre to the school. Now, as a teacher myself, I realize that, in an elementary school, the opportunity to be fully engaged in arts-based learning and extra-curricular theatre is only possible if a generalist teacher has a special interest in the arts, and brings that passion to the school. Unlike the arts school that I would later attend, elementary school curriculum calls for a small portion of the curriculum to be allotted to the arts, and teaching pedagogies differ from teacher to teacher; we were so fortunate to have someone with that level of passion influencing us.

I have two very distinct memories that I will share. The first, a theatre competition in third grade, in which Mr. Cox had us construct very elaborate puppets for the scene. These puppets were made of foam, and were cut and fastened together with glue before being spray-painted out on the school lawn. I still remember the feeling of the strange material rubbing on my skin, and the rush of excitement being on the stage. My second memory of Mr. Cox was a much larger school-wide production that Mr. Cox had orchestrated called *Christmas in Oz*. A chubby kid, I was cast as Santa Clause, and although I was a young female battling feelings on my changing body, I felt confident and validated because this was a lead role, and many of the older kids in the elementary school were only in the chorus. Charlie and I spent a considerable amount of time laughing and reminiscing about these memories before his interview.



*Figure 12: Me at a 4th Grade Drama Festival*



*Figure 13: Me as Santa in "Christmas in Oz"*

Charlie moved to the same southern Ontario city where Sabrina now lives, too. I am envious that they were able to remain close, as the two of them were such a close pair in secondary school, and remained close into adulthood. I had also conducted Charlie's interview via FaceTime, given the travel distance and poor winter weather. Charlie wound up working in communications after post-secondary school, and was as delightful as an adult as he was as an adolescent.

Charlie told me about his struggles, too, in middle school. Perhaps I should clarify that our middle school was separate from both the elementary and secondary schools in town; for grades seven and eight, we attended a school designated only to those grades, in a school all on its own, not connected to any other school. This scenario is unique, as generally these grades are

in a separate wing of either an elementary or secondary school. I remember feeling as though it were a preparation for high school, having lockers and gaining freedom and autonomy that we did not have in elementary school. However, I now recognize the bullying that took place at this school, as this was a “feeder” school for the public elementary schools in town. This school housed the majority of students in our town (of those ages) after elementary school, and then filtered us back out to one of the several secondary schools for grades nine through OAC (we had grade thirteen back then). Nonetheless, Charlie as well had fallen subject to adolescent cruelty, finding solace in the arts-based program in secondary school. Upon entering this program, Charlie described it as being a “positive experience”, and that he felt as though he “really belonged”.

“It just felt really nice to be a part of that group of people”, Charlie told me.

I moved through my questions, recording our interview and of course getting consent. “Charlie”, I began. “Tell me about your overall experience of participating in an arts-based educational program, including any critiques that you may want to share?”

“Well”, he said, “really forming those relationships and friendships was so important. One of the special parts of the program is that it was relatively small, so you got to know everyone and build trust with those people. That’s what made it so special – the close relationships”.

Charlie did make note of the same observation that I had. Unlike Carrie and Sabrina, Charlie and I did not feel a connection to visual arts during that time. As he pointed out, it was really self-directed in terms of interest. We had the freedom to select a major and minor for the program, and were expected to select a certain amount of courses in each stream to graduate. Outside of this, “elective” courses were opportunities for further artistic growth, but not required. Charlie noted that he had wished that there was a push for us to explore other facets of the arts, as he had picked up visual arts later in life, as did I. He made the interesting point that as a busy adult, visual arts offers a creative outlet with a lower level of commitment (as an adult). As Jolene had mentioned in her interview, visual arts can be explored independently, whereas theatre is a community effort with many moving parts and several pieces contributing to the whole. It was not until graduate school that I came into visual arts, having come to the theatre

because I could sing. So music, drama and dance were all areas of interest, but I as well did not interact with visual arts or take any courses during my secondary years.

“I wish I had gotten to do more of the visual arts side of it”, Charlie told me. “I am busy. Committing to rehearsals is impossible as an adult, but picking up a pad of paper and drawing on a Saturday afternoon is much more accessible”. I agreed.

For his arts-based piece, Charlie chose to create an illustration from a scene in *You're a Good Man, Charlie Brown*, one of our last shows while we were at the arts school. This show was special because it was a side project, and a few of the stronger students were hand picked to be in the show, directed by an up and coming teacher of the arts. I recall that rehearsals were held out-of-school and off school property, at a large (I believe abandoned) nunnery. Charlie and I laughed as we reflected as adults on the interesting choice for rehearsal space (likely this is what was available). As young students we would try to scare each other in the large, old, church-like building. At night, when we would hold rehearsals, the building gave a very eerie vibe...rumour was that it was haunted.

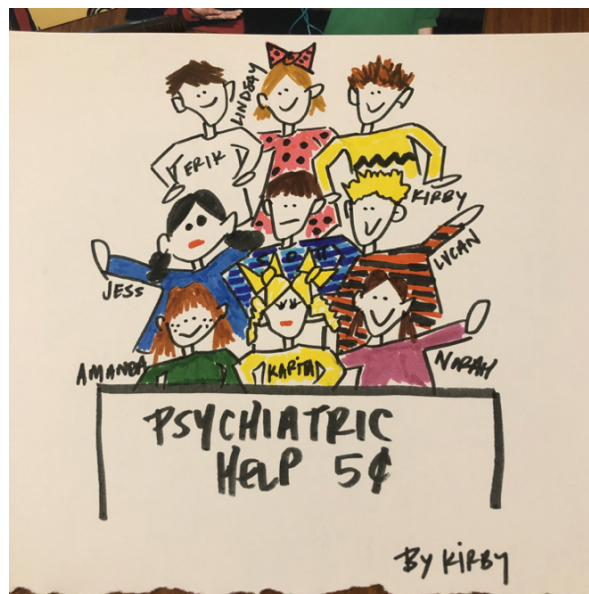


Figure 14: Charlie Arts-Based Narrative

## Ellie

Ellie was not at the celebration of life for Mary's daughter; Ellie was a few years older than I was. Though we were at the school at the same time, we were not friends (as there was an age difference between us, which was significant enough in secondary school), although we were connected through our tie to the arts (dance and drama). We both participated in school dance and theatre clubs, as well as seeing each other each summer at a summer arts program for which we obtained secondary school credits. This program was open to students city-wide, and offered the opportunity to be a part of a large-scale production. The program called on actors, dancers, singers, musicians and visual artists to spend the summer collaborating on a musical theatre production. Jolene, Charlie, Carrie and Sabrina all participated in this program each summer as well. Some of our best memories stemmed from spending five nights a week all summer long at rehearsals – a seemingly unexpected commitment from teenage students. The program was run out of the arts-based school, as the facility was well-equipped for rehearsals of this caliber. The school had multiple spaces to use such as a full dance studio and theatre, large music room, visual arts studios and multiple other spaces that could accommodate large groups of people. Ellie knew Mary, as Mary was the vocal instructor each year for the show, but Ellie was a dancer and did not sing, so she did not take private lessons as many of us did, and spent more time with the choreographers and directors.

I reached out to Ellie, who is now a secondary school teacher, as we still maintain a connection through teaching the arts, and I spent a considerable amount of time with her sister (also a past dancer) when we were both on maternity leave together. We met at *Stix* for an in-person interview (the same place that I had met Jolene). And I am really happy that I did, because as it turns out, Ellie had a lot of inside information and perspective about the origins of the programs that I enjoyed. The summer program, for example, was built upon a vision, volunteers, and a culture of parents that supported and nurtured the program. Funding, as it turns out, is a minor obstacle when you have a community of people that believe strongly enough in something. Ellie shared with me how the (extra-curricular) theatre company that we were both a part of at the school grew as a creative process in a time when technology and social media did not exist. What did exist was a group of engaged and committed leaders and parents that were socially connected – not in the sense that we know today. Theatre parents in this small

community donated time, did fundraising, contributed resources and were physically there. They came together as a community, building a program that has left a long lasting legacy in that community; a group collective sharing the same philosophy and vision.

“We don’t see this kind of experience in other schools, this type of synergy”, Ellie said with concreteness. “It’s a culture that can’t be replicated – it’s the philosophy”.

I reflected on her words. Culture is central to the arts. An unwavering belief in something greater than just the sum of parts – an expectation of greatness, an unbreakable passion and the realization that anything is possible with a community of like-minded people. Ellie shared with me her story, which was similar to those of my other participants. Prior to secondary school, Ellie was what she described as being an “underdog”. She wasn’t a great student, and wasn’t feeling success at school before joining the program. “People assume that teachers were not the ‘underdog’ kids, but that’s not true. It’s incredible how much my marks changed over the five years (because of the program)”.

Ellie had initially joined the program to dance, and after shopping around and seeing what the other schools had to offer, enrolled with the encouragement of her parents to do so. She spoke about the different perspectives (of the teachers) depending on which facet of the arts that you were in. Like the others, Ellie gravitated to certain aspects of the arts based on both interest and relationship with that teacher. She recalls not always “meshing” with the drama teacher at the time, who had a very strong personality and high expectations for his students. However, she felt that “having to navigate different personalities and different perspectives from different teachers made the difference. It gave us diversity in learning”. Upon reflection, she realized that the drama teacher was doing a great job and holding her to a higher standard, only as a sixteen-year-old student she could not appreciate his ethics until she herself was a drama teacher.

“If you miss school, it impacts you. But attendance also impacts the arts. Even as a teacher, I do not miss rehearsals”.

I thanked Ellie for all of the insight that she had given me and asked if there were any skills that she may have taken away from that experience and carried them into her career as a teacher.

“Absolutely”, she replied. “I had a major personality change. The shy, quiet person that I was in ninth grade is gone. I am more outgoing and confident. It is so scary to think where I would be (without having been in the program). I always thought I would be a teacher, but I don’t think it would have happened had I not done the arts at that time. To literally be given a voice, and to be told that your voice matters, is probably the biggest thing that the arts provide for kids. No matter how successful you go on to be, to know that you have an opinion and you have a voice and you can use it, and there is a variety of ways that you can use it (you can express yourself through music, through movement, monologues, anything at all). I can’t believe who I was in grade nine and who I was leaving that school. It was hard to leave. I don’t think anyone wanted to leave”.

Her words pierced me with a wave of nostalgia. As a young person that was not afforded the same opportunities as children from other families, this program literally supported me in realizing my true potential. It sparked a sense of curiosity and wonder, led to supportive friendships and close bonds with mentors and teachers – I do not know who I would be had I attended a different school. Regardless of the perception of others, I know with certainty that another school, a different program, would not have afforded me the personal growth and the student experience that I (we) had.

For her arts-based narrative, Ellie decided to write a letter to her son, who is the same age that we were when we entered the program. She felt it was important to share with him her experience, and used this an opportunity to write creatively.

#### A Letter to my Son

*As a graduate of an Arts-based education secondary program and after spending time working alongside my 13-year old son on a local community theatre project, I had the following realizations about the value of the Arts in Education and the impact on our youth. As my son is about to enter into an Arts-based speciality program in high school, I wanted to take the time to reflect and to encourage him to connect with the Arts and observe the life-long learning it can provide and offer.*

Dear Son,

This weekend I was able to witness your bright, authentic smile full of pride on your face.

I could see the laughter in your eyes.

I could hear your changing, confident voice exploring a new form of self-expression.

I could sense the maturity of what was happening over the course of one weekend because you were surrounded by people who were kind, loving, supportive and allowed you the opportunity to explore a new passion, that they also shared. A community of Artists provided you with this!

You had a chance to explore what it felt like to be involved in a community of open-minded, accepting, kind and creative people.

This weekend you added to your personal network, you made new friends, young and old, male and female, outgoing and quiet, with multiple leadership personalities and amongst those personalities you were able to carve out your own and have an authentically great time.

You were able to add to your skill sets and repertoire while having a great time. You did not even know you were learning and growing!

I was so happy to hear you say how much fun you had exploring the Arts during the production.

You talked about how much fun you had with the people during lunches, dinners, adjudications, workshops, travelling in the car with the people you met, on elevator rides and more.

You showed discipline, professionalism, leadership through a very challenging technical experience and it didn't turn you off. I think it actually "lit" the fire that will drive your creativity for years to come.

I want you to know that this doesn't necessarily happen in all aspects of life. You were just fortunate enough to experience what it feels like when that little bit of "magic" occurs in the Arts.

This can happen when you have the right blend and mesh of people that create a cast and when you have a leader and director who believe in providing opportunity for all, especially for new people so that they can learn and to grow within the creative process.

You experienced something that most students your age do not get a chance to experience and you will forever cherish those memories and the opportunities of learning that you experienced during the production.

I hope that even if you don't choose this as a pathway or a career or job, you realize how very valuable and important the Arts and the community that is created through the Arts is on your life and in your life.

The Arts help to shape us; they challenge us, they make us feel in a world that is far too numb; they bring out our creativity and spark joy.

I watched you as though you were the star, you reminded me so much of myself at your age.

I watched as you problem-solved so many times this weekend. I watched you mature before my eyes and I was so proud to see how you embraced the entire process and that when we came home you still wanted more!

Today when I picked you up from school, you commented that you would have preferred to have been with your cast and crew and doing more lighting than to be in school, so I feel that the Arts "bug" may have been planted on you! Nothing is more exciting than live performance and shared responsibility and collaboration.

I hope you know that the upcoming Arts education that you are about to receive in high school will be there to help support the passion you have for the Arts, and it will contribute to your skills and technique. You probably won't realize this until many years after graduation but I will do my best to point this out to you as you work your way through school. It is so very visible for me to observe.

My wish for you is that you will always will embrace the Arts, even when others may not.

I wish that you will continue to celebrate the Arts with your family and that when you have a family of your own one day, that you will understand the significance and the importance of the Arts, especially on the youth, and that you will engage them in a celebratory, supportive and accepting community of artists.

The Arts are necessary in a world that has so much hate and anger.

*This weekend I witnessed your laughter, your love, your honesty, your commitment, your passion, and I don't see those things all the time, on a regular school day, so I was very happy that you had the chance to explore the arts and to feel like this might be something you might chose to explore as you begin grade 9 in an Arts-based educational program in September*

Figure 15: Ellie Arts-Based Narrative

As I drove the four hours back to my home I felt validated in my experience. Hearing my friends and classmates speak about their experiences left me with a desire to further investigate the stories of students who attended arts-based schools, and really uncover what these spaces can provide to students during the most vulnerable and impressionable years of a young person's life. The sun shone brightly through the car windows as I listened to show-tunes and found myself thinking about Mary's daughter. A beautiful girl with so much potential. I wondered if she knew how fortunate she was to have a mother like Mary, and how much I wished that things could be different.

#### **Scene 4: Always a Dreamer**

In preparation for my data analysis, I drove back to that small northern town, to walk the streets and become reacquainted with my roots. I parked on the side of the main street, which for this hour of the day was unheard of in the city. I am used to circling the area around my destination, scanning for a space to park, then anxiously racing into the space before another car took my place. I forgot this feeling – like everyone was operating at a half-pace, with no real urgency to get anywhere. It was nice. I got out of my car, which was parked conveniently in front of my first stop – an old used book shop, which had been there long before I was even born. This was a space that I frequented as an adolescent, and of which I have very fond memories. As a child I can recall my father coming home from work, a brown paper bag in hand, and my excitement to read the new Archie comics that he would bring home for me. I have always loved to read, and I can still remember the feeling in the pit of my stomach, a combination of euphoria

and appreciation, that my children may never experience in this society of instant gratification. They will never feel the joy of simplicity as I had when I saw that brown paper bag. They will never know the feeling of excitement to watch TGIF Fridays on the television, the only night certain programs would be aired during the week. Or having to wait until a commercial to run to the washroom, only to race up the stairs and hurry back, anxious that the show might start up again and you would miss something, and there was no way to get it back. Every time I come back here, to this town, I get a feeling of nostalgia, like it is forever 1989; a sleepy town frozen in time, holding all my memories in an hour glass sand timer. Slowly I am moving further and further from these memories, and it is so important to me to never forget them.

I opened the door to hear the familiar chime of bells attached to the top of it, and could smell the delicious scent of ripened books and stale air. I noticed that they had expanded, and it appeared that the store behind this one had been absorbed by the book shop. I smiled at the young girl working at the cash, noticing the same old cashier till and a new large round mirror hanging above her. They must have upgraded the security system, I thought to myself as I ventured through the doors and walk towards the back of the store. As a pre-teen I recall coming here to purchase National Geographic magazines for school projects, as there was no internet to feed us information. There was something so satisfying about cutting pieces from those magazines, and posting them onto poster boards for presentations. No PowerPoint, just poster boards and dioramas. I walked past a display of Coles Notes, another go-to for secondary school students in the '90s. Many of my friends would skip the tedious process of reading Shakespeare and go right to the Coles Notes. But not me, I was too much of a keener for that. I read every single assigned book. Geeky, I know.

I stopped and picked up an aesthetically pleasing book entitled *The World of Post Secret*, by Frank Warren. It looked new and had a beautiful hard cover. As I started to leaf through it, I was surprised to see that it was a compilation of postcards containing the secrets of people from all over the world. People had written down their darkest and best kept secrets onto a postcard, and mailed them anonymously to the author.

I sat in a nearby chair and cracked open the protein shake that I had brought with me for this afternoon adventure. Page after page, I could feel the liberation of the people writing these notes, finally relieving themselves of an emotional burden that they likely had been carrying with

them for years. I was mesmerized not only by the beauty and detail of the art on the postcards, but also felt connected to the statements. Some of them were humorous, others dark, but they were real. It frightened me that these people could only be truthful without the fear of judgment; without the possibility of being known or connected to their secret. I realized that I, too, had secrets that I would never share, and for what reason? Were they really that bad? Not really. But we all present a version of ourselves that we think we should be – a partial truth. I think deep down we all feel that the ‘real’ person that we are would not be accepted by others. Such a sad revelation. I thought about what that meant for research and that fact that many participants likely are not giving us full answers to our research questions. The likelihood is that they are giving us the answers that they either think we want to hear, or the answers that they feel they should be providing. And this is why I enjoy arts-based research. Arts-based research gives participants a space to tell their story without actually *telling* their story.

I looked at my phone to see that I had spent a considerable amount of time sifting through that book. Time well spent, however I still had other stops and had come here for a reason, and my mother was watching my children and did expect that I would be back for dinner. I stood up, tossed my now empty drink container into the recycle bin, and tucked the book under my arm. I was definitely going to buy it. How could I not? I can see a small hidden room off to the right at the very back of a long corridor of books. I am drawn to it, almost as though it is a forbidden space. I see that it might be, though, as it is run-down and there are boxes of unpacked books everywhere. I slipped into the room and scan the titles on the spines of the shelved books. I quickly notice that they are classics, very old copies, bound in beautiful hard covers with gold-tipped pages. I pressed my finger along the books as I walked down the aisle, stopping abruptly when I see a particular title. It is a collection of work by Charles Dickens, and my heart raced when I saw that it contained *Great Expectations*. I pulled it from the shelf and opened it to the story. It smelled musty and delightful. I *loved* this story. It was one of my favourites. My daughter was supposed to be named Stella (after Estella, in the story), but later had decided to use this as her middle name. If I am honest I regret this decision, but that is water under the bridge.

I didn't need to continue looking – this is exactly what I was looking for. I was here to purchase an old book to use to create an altered book, and I had found the perfect one. I walked

towards the cash and did some last-minute browsing as I waited for the woman ahead of me to complete her transaction. I eavesdropped on the conversation between her and the cashier, and noted the friendliness in their voices, and their willingness to divulge personal information. Ah, small town socialization. I loved it. When I had moved to the city to complete my undergrad, I remember trying to socialize with people on the train and subway, and I remember the odd looks and aversion that I received in response to my advances. Clearly only small-town folk engaged in social conversations with strangers. My husband calls this phenomena ‘storytime’ and hurries me along when we are in the grocery stores or the mall. It drives him crazy.

“Hi there”, the cashier called to me. It was my turn. “Did you find everything that you were looking for today?”

She was very pleasant.

“I did, thank you”.

“Do you have any store credits that you would like to use today?”, she asked.

“No, thank you. I don’t live here”, I replied, smiling at her and reaching for my wallet. But I *did* live here at one point – I grew up here.

I finished cashing out and stepped out into the hot sun. I opened the trunk to my car and put my books inside. I looked around and noted that the town looked both run down and restored at the same time. Time and care had been put into modernizing the space, however the structure, the very foundation of my childhood town, was not being given the time and attention that it deserved. I could see the building that housed our grand performances, and could still smell the must and taste the fear of the spooky, run-down dressing rooms in the basement. While they were rustic and truly artistic, they were large and cold, without windows and dark shadowy corners. I was always too scared to go down into those rooms alone. Upstairs the rooms were of the same aesthetic appeal, but bright and inviting, with large windows complete with sills that you could sit on. I used to imagine that I was on Broadway, staring out the window from my large loft dressing room, getting myself ready to welcome an audience dressed to the nines, awaiting a high-scale production. This theatre, to me in my youth, appeared magical. Without a theatre to compare it to, it was simply divine – the most beautiful building in town. It is still magical. And although it may not be the most beautiful building in town, it is certainly special.

Before analyzing my data, I did two things. First, I spent a considerable amount of time listening to the recordings of my interviews. I played them while I was walking my dog, exploring the forest and even as I sat alone, in my cabin in the woods. Second, I also transcribed them. And while this process is very lengthy, I felt it necessary to transcribe them myself, without the assistance of any sort of technology. I carried the ideas around with me and kept reading more literature on the topic of arts-based education. I spent time walking the street of that sleepy town, reminiscing as I passed restaurants where we would have cast parties, and an outdoor stage where we would perform during the summer festival. I found myself thinking about the movie *The Dead Poets Society*, and the father that was pushing his son towards what he believed to be excellence. He wanted so badly to keep his son away from the arts and focused on the path to becoming a doctor – a path that ultimately led to his early demise. I wondered if our parents knew what sort of impact the arts would have on us, or if they were just humoring us by allowing us to explore childhood interests. Regardless, I could not stop thinking of that movie, and wondering how things might have been different had the father supported his son's interests?

I had to drive back home as the weekend was coming to a close and I worked the next day. It was very clear to me how I was going to frame our story. And I was very excited to get back and begin deconstructing my interviews. I left a little too late that Sunday and unfortunately was driving in the dark. I am not a huge fan of driving that highway in the dark, and instantly regretted my poor timing. I cracked the windows and let the cool air sweep through my car as I could feel the heaviness in my eyes. Once the darkness had completely set in, so did my unrealistic and childish fears. As a child I had heard enough urban legends to instill the belief that if I looked in the rearview mirror during nightfall, that I would see a pair of eyes glowing back at me from the backseat. I know, I know. But to this day I try my best to avert my eyes from the potential danger of what could be lurking in that backseat. If I just don't look in the mirror, then I escape whatever is waiting for me to look up.

On this particular evening, as I drove into the darkness, I noticed that there were not any other cars travelling; I was alone on a long stretch of highway, without cellphone signal and a wavering connection to the radio frequency. I had forgotten my connection cord to connect music through my phone, so I was forced to drive in silence, the only sound the incredible

pounding of my heart and an overwhelming anxiousness that a grown adult woman should not experience. I thought I could see something up ahead, so I began to slow down. There are so many animals on this northern highway, and while the ghosts I fear are an unreasonable distress, the threat of wild animals is real. I continued with caution, waiting for a deer or other small creature to leap out from the forest. I took deep, long breaths, imagining myself at home sleeping soundly in a warm cocoon; I thought of my children, and how excited I was going to be to see them once I got back. The eeriness of the long highway sparked some ideas for a fiction novel, and I began to map the story in my mind. A group of preteens in a cursed town, realizing early on that there is something different about their teachers and the other adults they encounter in the town. Secrets hidden deep within the forest, whispering to them in the still of the night; voices from beyond the grave. A town secret kept silenced by the elders....

Wait – where am I? I looked around and nothing appeared familiar. Did I take an exit by mistake? No, that can't be. There are no exits. This was a clear stretch of road. A simple drive from point A to point B. I looked around, my brain feverishly searching for a landmark to confirm my location. But there was...nothing. Just perpetual darkness. I reached for my cellphone only to realize that there was no reception. Great. I turned on my high-beams and started to speed up. Why was it so dark? Surely, I must be close to a convenience store or gas station. Oh, wait! What is that! Yes! The old train station! Thank G....

My heart sank as I realized that I had already passed that train station some time ago. I blinked my eyes to bring the building into a clearer view. That's impossible. I know that I saw that train station because I made a mental note of the amount of time that I had left to drive. I choked back my panic as the station on the radio slowly came back into range. Grateful for some company, I turned the dial up, trying to concentrate on the words of the radio announcer. They were bleak at best, a monotone consistency, and almost non-existent. I strained myself to hear, holding my breath so that I was not competing with the sound of the woman's voice.

“Flooooooorrriiiiiiaaaaaa” she hissed. “Flooooooorrriiiiiiaaaaa”.

Nope. This was not happening. Just then it started to rain. Light at first, but very quickly it grew into a turbulence of rain, slashing down onto my front window. I turned on my wipers, but even as they violently swooshed across my front window, they could not compete with the heaviness and rate at which it poured down. It felt as though the rain was trying to swallow my

car hole. As thunder boomed and lightening lit up the sky, I quickly realized that I needed to pull off the road. I slowed my car and signaled to exit the road, even though I had not seen another vehicle for miles. I took advantage of what looked like an entrance way to a building of sorts. I pulled towards a dim light at the entrance of the building, seeking shelter from the ungodly elements. I pulled in towards the building, moving the car into a parked position and looked out the windows to figure out where I was. The train station?! Am I losing my mind?

“Flooorrrraaaa”, her voice continued. A voice that sounded all too familiar. This was the voice that I had heard that night in my childhood bedroom. The night I made my parents get rid of that creepy doll.

“Floooooorrrrrraaaaaa”.

I began to cry. The voice sounded as though it was getting nearer and louder. Still the same whispery tone, but at a high volume.

“What do you want?”, I cried. “Go away!”

I just wanted to be at home with my kids. I squeezed my eyes closed and tried to cover my ears to escape the sound of her haunting voice. I could feel something over my shoulder as I sat in the driver’s seat. A cool breeze swept the back of my neck.

“Fllloooooorrrrrraaaaaa.... open your eyes”.

Against my better judgment, I opened my eyes and looked in the rearview mirror. I let out a piercing scream as I saw her – the creepy doll from my childhood bedroom. Her eyes were wide open, and she wore a wide, unhuman grin that spilled across her face.

“Flooorrrraaaaa”, she taunted. “WAKE UP!”

My eyes jolted open. I felt very disorientated and tried to ground myself by locating something that I could see, touch, hear – hear. What was that knocking? I hesitantly looked to see that it was a man, tapping on my window. Had I been asleep?

He continued tapping.

Visibly shaken, I rolled down my window just a few inches to see an older gentleman, peering into my car from beneath a dark grey umbrella.

“Evening miss”, he said. “You may want to get that tire patched before you head back out onto the open road”.

I had been asleep. As I looked ahead at the dim light I remembered that I had pulled into the old train station to rest my eyes as I had become fatigued while driving. I must have actually fallen asleep. I thanked the gentleman and realized that there was a heavy rain falling. I pulled my coat hood up over my head and stepped out of my car. The cool air smelled fresh, and it felt good on my clammy skin. As I slowly came out of my lucid state I realized that I had been dreaming, and was grateful to be out of that nightmare. I looked down at my back tire on the driver’s side and to my surprise he was right. The tire was very low and had I continued driving I could have been in some serious trouble as there are minimal places to stop and there is spotty cell service on this highway. Lucky for me I had a spare tire in my trunk. As I walked up to the door to search for some help, I told myself that I should lay off the ghost story podcasts...

### **Scene 5: Searching for Meaning**

With an increase in determination and access to the profound experiences of my participants, I felt compelled to share our story. I knew now that what I had experienced as a student was not an individual perspective but rather was a piece of a larger collective. In listening to my participant words and constructing interview transcripts, I understood that learning through the arts offered something different to each of us. That is, while we all benefitted from the experience, we each took away something that we needed individually. Of course, there were overlaps, but this experience was meaningful to each of us in individual ways.

### **Individual Case Analysis**

I sat at my computer, excited to dive in and analyze the individual cases. Utilizing a program called “Miro” I began what Saldaña (2013) refers to as “First Cycle” coding of the individual cases using the following codes to guide my understanding: confidence/self-esteem, inclusive space, safe space, school culture/environment, creativity/imagination, social cohesion, supportive role models/teachers, personal growth, cross-curricular/multimodal learning and transferrable/lifelong skills. Per participant, I organized the data in such a way that each participants’ responses were coded according to digital coloured sticky notes, represented by a different colour per category. As I negotiated the spaces for the meaning units, I could easily

alter the colour of the sticky note, and allocate the meaning unit to a particular category. Each meaning unit was assigned to only one category; I chose not to have them represented in multiple categories. Rather, I created a wide enough spectrum of codes that each meaning unit easily fit within a particular category. The meaning units that did not fit within the ten categories were “parked” for later consideration. I then recorded the candidate categories into a table (see Appendix 8).

In working through a ‘second cycle’ coding of the individual cases, I moved through several iterations in my analysis of the individual participant cases arriving at the final categories that I used for each participant. For ease of reference, I placed them into a table (see Appendix 9). Beginning with 309 (collective) meaning units, I was now working with 200 meaning units following my second cycle of coding. I was able to collapse categories for each participant based on lack of meaning units per category, and similarity between categories/meaning unit content. It was becoming clearer which categories were more prominent for each participant. Now that I had a final iteration for each individual case, I was able to look more closely at the words and stories of each participant to determine how each individual was impacted by participating in the arts-based program.

**Ellie.** I will begin with Ellie. In analyzing the words of Ellie, the final iteration of her meaning units demonstrated an emphasis on personal growth, social systems and school culture and support systems and leadership (see Appendix 10). As mentioned earlier, she had access to information about the structure and development of the program that really spoke to the emergence of the culture of the program and the school itself. She had mentioned that “there was never an intention to build this program, and that’s why it worked out so beautifully; it just happened holistically, over time, over a few generations”. She spoke in particular about the role that the community relationships played in terms of constructing the program. In particular the parents, teachers, volunteers and students that came together in a time before technology to communicate with one another and form partnerships through interactions. She emphasized the importance of simple tasks such as ride sharing amongst students, and parents that would stay and socialize while rehearsals were happening, for example, and witness what the program was offering to their children. “Parents would come in, there was no technology. Parents had to come in and if we were running late, they would wait. But they were physically there – that makes all of the difference”. In a time when students could not simply text their parents if a rehearsal was

running late or a parent text upon their arrival, the physical communication between parents, staff and students enabled an opportunity to forge connections with one another. I recalled this process as Ellie noted that “students would get rides with other families creating further social connections. So, parents knew each other. This builds community, and “there is a legacy now”. The social systems that emerged organically are responsible for the culture that was built. In essence, this culture is the foundation of the program itself.

Support systems and leadership was another key category for Ellie, who remarked that “there were so many strong women leaders--women held that program together”. She felt that “having to navigate different personalities and different perspectives from different teachers made the difference”. Recalling her past experiences, she identified a relationship that at the time seemed to be less cohesive. Ellie noted that she and the drama teacher at the time would often “butt heads”, but that in retrospect she now understands that he was doing his job, and finds herself operating in the same way (as a drama teacher). She also commented, however, “I think his male lens and experiences did not let him see things from the female perspective, and things that we would be dealing with. The difficulties I had were not with the women. It was with the only male educator in the arts”. Although she identified some friction with this particular educator, she did speak of the “high expectations” that the educators had for students. Being held accountable for absences, for example, is necessary as absenteeism impacts learning in the arts. As she pointed out, “experiential learning is great, but attendance is a big piece of that pie. I can’t re-create a missed workshop, for example”.

Having an educator believe that you can achieve a certain standard of excellence makes it easier for students to believe in themselves. Ellie recollected her appreciation for these educators and the program itself by inciting that “every year that you move away from the experience is another year that you are grateful for the experience that you had”. It was not surprising that “personal growth” was a key area for Ellie. She expressed in detail her transition from being a “very quiet, low confidence” student and evolving into an “outgoing, confident student who would talk to anyone in school”. She described her experience as “life-changing” and credits her strength as a current teacher of the arts to her experiences in the arts as a secondary student. Of her time at the secondary school, she spoke about becoming school president, and having the confidence to run for president. She acknowledged that “schools have stereotypical “groups”, but

that didn't matter, we would speak to anyone". In her arts-based narrative, Ellie had shared a letter that she wrote to her son for the exercise, outlining all of the positive attributes that the arts (and this program in particular) could offer him as a secondary school student.

**Sabrina.** As I have spoken about previously, Sabrina and I had a close relationship during our adolescent years. In fact, I came to the program as a result of both my experience and interest in the arts, but also having been influenced by Sabrina. Sabrina had a group of friends that were older than we were, and that connection brought her to the program through the extended summer program years before we attended secondary school. While I was already enrolled in the arts-program, it was Sabrina that encouraged me to try out for the drama and dance clubs associated with the school program. It was during our time in the participation of these shows that we forged an incredible bond with our classmates, and memories that would remain precious to this day.

For Sabrina's final iteration (see Appendix 11), I will speak to a category that really influenced her experience in the program, and that is school culture and environment. Like my other participants, Sabrina felt a sense of belonging and acceptance in the arts-based program that enabled her to take risks, be herself and move out of her comfort zone. She commented how, unlike prior school experiences, this secondary school left her feeling "much more comfortable with school and stimulated". She found the program to be very inclusive and welcoming to students of varying levels of ability by ensuring that each student felt valued and challenged, regardless of skill level. She noted that "being able to do drama all year, same period each day, changed me". The consistency that the program offered gave Sabrina the opportunity to build her skills each day, as opposed to once or twice a week as most secondary programs might allow. She explained to me that "getting that much practice talking in front of people and being 'vulnerable' changed me. Sabrina felt that arts spaces "are so important" as they provide "a safe space for so many different kinds of people". She described a comfortable and inviting environment with many choices and opportunities. Unlike arts programs at other schools, this program allowed movement within the arts. Students were able to change majors and shifts between music, dance, drama and art as they pleased, as opposed to focusing on a singular stream.

Sabrina spoke about the school as a supportive space, and noted that, although she had an interest in the arts, attending this school in particular meant escaping bullies that would be attending a different secondary school. She spoke about feeling “immediately comfortable” at the school, and made friends easily. She expressed feeling “stimulated” by the space, prompting her to become more “in touch” with who she was as a person. While “high school can be a brutal time for a lot of people”, the support she felt from both classmates and teaching staff made all the difference. Of the experience, Sabrina recalls that “it was more than just a school. It was a passion project”. Memories such as drama circles, engaging extra-curricular opportunities and dynamic and supportive educators, helped Sabrina to emerge “from my shell as a human being”. Gaining the confidence to step outside of her comfort zone contributed to her growth as a person.

To sum up Sabrina’s story, her final iteration included a category I entitled “transformational experience”. I collapsed personal growth and lifelong skills to describe a more encompassing representation of Sabrina’s experience. The transformation that she described was a shift from a being a shy student susceptible to bullying, to someone that felt valued, confident and creative. Having the opportunity to engage with other subjects (such as language) through an arts-based lens supported Sabrina in recognizing the value of the arts outside of the drama classroom. From confidence speaking in front of people and being able to “think on the spot” to approaching projects and tasks creatively, Sabrina felt that the experience of attending the program “totally informed everything that came afterwards”. Reflecting on her experiences, she expressed how this opportunity provided her with pertinent life skills that she is grateful for today.

**Charlie.** In Charlie’s final iteration (see Appendix 12), he had 4 main categories that spoke to his experiences in the arts-based program: confidence/self-esteem, inclusivity/community, creativity/imagination and personal growth through the arts. Like Sabrina, Charlie was a shy kid that lacked confidence as a result of middle school cruelty. He discussed how elementary school was “pretty awesome” and middle school was “the worst”. Upon enrolling in the arts-based program, Charlie felt that he “really belonged”. The category of inclusivity and community resonated as an overarching theme throughout Charlie’s entire experience. Charlie spoke about the aspects of the school that were not connected to the arts-based program, and recalled spaces that were less inclusive. He shared that he would “purposely

forget my gym clothes to not have to participate”. Charlie sought solace in the theatre, feeling “safe” in the arts spaces and part of a community. The social experience in particular stood out for Charlie, connecting him with people and forging friendships that he maintains today. Charlie felt that “it would have been a different experience going to a regular high school because we were with a random group of weirdo’s that were so fun to hang out with”.

Acceptance in being the person that you are and forming deep connections were strong building blocks for Charlie, who credits the arts with being an “important part of me figuring out who I was”. The personal growth from this experience left Charlie feeling like a “stronger, better person”. Charlie explained that “everyone is afraid of exposing themselves, but if you take on a character, it’s a lot easier”. The arts also provided Charlie with a space to “open up” and connect with himself and others. He became more confident and knew who he was and “who I want to spend my time with”. This confidence radiated outside of just the classroom and is something that he carries with him today; “I still feel shy and insecure at times, so I feel worried what I would be like had I not gone to an arts school”. Access to the arts enabled Charlie to embrace acceptance, support and a community built on difference and celebration of uniqueness. This community allowed Charlie to “love” school again, and nurture his talents and develop as a person.

In terms of creativity, Charlie feels that “everything outside of the arts is forgotten. If you write a book or a song or create a piece of art, it lasts outside of your life and becomes something even bigger than you”. The creative and imaginative aspect of the arts captivated Charlie not just in ways that helped him harness confidence, but also served as important outlets for creativity, imagination and innovation. Charlie shared that “the amazing thing about the arts is that you actually get to create something, and that thing can be permanent and have a life of its own, outside of you”. While he is unable to continue to commit to theatre in his busy adult life, he gave examples of how he still utilizes creative spaces as an adult. An example of how he continues to partake in “creating” is through attending classes such as ceramics, sewing, drawing and cartooning. He explained how he gravitates towards “elements of drama in my life that are not as structured as being in a play, but it comes out in different ways”. He considers himself to be a creative person and gravitates to these spaces in different areas in his life.

**Jolene.** Jolene and I both attended singing lessons with Mary throughout our childhood and adolescent years. Although Jolene is two years older than I am, we connected through various performances and recitals and eventually through the extra-curricular theatre programs at the school. Jolene was looking for a place to explore her creativity and imagination, and found acceptance through the arts community at the school. Jolene recalled how, prior to joining the arts community at the school, she “floundered around, struggled, and was picked on before my very first drama class”. After that class, though, “everything changed” and she found a group of people with similar interests and felt “loved” again. In her final iteration (see Appendix 13), Jolene had the following categories: confidence/self-esteem, meaningful experience, social emergence and personal growth.

Describing the arts-based program as being a “super inclusive, super safe space”, Jolene found that she “bloomed” through the program and her shyness dissipated. She described how she developed a confidence in herself, and that she “grew just from being a part of that group”. She developed a belief in herself and a level of confidence that she felt was unique to the arts environment in particular. Her ability to express herself increased her level of self-esteem, enabling her to grow as a person. She described to me how she found her voice, and how the arts opened her to vulnerability. Through the portrayal of different characters she was able to “lose a lot of fear” and “get in touch” with herself as a person. She felt that her experience in the arts-based program was similar to “therapy”.

Like my other participants, Jolene spoke about the impact of the arts community on her experience, and how she has maintained connections with friends that she made in 9<sup>th</sup> grade. I could relate as she spoke about how these relationships informed her sense of self, and encouraged her to move outside of her comfort zone. The theatre was a space for different personalities to come together and lean on each other. Jolene shared a story with me about a memory that she had of a day when the director was unable to attend a rehearsal for an extra-curricular performance. She recalled that the students held the rehearsal anyhow, proceeding without the director, because “we were just so into it”. The commitment to the show and each other kept them pushing forward, because the show was a collaborative effort. Each character, each musician, each set piece – all aligned to contribute to a collective performance. And that performance was meaningful. The experience of being together and creating something

imaginative was meaningful. Jolene described her experience as meaningful in the sense that she brought her own life experiences to rehearsals. The arts are a unique space because you bring yourself to the space. Jolene expressed to me that “it’s the only thing you can bring”.

**Carrie.** Carrie gave the longest interview. A fellow educator, she felt very passionate about what arts spaces can do for students, and how the arts have been integral in her own life and development as a person. Carrie’s final iteration (see Appendix 14) brought categories that mirrored what we as teachers aim to deliver in our classrooms: diversity/acceptance, unique culture/environment, growth mindset/thinking outside the box. In my interview with Carrie, it was clear that she also felt a strong sense of belonging and connection within the arts-based program. Unlike other participants, Carrie was a little more outgoing having had a strong connection to the arts throughout her elementary years. Coming from a large city to a much smaller space, Carrie was less apprehensive coming into the school, especially since she had met many of the theatre students through summer programs and extra-curricular programming that invited children’s chorus’s. As this school had a particularly strong theatre program, Carrie chose the school over other secondary school possibilities.

Carrie spoke to me about how she was drawn to the diverse nature of the students in the program; the theatre was a space for misfits and “outrageous” styles. Creative self-expression was welcomed and celebrated, and although she did feel that there were some “cliques” within the larger school community, the theatre was a place of solace and comfort. A home away from home. She spoke about the “ownership of the space”, and how the theatre was a community gathering spot within the school. She felt that “even if I didn’t like everybody that doesn’t matter. That’s your family, and even if you don’t hang out with everyone in your family, you get together for family reunions”. She forged strong connections within the arts community, meeting friends that would remain prominent in her adult life. She credits the theatre with “adjusting well” as an adolescent, and said she was not sure if she would have adjusted as well had it not been for connection to the arts.

Carrie spoke about the unique culture in arts communities. For starters, she felt strongly about the work ethic and sense of community partnership within the program. In her words, “maybe I am biased as a theatre person, but I feel like it’s a very unique role in bringing people together and getting people with unique skillsets to co-operate towards a common goal”. Unlike

playing a game in sports, for example, “it’s delayed gratification which is a problem for some people these days”. Rehearsal, for example, is not always enjoyable, especially when a scene is being worked on that does not involve your character. But working towards a common goal and feeling the energy of the show – especially at performance time – is a feeling that cannot be described. Being able to learn scripts quickly and continue on with tech and lighting errors, missed lines and missing costume or set pieces, that reinforces what Carrie refers to as “adaptability”. Being able to think on the spot and come together as a collective so that the show can go on...that is powerful. As Carrie described, “it’s being in the moment and it is being shared and those people are there to support you”.

As an educator and Sunday school teacher, Carrie felt that, what I am referring to as being a “growth mindset”, has enabled her to think outside of the box and solve problems easily. From being resourceful with classroom supplies to bringing lessons to life, Carrie sees theatre as a space that activates a variety of skillsets and nurtures creative thinking. Through the arts Carrie has found ways to integrate the arts in a cross-curricular manner to support struggling students. One example she gave was assisting a junior level student with a learning difference who had been struggling with math. She could see the difference in her ability to learn and retain information through the implementation of drama activities. Of the experience, Carrie felt “this is where you (the student) are not being served by the current system”. Arts-based learning increases student confidence and gives them the “chance to do something. Most of us don’t learn by sitting and listening. So, if that’s not how most kids learn, why are we still trying to teach them that way? And then give labels to the kids that don’t learn that way, even though we know most of them don’t learn that way”. Carrie is passionate about what the arts can do for student morale and ability to learn, and draws on her own experiences in an art-based program when approaching teaching and learning.

### **Cross-Case Analysis**

Reflecting on my participant interviews, stories, and the literature that I had read, I proceeded with a cross-case analysis of my data. I thought about my research question, *what are the effects of attending an arts-based secondary school program on the subsequent lives of six former students (including myself) who have graduated two decades ago?* and was left with a final burning question: what does it all mean? Going back to the initial 10 codes that I had used

to analyze my individual cases, I used the same codes to now conduct a cross-case analysis of my data. I was able to see the connections between the codes and the participants as a collective (see appendix 3). I was also able to make connections between the codes and collapse categories to arrive at 4 final themes that represented my participant stories. The final four overarching themes that I identified throughout the process of analyzing my data were social emergence, culture/environment, growth mindset and support systems. These themes emerged organically throughout my coding process, and were consistent across all individual cases. These themes were also consistent with my review of research conducted by seasoned researchers that conducted studies of a similar nature. In terms of our stories, we all shared one common thread: *the arts-based learning program that we attended provided each of us with what we needed at that time.* One of my participants, Charlie, made a very interesting remark to me, stating that “not every kid needs to be in an arts-program, but every kid would benefit from getting a piece of the arts and bringing that into their life”. Through my research I have found this to be a rather profound observation. Below, I will break down each of the themes, offering an interpretation drawing from the collective experiences of my participants.

**Social Emergence.** This theme encompassed several of the overarching candidate themes, rooted in the social relationships and social culture of the arts. As Sabrina so perfectly projected, “it was more than just a school – it was a passion project”. The emergence of this social space was so much more than just a bunch of like-minded students coming together on a stage; it was a collective conscience and deliberate connection amongst a community of adolescence who had a vision bigger than themselves. Committing to long rehearsals over spending time with friends, diving tirelessly into learning scripts and perfecting our unique skillsets...

*Fiction allows us to be anything we want to be, when we are not yet sure who we are... Being sucked into a world of possibility is addictive. Trying on new personalities, exploring who you think you are and who you think you might be. Working through teenage angst in real-time through the safety-net of an alter ego. Only the stage can bring such solace, and only these peers can know my truths...at the very least the truths I share.*

What is it about the arts-community that encourages social growth? For starters, the arts call on students to share a piece of themselves through their art, whether it be dance, drama, music or

visual arts. The arts are a place that not only invite individual narratives, it encourages them. To truly embrace the nature of arts-based perspectives, students must bring their authentic selves, regardless of how much of that self they wish to reveal. As a young adult, we are not always conscious or clear about who that is, as we are still developing our personalities while navigating social spaces. “A wide variety of styles were accepted. The people who were different, I thought yes, those are my people. There was a girl that would wear outrageous clothing and I remember thinking if that’s ok, then this is a good place to be” (Carrie).

In each of the five interviews that I conducted, the question *describe yourself and your life before enrolling in the arts-based secondary school that you attended* opened up the opportunity for participants to share a glimpse of *who they were*. One by one, each of my former classmates described being “pretty shy” (Sabrina), or “low confidence and not a strong student” (Ellie). Their narratives depicted people who were young and looking for the “right space to open up” (Charlie). Several participants noted that they would be taking a leap of faith entering this program, choosing to go although their friends would be attending a different school for secondary studies (there were five different options in our town at that time). When asked *what prompted you to enroll at the school?* they spoke of having a connection to the arts, including not being directly involved, but being drawn to the arts through friends. Charlie recounts his experience:

“Grade 4 (summer program) was the Wiz. I became friends with Ben, who was opposite than I was – loud, hilarious, risk-taker – he was auditioning, so I did too, but I was cut. Went to a rehearsal and they could see that I was engaged and they asked me if I wanted to be in the play, and of course I wanted to. From then on, I was involved in theatre – the older kids (when I was young) were a big part of our experience, and they were all at the arts-based school and I wanted to go, too”.

Jolene described her experience, having just moved to our town (which she referred to as a city, which technically it was, but it was quite small for a city) from one that was even smaller and more rural. Her mother had urged her to attend an art-based school, knowing what it would provide for her shy, yet “imaginative” daughter. She was open to the experience, and commented that “it would have been a totally different narrative if I didn’t go and I shudder to think that I didn’t go. My mom got me to go to that school by introducing me to the arts available at that school”. When I asked my participants *what were your first impressions of the school and the*

*program?* Jolene said that her “first impression was that I was lonely...The first drama class changed everything. I felt like yes! I came to the right place. Drama games were the first things we did to introduce ourselves”.

Sabrina mirrored Jolene’s comments, sharing that she felt “immediately comfortable” and “went from not feeling happy about school to enjoying school”. Why is this? What is it about the atmosphere of an arts program that is unlike a regular secondary school setting? Many of my participants recalled not enjoying middle (or intermediate) school, and reported feeling lost, lonely and even bullied. “I hated grade 7/8 so much; kids were mean. Primary was awesome, and then middle school was the worst. I remember going to the arts-based high school and being a part of that community (classes and extra-curricular), and I felt like I really belonged. It felt really nice to be a part of that group of people” (Charlie).

The participant responses reflected who my participants were, and then who they became through this experience. In the end, each of them described feeling more confident and greater self-esteem through strong friendships, and the opportunity to “get in touch with yourself and get real with yourself” (Jolene). Jolene recalled her experience before attending the program and shared her thoughts on who she is today. She noted that “we don’t want to put ourselves out there but we have to just let ourselves be vulnerable. And from that moment on you are addicted – you can’t wait to go back up there and do it again. It’s such a rush to let people see you for who you are”.

All of my participants reiterated the importance of the social space and the transformational nature of inclusive spaces. Charlie, in particular felt that a strong community was integral in his personal growth. He felt that “really forming those relationships and friendships was so important; one of the special parts of the program is that it was relatively small, so you got to know everyone and build trust with those people. That’s what made it so special. The close relationships”.

**Culture/Environment.** This theme included factors such as being in a safe and inclusive space, where students could be free to explore creativity and imagination. A space that celebrates and welcomes difference and self-expression, where new ideas and abstract thinking is encouraged. Unlike the more prescribed methods in traditional educational settings, the openness and encouraging nature of arts spaces lends a more supportive approach at exploration in learning. I asked participants to *tell me about your overall experience of participating in an arts-*

*based educational program, including any critiques that you may want to share?* and this is what I discovered.

Jolene felt very strongly about the possibilities that that arts spaces provide. Her interview responses really focused on providing a meaningful experience, in a space that welcomes diversity. Of her time in the program, Jolene had said this:

“Incredible; magical – there was this connection that we had with people. For being so young we were so invested in doing well. Invested in our rehearsals. One time, the director could not make it to the rehearsal, and we still had the rehearsal. We were 16-18 year-olds going in to do the work because we were just so into it. And the group of friends – we were all so different but we all just jelled. Super inclusive, super safe space. So many laughs; so much “drama”, and we all laughed at that kind of stuff. A belief in ourselves and a confidence that was instilled that you just don’t get from anywhere else”

As an elementary/intermediate teacher, one of the biggest challenges that I feel impacts educators is getting the buy-in from students. Engaging students in learning and capturing their interest (especially in the older grades) is difficult; experiential and arts-based methods draw students in and peak their interest. Sabrina discussed the idea that the educators in the program were able to keep students engaged at all levels; whether you came to the program as a seasoned artist or dancer, or had never taken a dance class before, there was something for everyone. The educators were able to develop a program and teach in a way that stimulated everyone. Ellie mirrored this comment by alluding that “the difference is who it was in the building – some of the biggest mentors on people’s lives were the people running the program. The teachers and volunteers built the entire “culture”. To support this comment, Ellie gave an account of one of her memories entering into the arts environment:

“I joined ‘the Company’, and I joined dance. I was nervous because I was in a grade 10 class as a grade 9 student and that was scary and intimidating. But, I felt instantly comfortable in dance, and successful – and I wasn’t feeling any success before that because I wasn’t a great student. And I thought, I am sort of good at this. Before this I was not working hard. I was that kid (that was not having success) before the program. People assume that teachers were not the ‘underdog’ kids, but that’s not true. It’s incredible how much my marks changed over the 5 years (because of the program)”.

As I have mentioned previously, most publicly-funded programs adhere to specific teaching guidelines, expectations and mandated curriculum. While the program my participants and I attended did follow the same Ontario curriculum, the methods for teaching are more abstract. Opening students to the possibilities of multi-modalities and creative expression requires modelling on behalf of the educator, as well as a willingness to push boundaries and have an open mind in terms of assessment. The cross-curricular possibilities in arts-based learning offer many benefits to students that is evident through my research. As Sabrina described, “drama impacted other classes; for example, English. I would do full performances pairing drama with Shakespeare, and also pretending to be an author giving an author’s talk”. Arts subjects are very easily paired through cross-curricular connections, beyond the more obvious connection between drama and English. There are many possibilities in learning, and those possibilities can be explored only if the opportunity is granted. This program granted that opportunity. As an educator herself, Carrie offered some insight into the importance of abstract thinking in the classroom:

“I think that being able to go through an arts experience in any of the art forms really helps you to explore (imagination and creativity) – **creativity dies if its not given an opportunity**. If you ask a kindergarten class “what can you do with a paperclip”, you will get 100 answers. If you ask a 40-year-old “what can you do with a paperclip” and there’s like two answers, right? They have done those studies, right? You need to be able to foster creativity in experiential programs, I think even non-arts ones where it is inquiry-based learning, that fosters creativity **that doesn’t tell them how to see the world, it asks them how do you see the world?** I think a lot of the ways that we got to journal, and have conversations at the end of the day was asking us how we saw it, not telling us how we should see it. And I think that is really important for kids. Especially in an ever-changing world. The pace of change right now is ridiculous”.

The environment of the arts is a space that encourages students to think outside of the box, and express thoughts about the world in ways that are not prescribed. As educators, we teach students *how* to think, not *what* to think, but it is equally important to provide platforms and spaces to explore possibilities.

**Growth Mindset.** A growth mindset is encouraged in spaces such as arts-based programs, and this is where many candidate themes were able to come together in this broader theme. This theme encompassed those transferrable and life-long skills leading to personal growth through cross-curricular and multi-modal learning fostering creativity and imagination. All of these sub-topics help develop skills that students carry with them throughout their personal and professional lives, guiding them to learn how to learn, not learn information that is prescribed. While students do have to learn information through curriculum, what is more important are those critical thinking and social-emotional skills learned through learning how to learn. How do we best learn? What supports do we need? What interests us? What methods of learning work best and how do we best convey meaning in learning? When we talk about critical thinking skills, this includes thinking critically about ourselves as learners, and how we best learn as lifelong learners, not just students. Asking questions such as *what was unique about the experience and what have you gained from it?* and *what specific skills did you learn and what did you carry with you?* invited my participants to share in which ways this experience may have impacted their lives and in which ways.

Of the arts-based learning experience, Carrie commented that “it’s the chance to do something. Most of us don’t learn by sitting and hearing...why are we still trying to teach them (students) that way? And then give labels to the kids that don’t learn that way...we are way overdue for a shift”. Carrie spoke in extent about the possibilities of learning through the arts, and the possibilities that the arts offer in terms of learning. In terms of skills gained, she is a great problem solver, and is able to think creatively and outside of the box, enabling her to see possibilities in everyday items in the classroom.

Jolene shared that she “left a shyness back in grade 9 and it never really returned. I notice that other people are nervous to do a presentation in front of peers in a meeting, and I don’t feel like that. I am well spoken”. Sabrina mirrored this point by stating that the “skills from drama come into play when speaking in front of people and teaching. I am more comfortable thinking on the spot...skills I continue to use. (The arts program) gave us positive outlets leading us to be well-rounded people, more in touch with ourselves. Important life-skills.”

A key component of arts-based learning is the emphasis on the self. “Arts education is helping people find potential, and that’s very special” (Charlie). In education when we speak of

developing a growth mindset, I believe that to do this we must first break down barriers and misconceptions that we have imposed on ourselves as a result of years of linear learning, unhelpful or possibly toxic media messages, and social pressures. This can be most difficult during adolescence, when it is easier to be the same rather than different, and standing out amongst the crowd can be terrifying. My research demonstrates how these safe spaces can open us to vulnerability, and that the arts, in particular, are safe spaces to do this. As Charlie had pointed out, “everyone is afraid of exposing themselves, but if you take on a character, it’s a lot easier”. Exploring emotions through an alter-ego, or in some cases through a character that is seemingly nothing like us, provides the safety net of deflecting what is actually coming from ourselves. Words that we long to say but lack the maturity or courage to do so. Activities such as drama circles allow for deeper connection to classmates, opening the opportunity to slowly reveal those truths or secrets that we hide within ourselves. “Being able to do drama all year, same period each day, changed me. Getting that much practice talking in front of people and being “vulnerable” changed me. That totally informed everything that came afterwards...all aspects of my life were coloured by that experience, for sure” (Sabrina).

In my interview with Ellie, she mentioned a point that was also made by Jolene, and that is having a voice. Not just having a voice, but knowing that they had a voice and could use it. “No matter how successful you go on to be, to know that you have an opinion and you have a voice and you can use it, and there is a variety of ways that you can use it (you can express yourself through music, through movement, monologues, anything at all) .... In my position now I have a strong voice and I know how to use it” (Ellie). To be seen, heard, respected and valued, as a student, is everything. For your ideas to be a part of the conversation, included in decisions made in the classroom or on stage, that is empowering. Facilitation as opposed to instruction is key to experiential models of education; working towards self-direction in learning as opposed to dictatorship. As one of our educators would often say, *it’s not that you can’t do it...you just can’t do it, yet*. This attitude towards learning makes all the difference.

**Support Systems.** This was a key overarching theme in that the *approach* to learning presented by the teachers and influential adults involved within the arts-based program set the stage by creating a culture that was supportive, encouraging and celebrated difference.

Opportunities to think and present information in more abstract and multi-modal ways were not just encouraged, they were modelled.

Jolene described her experience in dance, for example, as one that was very enjoyable and memorable, despite the fact that she was not a strong dancer. In her interview, she expressed that “I loved dancing. I love the feeling and expression. I always took a comedic approach to dancing; I couldn’t compete with the girls that had been dancing since they were young, but I loved learning it”. Unlike other arts schools and arts programs across Canada, our program was inclusive, and welcomed students with varying skill levels. There was no audition and no portfolio required to attend, and there was not a sense of competition amongst students. Each student had their strengths and skill sets, and felt welcomed to use the space to strengthen those skills that were still being developed. The classes were framed from an experiential approach, and educators were more focused on students achieving their own personal best and sense of growth as opposed to carrying an agenda and a set bar that students were expected to achieve. Carrie made a point that resonated with me. She considered that “not everyone is good at drawing, but everyone should feel that they are good at art. That’s why there are so many art styles. I think that visual arts have the opportunity to be really inclusive, but I don’t find that is the practice generally in schools. Some teachers, yes, others, it’s like here is the success criteria”.

As I found out through my interview with Ellie, “there was never an intention to build this program, and that’s why it worked out so beautifully; it just happened holistically, over time, over a few decades. It was based on a lot of support from parents; they were there as fundraisers and support for the arts, sort of like parent council”. As I learned through this interview, Ellie’s family was one of the supporters of the program, and that the program itself grew from a bank account to go on a trip to perform in New Zealand in 1994. The parent engagement, social committees, educators and committed leaders came together with a collective “philosophy”, and created a culture through a collective mindset and a community of people committed to the arts. Jolene also felt very strongly about the social nature of the arts, and the opportunity for inclusion, voice and expression. In her interview I recall her saying, “I may be ignorant but that is something that I feel you would not get from playing a basketball game. That self-expression, that I think is so important”. The “philosophy” Ellie spoke of was an unspoken bond that

demanded respect, honesty, acceptance and encouragement. The materialization of those support systems in a safe and encouraging environment gave us permission to be who we wanted to be.

In growing this support system, participants spoke about having a network of people to rely on; classmates, friends, teachers, other parents, volunteers – people that came together to ensure that everyone had what they needed to succeed. Sometimes that was additional resources, other times it was a shoulder to cry on. As Sabrina articulated, “some students just fell into it, and then fell in love with it...and some students were more transformed by the program. “Sports kids” came to the arts and were transformed”. There is something about the arts that is very unique. Charlie summed it up by saying that “arts education is helping people find potential. And that is very special”.

## **Chapter 6: Thirsty For More**

*What do you do when it's all over? The data is collected, the interviews analyzed. How is it possible to be left with more questions? Is this experience evident in other arts contexts? Are those students catching the same buzz and hunger for creativity?*

*As I approach what I consider to be a landmark birthday of 40 years of age, I have really come to know myself and who I am as a person. The thing is, I am recognizing now more than ever how the arts have informed not just my teaching practice, but also my connection to students, myself, and learning. Are there other educators like me? If so, what are they doing in their classrooms? How are they contributing to their student experience(s). I needed to know.*

As I sat down to map out the drama courses for pre-service teachers that I would be leading this year at the Faculty of Education at the University of Ottawa, I reflected on the information that *should* be included when teaching a drama course, and then considered the information that I *needed* them to know about teaching drama. The themes from my research became the foundation for these courses, as theatre is not *just* a course. It is a safe space to be yourself, and be that self with other people that support you and understand you. It is a space to work through emotions, in secret, through a character, when you are not sure yet how to express them in real-time. It is a space to develop a foundation for lifelong skills, ones that you will carry with you forever. It is a space to discover your voice – and realize that voice can and should be heard. It is a space to challenge longstanding beliefs about traditional methods of learning, and a space to try new things. It is a space to grow as a person, and a space to develop confidence and self-esteem. So, as I developed my courses and constructed my course outlines, I reflected on my

experience of attending the arts-based program, and more specifically what it was that affected me so deeply. Because those are the lessons and moments that I want to create for my students.

In this study I had set out to answer the following research question: “what are the effects of attending an arts-based secondary school program on the subsequent lives of six former students (including myself) who have graduated two decades ago?” What I truly was exploring was a curiosity of whether what I experienced was an individual subjective nuance, or if it was, in fact, something larger than myself. The confirmation from my former classmates and participants on the tangible and profound effects that this program had on their lives cannot merely be explained as a coincidence. Through research, personal experience, and my work both as a classroom teacher and a part-time professor (working with teacher candidates), it is clear that something transpires through the arts that is unique to the arts. Do occurrences (such as those I have mentioned in my identified themes) happen in other venues and in other subject areas? But what I have found is that this space is unique as it exudes level of inclusiveness and individuality that other clubs and activities may not support. Theatre is not about conforming. Theatre is about transforming. The arts are about finding your true self in a safe space that nurtures personal growth. The arts are about collective conscience, and working together as a well-oiled machine towards a common goal. A goal that is common and separate all at the same time. The arts invite misfits and social outcasts, loners and social butterflies, dancers and athletes, and everything in between to come together and really discover who they are. And that is something that cannot be taught. That is something that must be given the opportunity to grow organically.

My biggest fear is that this research will sit in a data base and never come to life. When I think about integrating policy into practice, I consider how this study can inform teaching practices and how educators can integrate the arts into other subject areas to create deeper meaning and connection to class materials. How are other classrooms utilizing the arts? Is there a connection between my findings and the findings of other studies? I felt that I still had some exploration to do before wrapping up this journey.

The weekend had finally arrived, and I was determined to use the break from teaching to quench my own thirst for inquiry. I rose early that Saturday, made myself a steaming hot cup of coffee, and hid in my office. The sun was barely breaking on the horizon and I could hear the

faint sound of birds chirping outside the window. I opened my laptop and nuzzled into an oversized chair, tucking my feet beneath me and resting my laptop on the arm. I put on my glasses and prepared myself for what would likely be hours of scouring databases.

I found a very interesting article entitled *A Reconsideration of Social Innovation: Drama Pedagogies and Youth Perspectives on Creative and Social Relations in Canadian Schooling*, stemming from a study conducted in a Canadian secondary school, in which students reflected on their experiences in a drama class. The article reported on the Toronto site only from a larger study that investigated theatre pedagogies and practices in England, Greece, Canada, Taiwan and India. More specifically, this study examined “how theatre-making with young people can cultivate practices, relationships, dispositions, and values that orient them towards, and support them in, engaged citizenship” (Gallagher, 2018, p. 6). While this study differed from mine as it sought to address civic engagement in drama classrooms, I did quickly recognize similarities in the themes in our data. Gallagher (2018) uncovered themes in her work that included the notion that “deeper issues can be addressed and consequently influence participants and audiences to adopt individual/collective social attitudes and behaviours” and that “processes inherent in drama provide a democratic space for “bringing people together” for social good” (p. 10). When I reflect on my own study, I see a space of acceptance and the intertwining of individuals from many different social spaces. The arts, as a community for social emergence, has a space for each voice to be heard, valued and encouraged, both inside and outside of the classroom, filtering into the greater society. I felt fixated on the concept of collaboration and the social opportunities provided by classrooms, and tried different key word searches to find connections between these social spaces and student success.

I re-filled my coffee and continued to search. I knew what I was looking for and tried different word combinations until I finally arrived at an additional study that caught my eye. I landed on *“Hard-Won Joy”: Equity through collaboration*, where Landay and Brice Heath (2021) utilize the arts to encourage positive relationships with education including the “academic and social development of learners across the socio-economic spectrum” (p. 103). I read through the study and discovered a beautiful passage stating that “an understanding of equity recognizes that *all* students, families and communities face individual challenges and require differentiated support to excel” (p. 103). I thought carefully about the word “differentiate” and how this applies

to classroom practices. Generally differentiated learning allows learners of different skill levels to excel, though largely not taking into consideration the modes in which students learn. The average classroom (in a school that does not specifically teach through the arts), would differentiate learning not through inviting multimodalities and different methods of expression, but rather by structuring activities in strategic ways that vary in the complexity of the task. As an example, I located an additional article entitled *Drama Activities as Ideational Resources for Primary-Grade Children in Urban Science Classrooms* (Varelas, Pappas, Tucker-Raymond, Kane, Hankes, Ortiz & Keblawe-Shamah, 2010) where it was found that performative subjects, such as drama, can encourage meaningful learning through engaging with course materials in an interactive way. Varelas et al. noted in this study that “the meaning making that unfolded during the drama activities was multimodal. As children moved, gestured, positioned themselves in space, and talked, they shared meanings - meanings that they had constructed with their peers and their teachers as they enacted their roles” (p. 321). The arts are a space that naturally invites students to socialize with one another, constructing meaning through *doing* and *exploring* – with other people. The social emergence among students opens the door to imagination, creativity and innovation in learning.

One of the ways that the arts helps students to feel success is by offering the opportunity for *possibility*. I had previously explored a study entitled *Students Perceptions of Success in The Art Classroom* where Andrelchik & Scmitt (2014) investigated secondary student perceptions of success in the classroom, in particular in the visual arts classroom, and how these beliefs about success and what they perceived success to look like translated into their everyday lives. Themes that emerged from this research included the belief that success can be defined by achieving set goals, overcoming challenges in achieving set goals, and the act of achieving the goals themselves. In relation to my study, the researchers acknowledged that “through making artwork, adolescents can gain flexibility in reasoning, as well as develop deeper understandings of themselves and their environment” (p. 7). Through art, students felt challenged in their work, but also motivated to work through those challenges and explore a balance between perfectionism and self-expression. Success was less focused on getting a specific outcome, but rather opened students to the realm of possibility, in a space that they felt lowered stress levels, enabled a sense of voice, and “invites a fun, supportive, and interactive atmosphere” (p. 9). The arts enable students a unique opportunity to experience success and personalize their work; “personal

expression is also very important during adolescence” (p. 10). As I read through this study, I had noticed an additional finding that was relevant in the attitudes and perceptions towards the arts in general. The student participants themselves, though acknowledging numerous benefits in their visual arts classes, also noted that budget cuts and community and administrative comments (inciting an attitude that the arts are not valued) impacted their success. Parent and teacher attitudes towards the arts, however, did change when they saw final projects. Andrelichik & Scmitt considered how teacher perceptions, in particular, can inform or impact the tone of learning through the arts. They suggest that, “by recognizing that teachers’ words influence students’ perceptions, teachers can reflect upon what they can do to enact positive change within themselves and their classrooms” (p. 18). In my study, students attended an arts-specific program, so students received the support and funding to be fully immersed within the arts. In comparison to art classes within a regular secondary school program, it is clear that the environment (including teachers, administrators and parents) plays an important role in student perception of success.

In investigating studies of the impact of arts-based environments on student learning, I came across an interesting study conducted by Gamwell (2005) that observed student experiences with arts-based methods. The researcher, a middle school teacher, conducted the study with his classroom students participating in a language-arts writing and performance project. For one of the tasks in the unit, students had the opportunity to select their mode of delivery (Gamwell noted that students were invited to draw upon their “strengths and interests” developing their own projects). Assigned tasks were multi-modal, and enabled students to pair creative writing with performative subjects such as dance and drama. Findings for the research question *how do students create meaning through arts experiences* included the themes, “active engagement and focused attention, emotional engagement, contextual memory, social construction of meaning, and personal choice and control” (p. 367). The study demonstrated that “the social aspect of the meaning making contributed to the development of a supportive, open learning environment and a true sense of community” (p. 380). My study brought forward the same findings.

I continued investigating peer reviewed articles finding much support and evidence for the arts as vehicles for lifelong and meaningful learning. A particularly interesting article, *Arts/music learning and the development of learners’ life-long creative capacity*, offered

particular insight into the relationship between the arts and tangible creativity that can be transferred into ‘real-world’ skill sets. Temmerman (2008) noted that in keeping up with changing technology and available employment, “it is imperative that young people are presented with forms of learning that will be long-lasting and with learning opportunities that develop their innovative and adaptive ability” (p. 38). These abilities, she suggests, include such skills as adapting to ongoing changes, employing multiple and creative strategies in problem solving, being equipped to work both as a team member and in solace through self-direction, and understand how success could look in a diverse and global environment. Through an analysis of a primary school in Australia, she demonstrates how education in the arts/music “provides comprehensive opportunity for learners to develop the capacity for life-long and life-wide learning in multiple settings” (p. 39). In an attempt to “enhance learner communication skills” (p. 40), a 10-week program entitled ‘Celebrating Literacies’ was initiated through a collaboration between classroom teachers and student teachers, to “engage learners in a creative arts experience” (p. 40) by way of opportunities for expression in dance, drama and music. Workshops were presented to engage students through “enhancing knowledge and understanding of arts literacy skills” (p. 41), and involved the collaboration of many stakeholders including the school, university, local business community and parents. Students were exposed to diverse and rich experiences of culture through the arts in an inclusive and collective environment. In observing the program, student and classroom teachers uncovered that students were interested and engaged, as they were entrusted with following their own interests. Students also took responsibility for their work, committed to goals and timelines, monitoring progress and communicating their goals with teachers, parents and peers. Most notably, students worked collaboratively in groups, considering their multiple points of view, and participated in evaluations. The program also strengthened community ties and cohesion, unifying and connecting stakeholders in a mutually beneficial manner. Students gained an “authentic opportunity to realize expected learning outcomes”, and “the overarching theme evident in the related commentary was that ‘learning-by-doing’ was a highly effected learning method” (p. 42). In light of the success of this program, it is now offered as a continuing module within the curriculum offered at this school.

I was excited by the multitude of studies that I uncovered connecting the arts and arts-based programs to student success both inside and outside of the classroom. Though the studies I

unearthed did not report on students retrospectively, as I did, the research did show tangible and explicit data demonstrating the umbrella of opportunities that arts-based learning offers students. From building self-esteem to forging better connections with teachers and developing a more thorough understanding of curriculum materials, it was clear that the arts are beneficial to student growth both as learners and as people.

In his publication entitled *The Value of the Arts and Creativity*, Foster (2009) shares that “the arts are confidence building, self-affirming and identity forming. They help to create a sense of community and contribute to good health and to social and economic well-being” (p. 257). As a teacher, I have witnessed a dramatic increase in student anxiety, in particular social anxiety, in a time where funding is deteriorating for both extra-curricular and in-school access to arts programs. As I sifted through articles outlining the numerous benefits of the arts, including social emergence and cohesion amongst students, I landed on a Canadian study based right here in Ontario. This study observed and investigated factors that contributed to student retention of first year drama students within an Ontario school board. In publicly funded schools in Ontario, secondary school students are required to complete only one course credit in the arts. This study looked to a sample of first year students for insight into their perspectives and opinions of their first secondary school drama course. Through interviews and questionnaires, McLauchlan & Winters (2014) observed a total of 54 students, almost two thirds of which reported drama to be a motivator for their attendance of school. The students revealed to the researchers that prior to participating in a class dedicated solely to drama, they had “experienced highly inconsistent school exposure to drama” (p. 55). Like my study, these students also described a positive experience in their exposure to drama, inciting comments that they were having ‘fun at school’, and enjoyed ‘learning through play’ (p. 55). The students appreciated the uniqueness of the style of instruction, finding opportunities to express themselves through creative measures, unlike more linear instruction in their other subjects. In particular, the findings of this study indicated that the educator played a key role in the drama classroom experience. Teacher pedagogies were described by students and summarized by researchers as teachers having a ‘passion for teaching’, demonstrating an ‘awareness of adolescent learning needs’ and an ‘effective balance of direct instruction and student-directed learning’ (p. 57). Students signified that their personal growth through drama included themes of empathy and perspective taking, social and collaborative skills, confidence, communication and creativity, and success in other courses and interview

preparation (p. 59). The student observations and comments showed consistency with my own findings, as “students viewed their drama teachers as leaders and co-participants who worked and learned along with them” (p. 60).

As I mentioned previously, teachers inform the “vibe” in their classrooms and they set the tone for what type of environment students will experience. By feeling empowered to set the tone for exploration, the classroom teacher generates a space of inclusivity, creativity and personal growth for both the student *and* teacher. In a study I found discussing the belief systems held by pre-service dramatic arts teachers and their prior experiences learning in a drama classroom, Gray, Pascoe & Wright (2018) comment on this innate “sense of belonging” that is “integral to the work of drama education” (p. 7). They posit that, “developing social relationships and supportive communities creates a safe and trusting environment for students to explore their creativity and take risks” (p. 7).

I closed my laptop, eyes dry from the excessive screen time. I got up from my chair and stretched, noting that the sun was now in full brightness, looming over the sky as a reminder of just how long I had been sitting there. Knowing the hours of sunshine were limited as it was late in the day, I decided to grab my dogs and take them for a walk in the woods. I put on my sneakers, grabbed their leashes and headed out to work through my thoughts in the comfort of the forest. I felt excited and validated by the additional research that I had done, and saw value in returning to the literature now that I had a clear understanding of what my participants had experienced. I took a deep breath, and felt gratitude for the day. The air was crisp and felt so good after being cooped up in the house. I concentrated on my breath, focusing on holding it in and then letting it out slowly. I let my mind wander as I walked, thinking about what I had learned and what I could offer to other teachers.

So, what did I find? I found that although each student experiences the arts differently, they experience it in ways that are meaningful to them. The arts are a vehicle for exchanging silent words, being vulnerable in a safe space, and pushing ourselves to be authentic. The arts invite us to be a better version of ourselves. What other subject areas teach students to live their truths and share their stories? We spend so much time as educators teaching curriculum, but what about living it? A colleague recently posed a question that I found to be particularly profound. She asked, “what can we learn from the art of storytelling?” As an educator I have sat with this

concept and realized that what I truly need to know (in education) is what I have learned (and continue to learn) about myself. And this stems from a popular saying that *all I will ever need to know is what I learned in kindergarten*. And what I learned in kindergarten was to be kind, be curious, and explore what brings me joy and interest. So why then, after kindergarten, do we stop living this pedagogy?

To answer my research question, the “effects” of attending an arts-based program at a secondary school are the themes which I identified through my study. The effects are social connection and emergence, a growth mindset, the development of a culture and a continuous support system. The reason why, twenty years later, I still feel that secondary school was so pivotal and instrumental in my personal growth is because it was. And it also was for so many other people, and will be for future students.

So, as I walked, my study complete and my research question answered, I was left with one final pressing question: How can I re-create this experience for others, now knowing what factors helped construct it for myself and my classmates? In other words, how do educators mobilize policy into practice, and where can I make the greatest impact on the student experience? Is it in a classroom? Instructing teacher candidates? Writing and advocating for arts-based learning? What I have affirmed through this study, is that the effects of attending an arts-based program are life-changing. And these effects resonate with former students decades later.

The next chapter of this story will be completed in good time. People like myself are putting in motion the things that need to happen for the story to continue...

...and in case you were wondering, I did start that fiction book.

### **Insights, Recommendations and Contributions**

*I came across a series of photos the other day, buried in a box deep within my garage. Flipping through them, a wave of nostalgia overcame me as I sat down and shuffled through visual representations of my youth. These photos were of various shows and competition trips from my theatre years. I smiled at the ‘inside’ jokes, expressive poses and classmates who were more than memorable. Photo after photo, I saw smiling, joyful adolescents, full of life and promise. As adults, each of us had gone on to pursue dreams, some in the arts, some not, but noted that we all moved forward to become autonomous and efficacious, enjoying careers such as teachers, academics, actors and artists. I found myself thinking of the phrase ‘no child left behind’, used frequently in the field of education. I looked at the photos and vividly remembered the different personalities, strengths and talents, and how there was a place for each of us in the theatre. Our differences were celebrated and considered to be advantageous as we played different roles and contributed differently to the greater production. What a beautiful thought – having tasks assigned to match unique capabilities, and not the other way around...*

### **Insights**

In considering the findings from my study, and answering my research question *what are the effects of attending an arts-based secondary school program on the subsequent lives of six former students (including myself) who have graduated two decades ago?* I have some considerations to offer to educators in terms of their practice. I have outlined three applications that I feel would benefit students across all classrooms, not just arts specific classrooms.

### **The Case for Multimodalities in the Classroom**

In my own study, as well as the studies that I reviewed both for my literature review and my fictional story, empowering students to utilize multi-modal methods in the classroom is a key factor in creating a classroom that is both equitable and inclusive. Inviting students to demonstrate their knowledge in ways that make sense to them lends an opportunity for students to explore their own talents, and connect with information and class materials in ways that will foster lifelong learning practices. As I will demonstrate, education is not a one-size-fits-all approach, and using methods for teaching and learning that incorporates student choice and

multiple modes of delivery contributes to student engagement, empowerment, understanding and student achievement.

In Gardner's research on multiple intelligences, he has defined several 'intelligence' areas, including musical/rhythmic, bodily/kinesthetic, logical/mathematical, verbal/linguistic, visual/spatial, interpersonal, intrapersonal and naturalistic (Gardner, 1997). He notes that these categories are not singular in the sense that there are connections, overlaps and correlations between the groupings. As an example, "people who are mathematically talented often show considerable interest in music; perhaps this is because music presents itself as an extremely fertile field for the mathematical mind, which is fascinated by patterns of any sort" (Gardner, 1993, p. 42). Gardner's theories are still relevant in recent research on the arts and learning (Fraser et. al, 2007; Gamwell, 2005; Steele, 2019), and I reflect on the implications of students not having access to tap into these creative spaces. I also consider how we can transform the future of education by pairing artistic opportunities with other subject areas, and teaching from an experiential and arts-based perspective. Richardson & Mishra (2018) acknowledge that researchers and educators "describe the current state of education as one of standardization and conformity, which is rooted in the compulsory curriculum and high stakes testing of the last 20 years" (p. 45). I question the disconnect between current policies and practices, and recommendations from leaders in educational research. These researchers suggest that a "change in focus is required" (p. 52), and that spaces conducive to encouraging creative and innovative thought can support and nurture student potential, and bring us "successfully into the 22<sup>nd</sup> century" (p. 52).

Arts-based learning, including access to multi-modal approaches, offers students the unique opportunity to explore learning through different mediums and in different contexts using their sensory systems. As research suggests, "the developing brain is hungry to engage with diverse and meaningful sensory input" (Kraus et. al., 2014, p. 1). Only a fraction of students learn best through what Gardner describes as *linguistic* intelligence. This 'intelligence' enables students to observe and process information and communicate ideas through language, (such as reading and writing) which is an integral part of education, but not the sole form of information translation. Multiple modes of communication can be used as teaching and learning tools, as well as forms of assessment. As an example, visual arts is deeply intertwined with language, and can

be used to replace language (as in visual storytelling). Rifa-Valls, a visual narrative researcher, notes that “learning increases when multi-literacy and self-awareness and meta-awareness interact” (2011, p. 302). Dance, drama and music are all forms of language and storytelling. Sadly, for students that do not attend arts-specific programs, access to the opportunity of arts-based learning is not always afforded. We will speak more about that later.

Morawski (2014), documents her experience teaching a graduate course exploring multimodal possibilities in education. Her course, which included students from a wide variety of areas such as visual arts, teaching, nursing and counseling, investigated the factors that contribute to differences in education, such as learning styles and multiple intelligences. By offering her students the opportunity to explore the research, their own experiences and course materials through multimodal perspectives, what she found was that “...multimodalities encouraged them to draw on various elements of personal resources such as emotion and imagination, to reconsider difference as a multidimensional and fluid concept” (Morawski, 2014, p. 3).

Her words resonate with me, and build a convincing case for the use of multimodalities in the classroom:

Art can be an emotional and immeasurable space for anyone to explore. The challenge and idea of endless possibilities for the elucidation of one’s knowledge gained and how one chooses to portray this individual. Understanding can be alluring. The infinite limitations of language can be resisted through the process of art and the creation of representative and symbolic work. (Morawski et. al, 2014, p. 17)

As research continues to surface supporting theories of multiple intelligences, “educators have become more aware of the research that has been done by cognitive and educational psychologists in the area of learning styles and multiple intelligences” (Snyder, 1999, p. 11). Studies continue to support the integration of multiple intelligence theories into classrooms to enhance instruction and further encourage student achievement (Snyder, 1999; Cassidy, 2007; Nolen, 2003; Gouws, 2007; Stanford, 2003). In an inclusive classroom, we recognize that the needs of each learner will vary, and that every student will learn differently. Drawing from theories such as multiple intelligences and encouraging learning and exploration through multimodal approaches empowers students to actualize their potential.

## **Intelligence and Student Potential**

As a teacher, I want my students to recognize that intelligence is not something that is measured by standardized tests. Intelligence is a very fluid concept that is different for every individual based on their own talents, skills and interests. Building on the case for multimodalities, I see that students who are not experiencing success perhaps are not progressing as a result of a lack of opportunity, not intelligence. A famous quote from Albert Einstein has always stayed with me: Everybody is a genius. But if you judge a fish by its ability to climb a tree, it will live its whole life believing it is stupid. While this quote can be found on cups and t-shirts and memes extensively, what I do not see is the connection between this wisdom and commonplace classroom practices. Through multimodal possibilities, student potential can be actualized.

Through his extensive research on the theory of multiple intelligences, Gardner (1999) has come to define intelligence as being “a biopsychological potential to process information that can be activated in a cultural setting, to solve problems or create products that are of value in a culture” (p. 14). When I think about multiple perspectives, multiple intelligences, human potential and individual gifts, I reflect on what type of space or environment would be conducive to accessing that potential. The difference, for example, between undergraduate and graduate studies is quite different. I reflect on my experience as an undergraduate student, and recall feeling restricted in my learning. I had actually attended three different facilities to complete my undergraduate degree, and my consistent memory was that of learning through very traditional methods – lectures, exams, very succinct and prescribed papers that could not be written in a first person narrative. Hours of studying and absorbing information that I can no longer recall for the most part. Graduate studies, on the other hand, opened up a space for my voice, my interests, my thoughts and my preferred learning/writing styles. While I acknowledge and appreciate the necessity to develop a base understanding for my area of research and core methods for constructing and executing arguments, my appreciation and thirst for knowledge has grown exponentially. I am now learning for me, not for a professor and not for grades. Imagine an education system where secondary school students are treated as graduate students – where teachers facilitated learning, in whatever space that may be. I reflect upon the perceptions of Holt (1982), as he suggests that “when we talk about intelligence, we do not mean the ability to get a

good score on a certain kind of test, or even the ability to do well in school; these are at best only indicators of something larger, deeper, and far more important” (p. 271).

I question traditional measures of intelligence, and recognize that education and *educating* must derive from a space of interest, desire, ability, and narrative. I have spoken to this concept repeatedly as I feel that stories are the essence of our individuality and personhood, and it is my responsibility as an educator to join in the ongoing narrative of the student, not create a new one. To do so requires an openness and recognition that “learning is not everything, and certainly one piece of learning is as good as another (Holt, 1982, p. 292). Holt (1982) acknowledges that “it is not the subject matter that makes some learning more valuable than others, but the spirit in which the work is done” (p. 293). We have already discussed the idea that emotional learning is of great importance to the growth and development of students, as well as teamwork, empathy, work ethic, support for self and others, and many other very key parts of the hidden curriculum that are not explicitly ‘taught’ in schools. So if we can agree that these aspects of human development are valuable to the adolescent learner, why do we limit the possibilities in education by restricting access to alternative models and methods of teaching and learning? Why are only some students afforded the opportunity to engage in arts-based and other experiential approaches to education, and why are we not encouraging more individualized plans of study based on the needs and interests of all students?

Miller (2010) unpacks some of these big ideas in his work on *Whole Child Education*, cautioning that “whole child education requires whole teaching. Since we should reach the head, hands, and heart of the student, we need a broad range of teaching approaches that reach these different aspects of the child” (p. 9). He goes on to suggest that to achieve a *whole curriculum* we must aim to have a curriculum that is connected, and “fosters relationships between subjects and various forms of thinking, and builds community” (p. 12). In our current approaches to curriculum there is superficial evidence of interconnectedness between subjects, students and school community, offering a more one-size-fits-most approach. While I recognize the obstacles (funding, staffing, etc.) facing current public education models, what I am suggesting to achieve a more whole-child, whole-school and whole-education approach, is to implement further options for children to learn in an experiential environment with multimodal possibilities. I also recognize that not all schools have access to the arts-based programming that I had experienced, however what I am intending through this study is to pull some key ideas and ‘best practices’

from the stories of myself and my participants, to contribute to strategies that encourage and model meaningful education for students. I agree with Holt (1982) that “schools should be a place where children learn what they most want to know, instead of what we think they ought to know” (p. 289). To further this point, “we adults destroy most of the intellectual and creative capacity of children by the things we do to them or make them do” (p. 274). We are doing children a disservice by not expanding our views on education and intelligence, and are squashing their thirst for knowledge by only allowing them to explore themselves and their interests within a particular set of parameters.

Vail (1987), describes what she calls ‘conundrum kids’ in her book *Smart Kids with School Problems*. She notes that these children “often shine in the arts, athletics, or interpersonal skills...But many are turning away from education because their school problems are misunderstood” (preface). She acknowledges that “talent and trouble are intertwined” (p. 2), and suggests that “often a smart kid’s school problem arises from a mismatch between his learning style and the methods and materials used in the curriculum. When this happens, it is the student who is diagnosed as learning disabled, instead of material’s being labelled inappropriate” (p. 8). I invite you to reflect on Vail’s statement, and then consider Gardner’s thoughts from 1999:

*Indeed, in education, the challenge of the next millennium consists precisely in this: Now that we know about the enormous differences in how people acquire and represent knowledge, can we make these differences central to teaching and learning? Or will we instead continue to treat everyone in a uniform way? If we ignore these differences, we are destined to perpetuate a system that caters to an elite – typically those who learn best in a certain, usually linguistic or logical-mathematical manner. On the other hand, if we take these differences seriously, each person may be able to develop his or her intellectual and social potential more fully (p. 92)*

His book, *Intelligence Reframed* (1999), was published over two decades ago, with a very direct message based on years of research in education. During the time period that this book was released and notable, I was a senior student at an arts-based secondary school, in a time when the arts were celebrated and held in high enough regard to have full programs designated to arts-based education, fully-funded extra-curricular programs in the arts, province-wide theatre

competitions which encouraged and welcomed schools across many districts to compete, designated teachers instructing in their specific discipline (visual arts, music, drama, dance), community and parental support and wide recognition of program benefits. Fast forward twenty years, long after Gardner and Vail offered suggestions to support and engage students in learning, and I find myself in the age of digital and online learning, continuous and increased cuts to arts program funding, a significant increase in children with learning differences and exceptionalities, teachers with insufficient training in the arts delivering arts curriculum, increased class sizes and stressed and distressed children and teachers. How can arts-based approaches address some of the ongoing roadblocks in education?

### **The Culture of Education**

As I have mentioned throughout this thesis, the culture of the classroom is key in developing an environment conducive to learning. Social relationships, classroom environment, classroom practices and approaches to learning are all integral to student success. Each teacher has the autonomy to develop practices based on their own teaching pedagogies, and while this is empowering for the teacher, it leads to inconsistencies in education. Every classroom fosters a different environment, and every teacher provides different learning opportunities. Building on the multimodal opportunities and the expansion of what “intelligence” entails, the culture of schools is another area to consider when comparing programs and students experiences.

In his work entitled *The Culture of the School and the Problem of Change*, Sarason (1982), comments that “as a society, however, we do not value high intelligence as such unless it leads to socially approved achievement” (p. 262). What is considered a ‘socially approved achievement’? From my own personal experience, the arts were held in high regards for the duration of my childhood and into adolescence, however once I reached post-secondary learning, somehow I was expected to conform and get in line with ‘real’ learning or ‘real’ work. Somehow my enrichment in arts-based learning was deduced to being simply an extra-curricular or an activity or hobby. My parents discouraged me from pursuing my dream of being on *Broadway*, and instead I attended university in a pre-law program with the intention of attending law school. This, obviously, was not the path for me, and coming full circle on my journey back to the arts through education and becoming an educator is fascinating. I took a different path, but

eventually came back to where I was always meant to be. So, I reflect on the idea of ‘socially approved achievement’ and question why some intelligences/career paths are held in higher regard than others? When did our societal culture shift, ever so slowly, from a civilization premised on aesthetic innovation and arts as high society, to that of an achievement-based system, streamlining students into specific areas that have been deemed to be ‘intelligent’. Our current push on curriculum, specifically in the areas of math, science and technology, calls into question the significance of the arts, when in fact the two areas are not comparable. While I recognize that the arts are included in the Ontario curriculum expectations, what I am speaking to specifically is my observation of the decrease in funding for extra-curricular activities, supplies and materials, and qualified generalized arts teachers hired to teach the arts in elementary schools. I also see a push on math, for example, with funding for additional teacher training, resources, specialists and teacher rebates and discounts on math additional qualifications. What happens, then, to the right-brained students who recognize early that math is not their calling? Surely not all students strive to become engineers, architects and computer analysts, and for those that do, what can arts-based learning contribute to them?

Innovative schools and school programs do exist, whether premised on “STEAM” based learning (science, technology, engineering, arts and math) that encourages arts-based approaches in math/science, or schools employing project-based learning (PBL) through an arts-based approach. One such school is School 21, in Stratford, London in the U.K. This school focuses on pairing “performative” and “knowledge-based” subjects, to infuse the arts as a central focus in learning (Edutopia, 2016). Schools do not need to be specific performing arts schools or offer specific programming in the arts to encourage, support and offer arts-based practices and methods. One main area of focus is teacher education. A predominant reason why I made the decision to teach post-secondary studies as opposed to teaching solely in publicly funded schools, was to have the opportunity to encourage teacher candidates to discover alternative methods of teaching, learning, and assessment. In a commentary with Michael Wilson, he offered his insight as a professor in a teacher education program:

...I was more interested in taking generalist teachers, in other words elementary teachers, many of whom had no experience in any of the arts, certainly not them all, and most of whom did not feel they were “talented,” and that the arts were for the “talented.” I wanted to ignite a fire under them and to this day that’s mostly what I want to do—is

motivate teachers to want to do that - Wilson, M. (2014)

Teacher education programs are key to making the arts more accessible for students in mainstream education, as well as changing the school culture.

## **Recommendations**

In considering the insights that I have outlined, I will next offer some recommendations for future practice.

In considering the use of multimodalities in the classroom, I feel that professional development for teachers would be beneficial in providing tangible resources, ideas, approaches and instructions for teachers. Pre-service teachers may not have had the opportunity to be emerged in arts-based and experiential practices in their teaching training, and likewise for seasoned teachers. I believe that ongoing professional development helps us as teachers stay current and relevant with available methods and tools for the classroom, and also encourages us to consistently re-evaluate our teaching practices and teacher pedagogies. Demonstrating learning does not mean paper and pencil worksheets, and evaluation does not mean rigorous testing. Teaching and evaluation, when approached through an arts-based prospective, gives students the opportunity to think critically, creatively and make cross-curricular and real-life connections to class materials. Adopting methods that welcome arts-based approaches, for example, invites student voice and perspective. Arts-based approaches also support student engagement in a way that promotes social cohesion amongst peers, activates an environment for meaningful learning and supports a growth mindset.

In considering arts-based approaches as a way for students to actualize their own skills, talents and “intelligence”, I recommend approaching education in an individualized manner. As an elementary teacher, arts-based approaches have broadened my ability to meet the needs of all students, in particular students who are working from an individualized education plan (IEP). Working backwards, when I design units for my classroom, I first consider *who* I am planning the lesson for, *why* I am doing the lesson/unit, *how* I am going to engage students and *what* methods I will use for assessment. When I design courses for teacher candidates, I place particular emphasis on these points, and offer them methods of instruction and evaluation design that is multimodal, focuses on the strengths and interests of students, offers choice and flexibility

in learning and encourages student voice. Each student should have the opportunity to learn and demonstrate their learning through the methods and means that works for them. The Ontario curriculum documents are a guide to the topics and material that must be covered in each subject stream in a particular grade. *How* a teacher implements that curriculum is completely subjective and based on the talents, interests, skills, pedagogies and professional judgement of each teacher. In recognizing the ‘multiple intelligences’ in students, teachers can expand their understanding of the types of learners that reside in their classrooms. One method or approach to delivering curriculum is not sufficient; rather, offering students the opportunity to express their learning through multiple modes is crucial to meaningful learning and an individualized student experience.

In considering the culture of education, my study offers a perspective of the arts that may not be inherently recognized by all educators. The effects of arts-based education may not be evident or even measurable until years after student graduation. Understanding the long-term impacts of arts programs on students helps to support a rationale for funding, encourages further development of arts programs, and can be used as a tool for students struggling socially. As I have mentioned, there is a divide between policy and practice, and through further research into the benefits of arts-based programs after graduation, we as educators can make a shift in our classroom practices. My recommendation is teaching through a lens that considers multimodalities to open the possibilities and approaches within classroom structures. Experiential and project-based approaches increase student autonomy, empowers students through student-led learning, creates space for student voice and narrative, and invokes a growth mindset. Studies such as mine demonstrate a strong need for programs such as the one that I attended, as students actualize the long-term benefits of these programs years later in the workforce. Further to my recommendation, modelling for students how projects could be completed, for example, will provide examples and context for the possibilities in learning. A teacher cannot simply say “be creative” but rather should lead by example. Teach lessons through hands-on and arts-based approaches, give examples how written work can be explored through programs such as Flipgrid and Stop Motion Animation. Invite students to participate in tasks such as body biography and demonstrate reading comprehension through writing song lyrics, creating a visual arts piece or writing a small screenplay or monologue. A ‘creative’ space

is invited and is reflective of the classroom culture. If we want students to think outside the box, we need to teach outside the box. Changing school or classroom culture is not a matter of doing one arts-based project. It is inviting inquiry, sharing stories, providing time for thoughtful group reflection, exploring less traditional curriculum resources and bringing in the voices of the classroom community and the community at large.

## **Contributions**

My study has highlighted some very important and key elements implicating not just the student experience, but also how we frame teaching and learning as educators. I consistently reinforce to teacher candidates the idea that we never know what moments will be impressionable for students, and as educators we can never pinpoint the experiences that will be everlasting and shape and inform future learning. What we can do, is provide a safe space for meaningful learning, inviting student narratives and encouraging multimodalities. Drawing on the literature, research, and references in this dissertation, there is evidence that these methods contribute to the growth and success of students. Expanding the ways in which we frame education is helpful in meeting the ever-changing needs of students, and delivering the curriculum in creative and innovative ways. As an example, online teaching and learning has become more prevalent as we have adapted to recommendations from health units in regards to the current pandemic. I have personally experienced teaching both elementary and post-secondary studies completely online over the past two years, and as a result have moved outside of my own comfort level and pushed boundaries to deliver an arts-based experience. Utilizing digital resources, recording educator videos, and creating moments for social cohesion amongst students are all ways that we can modify learning to accommodate an online platform. While online learning is not ideal for an arts-experience, I can say that the key findings from my study can still be found within the online classroom. Social emergence has been possible by reinforcing and encouraging student relationships through synchronous meetings, and guided group work. The culture and environment of the classroom can still be a safe space that models creative and innovative learning, and multi-modal methods are still accessible, and can be adapted. A growth mindset can still flourish through implementing support systems for students, and crafting classroom activities in a way that promotes student success and self-directed learning. We are entering a framework for learning that challenges traditional beliefs about

teaching and learning, and perhaps this is a time to re-imagine education, and re-evaluate the importance of the arts. Through the pandemic, social emotional learning, including arts-based learning, has been key to maintaining positive student mental health and now more than ever the benefits of arts-based learning are evident. What is clear is that the effects of arts-based learning on students, (present, past and future), is an opportunity to learn in the ways that make the most sense to each of us. I do recognize the limitations of this study given the reliance on participant memories, however, this study is not looking for precision of the memory but rather the emotion, learning, personal growth and benefits tied to it. Each of us will take away something different, and will grow in the ways that we need. The arts are an opportunity to invite our students into a realm of possibility...

...and isn't that what learning is all about?

### **A Quick Activity**

Gillian Judson (2014) reminds us that “images evoke complex meaning and can enrich that meaning by calling out that which is inexpressible in words” (p. 5). The arts open our minds to the realm of possibility, bringing to life unexplainable phenomena and evoking our senses in unique and powerful ways.

*Close your eyes and go outside of your home. Listen carefully. What do you notice about your sense of sound? Is it heightened? Do you notice sounds that feel unfamiliar in a familiar environment? Walk around and let the sound guide you. What do you feel? Are you drawn to anything in particular? Do you find yourself with a sense of renewed curiosity about a space that you frequent each day?*

*Open your eyes. Cover your ears. Continue to walk around your space. What do you notice now? How has the environment changed? How have your feelings towards it changed? As you walk, re-trace your steps to where you first began and make note of the things around you. How are they different? Let yourself focus on the experience of the moment; notice the details of the elements. What season is it? What green spaces exist?*

*Now, cover your ears and close your eyes. Keep walking. You know where you are. Why do you feel hesitation? Are you nervous or even afraid of walking without guidance or a sense of direction? Challenge yourself and begin to run, slow at first, and then pick up the speed. Have you opened your eyes yet? If you have, think about why that is.*



Figure 16: The Writing Shack

Thank you for humoring me if you have participated in that quick activity. As a reflection, think about the first scenario. It is interesting to view something familiar through a new lens, isn't it? Was it refreshing to gain an entirely different perspective on a space that is not new? What about the second scenario? Did you find yourself questioning how the space could be observed so differently from alternate perspectives

### **Concluding Thoughts**

*I walk barefoot along the earth, feeling the cold, soft grass beneath me. I walk slowly, without urgency, both to a destination, and again without any destination at all. I feel the cool fall breeze brush against my sun-kissed skin, and close my eyes, breathing deeply and steadily. Amidst the chaos of our everyday lives I have found a space of solace and comfort. A space to think and reflect. A place of peace.*

*I see the colours of the leaves are starting to change as they let go and give in to transformation; soon the trees will be bare and vulnerable. Soon they will embrace the cruelty of winter, only to survive and emerge even stronger come spring.*

*I feel a soft rain slowly trickle down from a looming sky. I long to feel fulfilled as I once did; I crave an artistic outlet and want to break free from the confines of my own mind. What happened to me? Did I settle for the expectation, the mundane within reach of what could be possible? Did I “grow up” and become who I thought the world wanted me to be? Is there a compromise....?*

This research has allowed me to revisit and reclaim a part of myself that has informed my personality, my thinking, my teaching style and my perspectives, but has been neglected as a source of fuel for my soul. As a teacher, I have spent years perfecting my skills, drawing on myself as an artist, but not fulfilling myself as an artist. Last year I taught both drama courses required for a teachable in drama at the University of Ottawa, courses that for years were entrusted to Michael Wilson, who has recently retired but pioneered the imagination and creativity cohort of teacher candidates at the faculty. Through his mentorship I gained an additional perspective on arts-based learning, one that he crafts from a position of play. Michael insists on the importance of students being able to “laugh at themselves and each other at the same time”. I reflect on this concept as I conclude my study through my research question, “what are the effects of attending an arts-based secondary school program on the subsequent lives of six former students (including myself) who graduated two decades ago?” Throughout this dissertation I have given a background as to why I felt it was important to conduct this research, provided a review of literature outlining a social constructivist framework and arts-based learning methods, and also discussed my methodology, summarized the results of my study and offered insights on arts-based learning. As I conclude my study, I consider the implications for present and future practice, and through my own classroom teaching and my work with teacher candidates, I intend to disrupt conventional teaching methods and offer insight into methods that make space for *all* students.

*I had a dream the other night that I lost my identity. My face was hidden behind a white, unremarkable mask, my body wrapped in black robe-inspired attire. I did not have a voice, and could only communicate my despair through movement. The sky was dark, the only light looming*

*from a nearby fire. I lay in the fetal position on the cold, damp forest floor, observing the stillness and silence of the forest canopy. As if on cue, music began to play, soft at first and then rising into a beautiful crescendo. The sound made me feel powerful. I could feel a burning in my soul that pleaded for escape, but my throat swelled with an imposed silence and a feeling of defeat. The music played, and I found myself slowly unfurling from my curled position. I followed the lead of the song stretching my limbs and eventually rising up, slowly feeling the defeat slip away. I began to move, enveloped by the sound. Without instruction, my body swayed, slowly and methodically with the mysterious music. I danced around the fire, feeling free and connected to my space. I noticed thick tree trunks, smooth and cut to perfection as though they were small seats around the fire. Stacks of books sat atop of the grounded stumps, outdated and locked.*

*I heard a sound from the woods. An animal? No. A child. I walked cautiously over to what appeared to be a hanging window frame. The music followed me like a shield as I peered through the window to reveal a younger version of myself. A daughter. My heart ached as she, too, revealed a white mask, imprisoned by silence, spirit darkened with the same black robes. I reached for her hand without hesitation and pulled her through the window. The music called to us, but she would not dance. In the dark space I motioned for her to see the light, looming from the lit fire. I had to set her free. I somehow knew innately how to save her...*

*I approached the fire to the stacks of books and questioned why they were protected by locks. She seemed afraid. I picked up a book and she stood gazing, frozen. I locked eyes with her as I ripped the protective seal from the book and began tearing out the pages, throwing them into the fire. Without hesitation, in an animalistic ritual I started to tear at the books, dismantling the locks and destroying the pages. I felt powerful. I motioned for her to join me and as the books crumbled and sizzled in the heat of the blaze, the colour slowly bled into our faces. Our white masks shortened, to reveal our voices, the white foundation giving way to a colourful and expressive hue. The young child approached me with cans of paint, and as we danced, we coloured the forest with neon brightness. We continued to dance as we whimsically splashed paint everywhere on this black canvas. The colours swirled among the trees, and I knew that we would never be silenced again.*



*Figure 17: The Silenced Figures*



*Figure 18: Harvesting the Light*

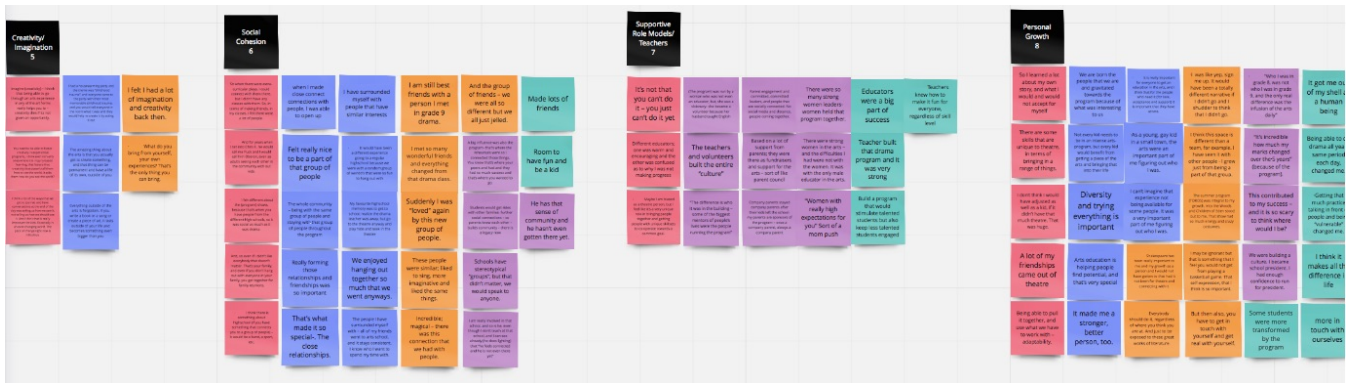


*Figure 19: Emerging from the Darkness*

## **Appendix 1 (Interview Questions)**

1. Describe yourself and your life before enrolling in the arts school.
2. What prompted you to enroll in the school?
3. What were your first impressions of the school/program? (environment, people, educators, etc.)
4. Tell me about your story of participating in an arts-based educational program, including any critiques that you may want to share?
5. What was unique about this experience, and what do you feel you learned/gained from the experience?
6. What specific skills did you acquire through arts-based learning, including personal development, and how (if at all) have these skills prepared you for your current role?
7. What benefits do you see in learning through arts-based education?
8. What have you learned from this experience that has stayed relevant in your current life situation?
9. Would you recommend arts-based models of education to current secondary students? Why or why not?

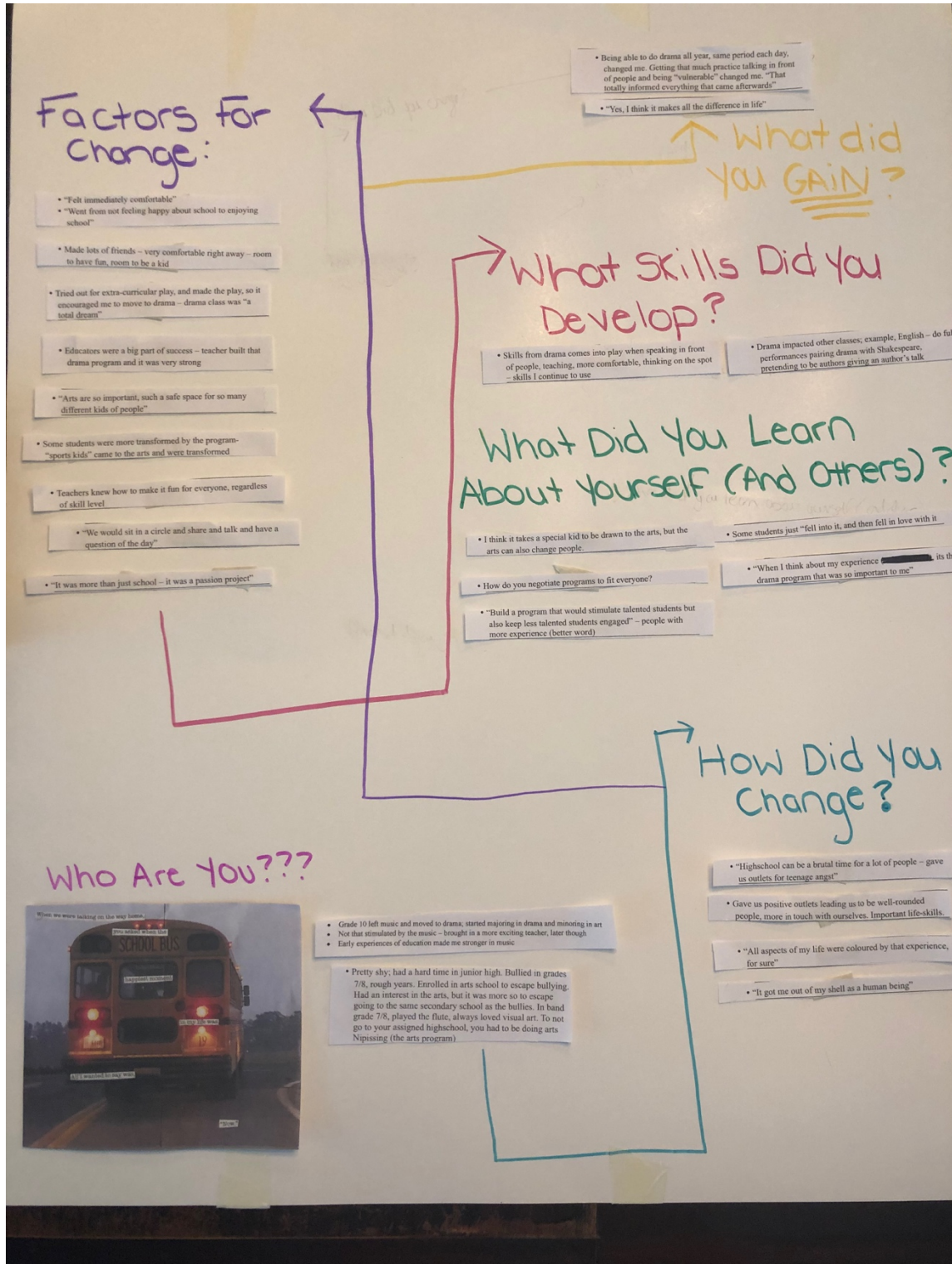
# Appendix 2 (Visual of Cross-Case Miro Diagram)



### Appendix 3 (Codes Collapsed into Themes)

Social Emergence	Social Cohesion Inclusive Space
Culture/Environment	Creativity/Imagination Cross Curricular/Multi-modal Learning
Growth Mindset	Confidence/Self-Esteem Transferrable/lifelong skills Personal Growth
Support Systems	Supportive Role Models/Teachers Safe Space

## Appendix 4 (Mind-map Sabrina)



# Appendix 5 (Mind-map Ellie)

**Who Are You?**

- I did some research and tracked attendance of students, and the students who have rehearsals after school, the attendance is higher on those days. Kids show up "when they have something to stay for". For some kids, that's why they go to school.
- "This school created its own "magnet" program and attracted people"
- I don't think anyone will get anything negative out of it.
- Technology has ossified relationships - people don't come together like that anymore
- "The culture that has been created through the arts has literally saved that school"
- Technology has ossified relationships - people don't come together like that anymore
- Very quiet, low confidence, not a strong student - struggled with organization, in general low confidence

**Additional Comments of Interest**

**Who Did You Gain?**

- This contributed to my success - and it is so scary to think where would I be?
- I always thought I would be a teacher, but I don't think it would have happened had I not done the arts at that time.
- "Every year that you move away from the experience is another year that you are grateful for the experience that"
- "I didn't know that the world didn't experience what we experienced"

**Who Did You Learn About Yourself & Others?**

- to the school. A big milestone was also the TOROS program - that's where the rehearsals were so I connected those things. You know that's where your peers and had and they had so much success and that's where you wanted to go.
- Having to navigate different personalities and different perspectives from different teachers made the difference. It gave us diversity in learning. As well they brought in guest artists and teachers so we had various opportunities for learning.
- I remember very different perspectives depending on which facet of the arts you were in - there were very different people leading the arts. We had a dance teacher that became ill, and that impacted the kids.
- The drama teacher at the time - sometimes our ideas would not mesh and we would butt heads. As a drama teacher, I find myself doing the same thing, but as a 16-year-old kid, I didn't realize that he was doing a good job.
- We don't see this kind of experience in other schools, this type of energy: "it's a culture that can't be replicated" - "It's the philosophy"
- If you get the philosophy, you will be successful
- "Everyone could go through arts education, and everyone will get something out of what it provides"

**Who Did You Become?**

- Once I enrolled in dance/drama, the "confidence boost was instantly noticeable to my family, but not to me right away"
- "Who I was in grade 8, was not who I was in grade 9, and the only real difference was the infusion of the arts daily"
- Major personality change - the shy, quiet person is gone. More outgoing, confident.
- "What I got out of the program was the ability to make friends, form friendships and connections with people, in a deep way"
- "To literally be given a voice, and to be told that your voice matters, is probably the biggest thing that the arts provide for kids"
- I joined "the Company", and I joined dance. I was nervous because I was in a grade 10 class as a grade 9 student and that was scary and intimidating. But, "I felt instantly comfortable in dance, and successful - and I wasn't feeling any success before that" because I wasn't a great student.

**What Skills Did You Develop?**

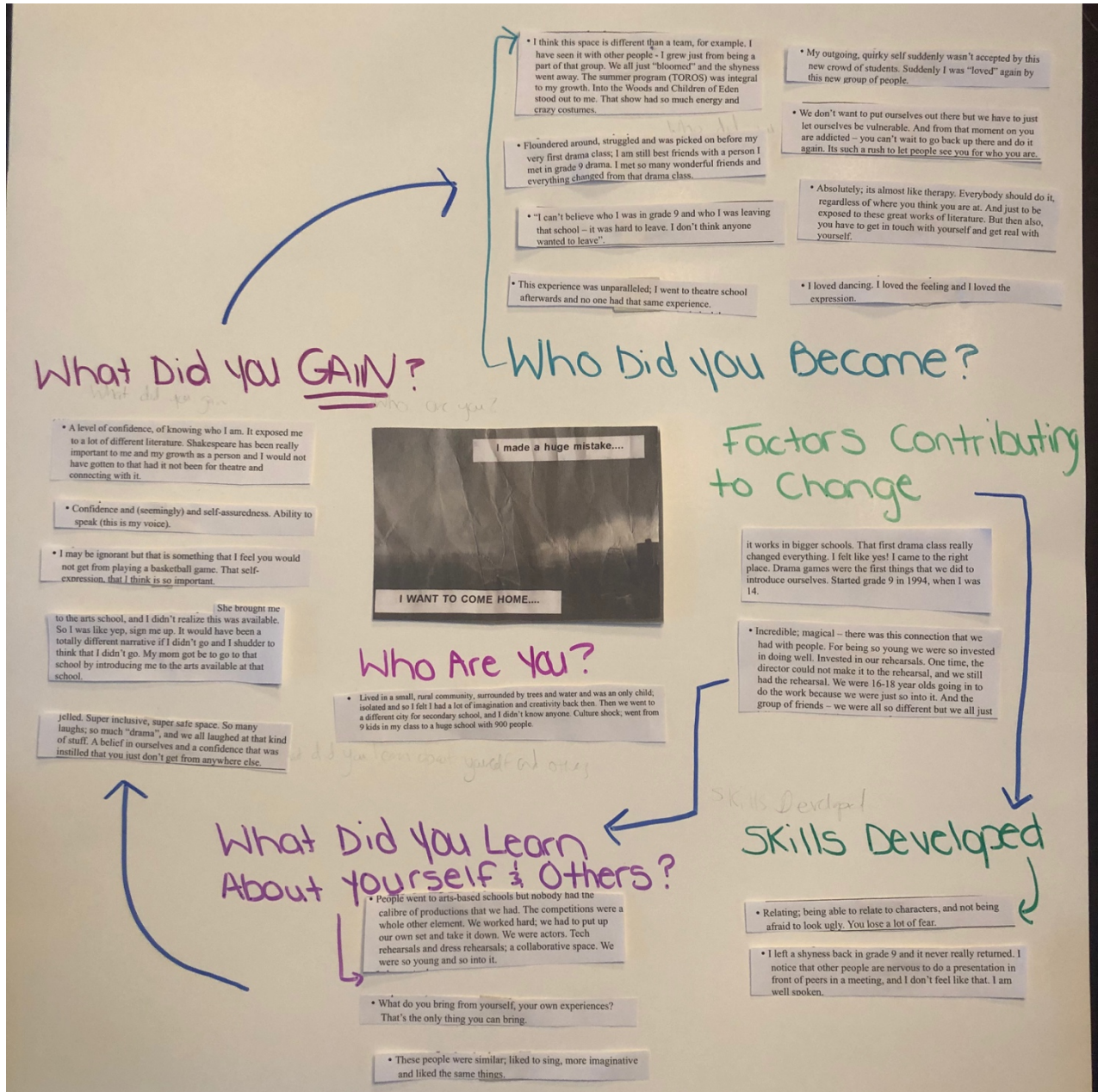
- When I left I was a very outgoing, confident person who would speak to anyone in the school. Schools have stereotypical "groups", but that didn't matter, we would speak to anyone. We were building a culture. I became school president. I had enough confidence to run for president.
- In my position now I have a strong voice and I know how to use it - and we know how to polish something "the show will always go on"
- "It will be fine" - and you just trust that and it is fine - you are not overthinking things
- "No matter how successful you go on to be, to know that you have an opinion and you have a voice and you can use it, and there is a variety of ways that you can use it (you can express yourself through music, through movement, monologues, anything at all)"

**Factors Contributing to Change**

- There was never an intention to build this program, and that's why it worked out so beautifully; it just happened holistically, over time, over a few generations"
- There were 20 or so parents that would show up and work together and built what is now known as "Arts-Nipping" - and they titled their group to open a bank account to go to
- Company parents stayed company parents after their kids left the school - my parents are sponsors of the program - once a company parent, always a company parent
- "Women with really high expectations for you" Sort of a mom push
- Parent engagement and committed, committed leaders, and people that are socially connected. No social media and distance, people coming together.
- "The difference is who it was in the building - some of the biggest mentors on people's lives were the people running the program"
- Based on a lot of support from parents - they were called the Company parents - they were there as fundraisers and support for the arts - sort of like parent council
- The teachers and volunteers built the entire "culture"
- Students would get rides with other families - further social connections - so parents knew each other - builds community - there is a legacy now
- Parents would come in, there was no technology, parents had to come in and if we were running late, they would wait. But they were physically there - that makes all of the difference.
- Nobody got in the way - there was no red tape. The amount of red tape today is just unbelievable. You need permission forms signed for even a try-out now. It was a different world then. Now, there is so much red tape that you can't build community.
- LORLUS was run by a woman who was not even an educator, but she was a visionary - she became a volunteer because her husband taught English
- It was a "creative process" and grew on its own - it just kept morphing
- There were so many strong women leaders - women held that program together.

**Screenshot:** A screenshot of a software interface showing a 'Project Library' and a text editor with the text: 'I hope you take my script... maybe you'll see yourself on the big screen and realize what you passed up.'

# Appendix 6 (Jolene Mind-map)



# Appendix 7 (Mind-map Charlie)

**Additional Comments of Interest**

- There was a fun part of school where you were in the theatre, but there were also still the components that were like a regular highschool
- I wish I had gotten to do more of the visual arts side of it
- I am busy, committing to rehearsals is impossible as an adult but "picking up a pad of paper and drawing on a Saturday afternoon is much more accessible"
- It is a creative outlet - being in a play sounds awesome but also hard as an adult
- Should kids be forced to learn a little bit of everything? Or, should kids just gravitate towards the things they enjoy? I am leaning towards people should do a bit of everything. Spend more time doing the things you enjoy, but create a diverse skillset for yourself.
- I wish that I would have been pushed to try new types of arts while I was there, as an adult I have become more interested in visual arts, and I don't feel that was
- I didn't feel really connected to the music kids; I think dance and theatre were really well connected, but I think the music and the visual arts kids were a little bit separated, and I wish that I had gotten to experience a little more of the full spectrum of what the program offered.
- I had a housewarming party and the theme was "childhood trauma", and everyone came to the party with their most memorable childhood trauma, and you would tell everyone in the room what it was and they would help re-create it by acting it out. Dramatic activity.

**Who Are You?**

- "I would purposely forget my gym clothes to not have to participate"
- "I hated grade 7/8 so much", kids were mean. Primary was awesome, and then middle school was the worst. I remember going to the arts-based highschool and being a part of that community (classes and extra curricular), and
- "We are born the people that we are and gravitated towards the program because of what was interesting to us"
- I have a good sense of humour, even as a kid, but I needed the right space to open up, and that brought me a lot of happiness
- Yes, absolutely, for everything that we talked about. It is really important for everyone to get an education in the arts, and I think that for the people who need it (for love, acceptance and support) it is important that they have access. As a young, gay kid in a small town, the arts were an important part of me figuring out who I was. "I can't imagine that experience not being available for some people". It was a very important part of me figuring out who I was

**Factors Contributing to Change**

- Really forming those relationships and friendships was so important, one of the special parts of the program is that it was relatively small, so you got to know everyone and build trust with those people. That's what made it so special. The close relationships.
- Grade 4, TOROS '92 was the Wiz, became friends with Scott, who was opposite than I was - loud, hilarious, risk-taker - he was auditioning, so I did too, but I was cut. Went to a rehearsal and they could see that I was engaged and they asked me if I wanted to be in the play, and of course I wanted to.
- "I loved highschool"
- "Everyone is afraid of exposing themselves, but if you take on a character, it's a lot easier"
- "The amazing thing about the arts is that you actually get to create something, and that thing can be permanent and have a life of its own, outside of you" - everything outside of the arts is forgotten. If you write a book or a song or create a piece of art, it lasts outside of your life and becomes something even bigger than you.
- My favourite highschool memory was to get to school, realize the drama teacher was away, but go to the theatre anyway and play hide and seek in the theatre. We enjoyed hanging out together so much that we went anyways.
- The whole community - being with the same group of people and staying with that group of people throughout the program

**How Did you CHANGE?**

- I was a shy kid, "when I made close connect connections with people, I was able to open up"
- Confidence - I still feel shy and insecure at times, so I feel worried what I would be like had I not gone to an arts school. It made me a stronger, better person, too.
- "Arts education is helping people find potential, and that's very special"
- "I felt like I really belonged"
- "Felt really nice to be a part of that group of people"
- "Positive experience"
- I was shyer when I was young and it helped me come out of my shell

**What Did you GAIN???**

- It helped me with confidence; when I have to make presentations at work, it helps me to go back and pretend I
- It would have been a different experience going to a regular highschool because we were with a random group of weirdos that were so fun to hang out with
- I have not done theatre since highschool, but I have done a lot of "creating", taking ceramics, sewing classes, some drawing classes, a cartoon class.
- Elements of drama in my life that are not as structured as being in a play, but it comes out in different ways. It is fun to me - and I have surrounded myself with people that have similar interests

**What Did you Learn About Yourself / Others?**

- While the arts-based secondary school had a strong arts component, there was a component that wasn't arts-based, we were an arts highschool, but it was very segmented. There was a piece "that you could be yourself in the theatre and feel safe and fun to be with your friends", but there was also another side that was not totally inclusive and accepting, and felt less comfortable.
- The people I have surrounded myself with - all of my friends went to arts school, and it stays consistent. I know who I want to spend my time with.
- Diversity and trying everything is important
- "Not every kid needs to be in an intense arts-program, but every kid would benefit from getting a piece of the arts and bringing that into their life"

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**Appendix 8 (First Cycle Coding Totals Per Participant)**

	Confidence/ Self Esteem	Inclusive Space	Safe Space	School Culture/ Environment	Creativity/ Imagination	Social Cohesion	Supportive Role Models/ Teachers
Carrie	2	5	7	2	3	5	3
Charlie	3	3	3	2	3	10	0
Jolene	11	2	2	2	2	6	0
Ellie	4	1	1	10	0	5	9
Sabrina	2	3	3	4	0	2	4

	Personal Growth	Cross- Curricular/ Multimodal Learning	Transferrable/ Lifelong Skills
Carrie	5	10	7
Charlie	8	8	6
Jolene	7	0	1
Ellie	4	2	6
Sabrina	7	1	5

**Appendix 9 (Second Cycle Coding Totals Per Participant)**

Participant	Category	Number of Meaning Units
Sabrina	Supportive Space	7
	School Culture/Environment	13
	Transformational Experience	12
Charlie	Confidence/Self-Esteem	4
	Inclusivity/Community	18
	Creativity/Imagination	7
	Personal Growth	8
Jolene	Confidence/Self-Esteem	11
	Meaningful Experience	12
	Social Emergence	7
	Personal Growth	7
Carrie	Diversity and Acceptance	20
	School Culture/Environment	18
	Growth Mindset	14
Ellie	Personal Growth	12
	Social Systems/School Culture	17
	Support Systems/Leadership	13

## Appendix 10 (Ellie's Final Iteration)



## Appendix 11 (Sabrina's Final Iteration)





## Appendix 13 (Jolene's Final Iteration)



# Appendix 14 (Carrie's Final Iteration)

**Carrie**

Diversity and Acceptance			Unique Culture/ Environment			Growth/ Mindset/ Thinking Outside the Box		
I think theatre is perhaps any helpful because you have to put yourself in someone else's shoes.	I think that you can have the same things but really inclusive, but I don't think it's the greatest primary resource. Some teachers, you know, to like here is the same as others.	Visual arts has amazing potential to be very inclusive. The same as dance.	A wide variety of styles were accepted.	I think we had the best theatre program. I wanted something that had a good theatre program.	So there was a large amount of buy-in. As opposed to just auditioning.	Visual arts - not necessarily strong as a visual artist, but I was able to find art outside of being just a visual artist.	There are a lot of people who are really into it, but I think that being able to have it as a resource is a great thing. I think that being able to have it as a resource is a great thing.	I teach Sunday school, and we do a Christmas pageant every year, so definitely some of those traditions into that, including writing a script very quickly.
In that moment, I realized that you can be ok after that. It's being in the moment and it's being shared and those people are there to support you.	I think it's not "our" theatre at all, but it's the people who are there to support you. I think it's not "our" theatre at all, but it's the people who are there to support you.	I remember in that moment with that group of people, it was like, "this is what it is to be in the same space as a safe space, and it's really important."	The people who were different, though, and those are my people. There was a girl that was just out there, and I remember thinking it back to when this is a good time to be.	I think people took ownership of the space that programs were held in, so it was sort of like a collectively owned space.	I think because the acting was more so in terms of a performance, not by the director, it was more like a performance, not by the director, it was more like a performance.	It's the chance to do something - most of us don't learn by sitting and hearing.	I definitely would think that we should be looking at blending with other topics.	If it's something, look to the same level of a difference, then what the difference is, what the difference is, what the difference is, what the difference is.
I never got better with dance; I feel better about it now than I did in grade 12.	I felt safer with movement in theater than I did with movement in dance.	What about the Company? - well, the company is like family.	Being able to pull it together, and use what we have to work with - adaptability.	Ownership of the space was especially true of the drama space.	Maybe I can't see it as a dance person, but I think it's a very unique one, it's really unique, it's really unique, it's really unique.	Most of what we teach is by sitting and listening, you know? So, if that's not how most kids learn, why are we still trying to teach them that way?	I think we had some ideas and we had some ideas, but why are we still trying to teach them that way?	Maybe something... I think that being able to go through an arts experience is really important, it's really important, it's really important.
Not everyone is good at drawing, but everyone should feel that they are good at art. That's why there are so many art styles.	It's not that you can't do it - you just can't do it yet.	I think if I had had that the positive experience of drama at the high school, I would not have been able to do that again in university.	I think there's a really different way to look at it, and I think there's a really different way to look at it, and I think there's a really different way to look at it.	When the show that got off in the end, it was really interesting, it was really interesting, it was really interesting.	There are some skills that are unique to theatre, in terms of bringing in a range of things.	We are way overdue for a shift.	It's really important to have that kind of experience, it's really important to have that kind of experience, it's really important to have that kind of experience.	
I don't think I would have adjusted as well as a kid. If I did, I don't have that much theatre. That was high.	So I learned a lot about my own story, and what I would and would not accept for myself.	And, so even if it's not for everybody, it's not for everybody, it's not for everybody, it's not for everybody.	There's something that you want to see, and you want to see, and you want to see, and you want to see.	And it's always hard when the show is over, but working towards the common goal, I think that was really important, it was really important.	Someone's not always fun, but I think it's really important to have that kind of experience, it's really important to have that kind of experience.	Early literacy specialist role: I used a lot of these skills, using storytelling skills with literacy.	You really have to have that kind of experience, it's really important to have that kind of experience, it's really important to have that kind of experience.	
A lot of my friendships came out of theatre.	I think there's something about it, and I think there's something about it, and I think there's something about it.	I think there's something about it, and I think there's something about it, and I think there's something about it.	You volunteer to go to the show, it's always great, it's always great, it's always great.	I think, even if you have a job, you still want your drama, you still want your drama, you still want your drama.	So, it's really important to have that kind of experience, it's really important to have that kind of experience.			
So when there were other people, they would connect with them, but when there were other people, they would connect with them, but when there were other people, they would connect with them.	And for years when I was in high school, I would go to the show, and I would go to the show, and I would go to the show.							

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