

**Yoga / Yuj / (a) Union of Practices: A Narrative Inquiry of Teachers On and Off the Mat.**

**Lauren Owens**

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Thesis Supervisor: Dr. Cynthia Morawski  
Faculty of Education  
University of Ottawa

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**Abstract**

Yoga is practiced worldwide as a means to improve physical and mental health. For teachers, with stress and burnout rates being so prevalent, yoga may be an effective tool in managing stress. How does a yoga practice influence schoolteachers' experiences in their daily lives? This study describes the experiences told by 3 teachers who have developed a yoga practice within the last 5 years. Narrative inquiry is used as a methodology to capture the lived experience of the participants, while constructivism is used as a theoretical lens. Data collected in this study includes interview transcripts, multimodal expressions via body biographies, journal entries and field notes. The primary researcher's narrative as a teacher who practices yoga is woven throughout the study. Results suggest that there is undeniably a connection between a yoga practice and ability to manage stress. Participants recounted their stories of yoga and teaching which evolved into the following themes; *community*, *awareness*, and *the feeling*. The researcher calls for further research of yoga practice for teachers as a method of managing stress, involving yoga philosophy, as well as strategic and practical forms of delivering yoga to teachers and supporting them in their practice.

## **Acknowledgements**

I would like to express my deepest gratitude towards my supervisor and mentor, Dr. Cynthia Morawski. Thank you for believing in my passion, pushing me far beyond my creative comfort zone, and for your patience as my own narrative of yoga and teaching took its shape as this thesis.

I cannot comprehend what my life would look like without my yoga teachers. Thank you for the guidance, the movement and the space to just be. If it weren't for you, I can only wonder if I would still be in the teaching profession.

Michael Stone was a prominent and innovative Buddhist teacher, yogi, psychotherapist and author. The pages of the book "The Inner Tradition of Yoga" taught me most of what I know of the philosophy of yoga, and significantly contributed to the words and ideas in this thesis. His tragic passing occurred during the creation of this thesis. My hope is that his philosophy of nonviolence, patience, honesty and respect live on through the practice of yoga.

*For my parents who believe in me wholeheartedly*

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*"When you find peace within yourself, you become the kind of person who can live at peace with others." ~ Peace Pilgrim*

### ***Svadhyaya ; self-study***

*I stand at the front of the classroom. I feel small, I feel vulnerable. My shoulders are hunched, my hands are shaking, my heart is racing. Sometimes I forget the reasons why I love my job: the students who are kind, the satisfaction of seeing a student learn something new, interacting with the students while they enjoy phys-ed class outside... This is one of those times that I forget. It is a combination of the boy at the back of the class with his headphones in his ears seemingly oblivious to instructions, along with the girl who suggested I was not old enough to be a teacher instilling doubt in my abilities and authority. I stare at the large biology textbook on the desk in front of me. It's heavy presence is not only a reminder that a Bachelor of Science degree certainly didn't make me an expert on this book, but also that the hundreds of pages somehow needed to become a semester full of innovative lessons and assessments which meet a list of criteria for the curriculum, and result in the success of each student. Today teaching feels stressful, overwhelming and frustrating. I am hurt by the students' behaviour, and doubting my capabilities standing in front of the room.*

*For a brief moment I turn away from the students and find my breath. A deep inhale followed by a slow exhale through the nose, just like in yoga. Certain components of yoga begin to circle in my mind... the feeling of being grounded on my mat... the voice of my teachers always encouraging students to 'let go' and 'be present'... the feelings of peace, relaxation, strength and contentment I feel after practice. Even on days when I feel frustrated or lack energy, yoga is always a positive experience.*

*With another deep breath, I remind myself that teaching is my passion, I am doing the best I can and so are the students. I am exactly where I am supposed to be. Just as with a yoga practice, teaching requires patience, strength, determination, and perhaps most importantly, the ability to let go when things don't go as planned. I take one more intentional breath and feel my body start to relax. My shoulder blades draw together as my chest becomes prouder. I stand taller, lifting my chin. Everything is going to be ok, better than ok! I have worked so hard to get here to help and inspire students, I have my dream job! A sense of calm waves over me as I turn back towards the students...*

#### **Niyama**

*Svadhyaaya / self-study / intentional self-awareness, welcoming and accepting limitations / be authentic with students, regularly check in on reasons for being a teacher*

## Introduction:



*Figure One: A journal entry from primary researcher, Lauren Owens*

The feelings I experience in a classroom are not uncommon for teachers who on a regular basis encounter a heavy workload, inadequate support and other factors contributing to stress and eventually teacher burnout (Brouwers & Tomic, 1999; Canadian Teachers' Federation, 2011).

Many practices of yoga can be used by teachers to reduce stress and improve well-being (Abenavoli, Jennings, Greenberg, Harris & Katz, 2013; Ancona and Mendelson, 2014;

Anderson, Levinson, Barker & Kievvra, 1999; Harris, Jennings, Katz, Abenavoli & Greenberg, 2016). Although there is considerable research on the benefits of practicing yoga in reducing stress, most of the research appears to focus on quantitative studies that involve physiological measurements or perceived stress levels using a scale (Anderson et al., 1999; Ross et al., 2012).

### **Yama:**

Asteya / not stealing / freeing oneself from the desire to have something that one has not earned or paid for / putting in time, money and effort for students far beyond the job description

I became interested in exploring if and how a consistent yoga practice becomes a yogic lifestyle of sorts, and the role it plays in a teacher's everyday life in the classroom. Formulated as a research question, I ask: "What are the experiences of 4 teachers, including myself, who regularly practice yoga, in relation to the daily stressors encountered in their teaching practice?"

The first chapter of this thesis provides an in-depth review of the related literature to teacher stress, the benefits of yoga regarding stress, as well as the current programs in place for teachers to help manage stress. Chapter Two provides a description of the study, including the methodology and frameworks used, as well as a description of the analysis process of the testimonies. Chapter Three provides an in-depth analysis of the results including excerpts and visuals from the participants as well as the discussion. Finally, in Chapter Four, related considerations of this study are discussed, as well as the importance and possible direction for further research on this topic.

### **Yamas and Niyamas:**

The Yoga-Sutra, considered to be the basic text on yoga, consists of eight limbs explaining how to cultivate one's path to samadhi, a blissful state where the practitioner is able to release the ego and steady the mind (Stephens, 2010). The Yamas and Niyamas are the first two limbs of the sequence. The participants in this study mentioned that they enjoyed learning pieces of yoga philosophy from teachers as part of their practice, and so I felt it was significant to include some examples in this study. Although these parts of yoga philosophy are geared towards teaching yoga, they can easily be practiced in all areas of life, especially for teachers. The *Yamas*, meaning to contain or control, explain the principles of ethical behaviour, while the *Niyamas* reflect on personal observances. I have chosen 4 Yamas and 5 Niyamas which I believe demonstrate the positive influence yoga has on teachers. Their definitions and my personal

interpretations will appear throughout this thesis in text boxes, strategically placed with relevance to the sections in which they are located (Stephens, 2010).

## **Chapter One: Literature as Context**

### ***Guru; teacher***

*Today, it feels impossible to be a perfect teacher, the expectations feel too high. I leave work feeling exhausted and reclusive, which leads to my negative attitude and irritable mood. As I sit on the couch, about to turn on the television, I realize that it is important, especially today, that I make it to the yoga studio. I get up and go. After practice I feel a rise in my energy, patience, understanding, and I feel genuinely happier.*

According to the Canadian Teachers' Federation (2011), teaching can be an extremely challenging profession due to a variety of factors such as heavy workload, poor school ethos, and a lack of adequate support and resources, especially related to the inclusion of students experiencing learning difficulties. Several studies have linked the stress caused by these challenges to teacher burnout—an exhausted state where teachers can no longer cope with work pressure (Canadian Teacher's Federation, 2011; Saleem & Shah, 2011; Yu, Wang, Xuesong, Dai & Yang, 2015). In 1998, Guglielmi and Tatrow published literature on teacher burnout as a result of stress and concluded that the health and occupational satisfaction of these valued professionals were (and likely still are) at stake. Around the same time, Brouwers and Tomic (1999) published a related study, supporting the idea that stress, specifically caused by classroom management and disruptive behaviour, was a major factor leading to burnout for 243 secondary school teachers. They also concluded that this same factor was a direct cause of a significant number of teachers leaving the profession. More recently, Karsenti and Collin (2013) found that teacher stress appears to be a national problem in Canada, the United States and the United Kingdom, where new teachers are changing career paths. Although it is difficult to determine the specific percentages, rates have been estimated to be between 30 and 46% in these countries. To identify

stressors leading to teachers leaving the teaching profession, Karsenti and Collin (2013) used online surveys with 34 former teachers. They found that heavy workloads, challenges in the classroom and a lack of support for teachers were common motivators for educators to drop-out of their profession (Karsenti and Collin, 2013). Researchers studying in Asia and Europe, specifically in countries such as England, Spain and Hong Kong found similar relationships between teacher stress and burnout, which suggests that the well-being of educators being affected by stress is a worldwide problem (Bermejo-toro & Bermejo-toro, 2014; Chaplain, 2008; Ho, 2015). It is evident from the literature that stress, burnout and overall health are ongoing concerns for teachers, therefore validating an immediate call for research to develop strategies for teachers to have the capacity to handle stressors in the classroom.

Gillan, Naquin, Zannis, Bowers, Brewer and Russell (2013), note that stress is an inevitable part of the job, and therefore health promotion programs for school-based employees should include stress management, nutritional intake and physical activity (including yoga). Kyriacou (2001), who reviewed research findings on teacher's stress, recommends that future research concentrate on "assessing the effectiveness of particular intervention strategies to reduce teacher stress" (p. 27). In view of the research regarding possible detrimental outcomes of stress and burnout among teachers, practices such as yoga, which have begun to emerge as strategies to prevent and reduce this stress, appear to be extremely important to investigate further.

***Yoga Abhyasa; practice***

*I lay on my yoga mat in supported fish, a heart-opening pose. I am feeling emotions as a result of my day. The guilt from unmarked assignments from the previous day, frustration with students that skipped class on the day of a lab, and anger at a student who is constantly unkind to others. I hear the voice of the instructor encouraging me to become present on my mat, start to notice the thoughts entering my mind, and use my breath to let them go on an exhale. I slowly begin to relax through my shoulders, the place where I carry most of my tension. I begin to breathe deep, slow breaths and feel these emotions as if they are simply passing through me. My breath feels cleansing as these frustrations seem to lose their intensity...*

Yoga in the West generally comprises a regime of postures (*asanas*)—sometimes held for long periods of time, sometimes executed in rapid sequence—often held together with techniques of breath control (*pranayama*) (White, 2012). Although yoga can be a very personal and individual activity, the popularity of yoga studios and group fitness continues to grow in Canada. Park, Braun and Siegel (2015) completed a systemic review of studies in order to gain more perspective on *who* is practicing yoga, and *why* they do so. After identifying 55 studies, they concluded that yoga was most popular among women and people with a higher socioeconomic status, whose reasons for practicing were related to psychosocial factors such as coping and mindfulness (Park et al., 2015). Park, Riley, Bedesin and Stewart (2016) completed another study to further investigate who practices yoga and for what reasons. Their study included 360 yoga practitioners, the majority of participants being women of high socioeconomic status, who chose to practice for mainly exercise and stress relief, but actually maintained a practice due to discovering a spiritual aspect (Park et al., 2016). The available literature appears to lack research on the diverse group of people who practice yoga, and which reasons, such as mental and physical health benefits, leads them to adopt and maintain this practice (Park et al., 2015; Park et al., 2016).

There is a substantial amount of quantitative research on the physical health benefits of yoga. For example, one study measured the effects of a 9-day yoga-based program, which found

decreased measures which indicate risk of cardiovascular disease and diabetes mellitus (Bijlani et al., 2005). Another study demonstrated how the amount of immunoglobulin secretion rose temporarily for 11 individuals after a yoga practice, indicating lower levels of stress (Stück, Meyer, Rigotti, Bauer & Sack, 2003).

With regards to research on yoga influencing mental health, researchers looked at the influence of yoga on mindfulness and well-being, compared to other sports such as gymnastics (Gaiswinkler & Unterrainer, 2016). Participants compared a self-recorded measurement stating how involved in yoga they were with a measurement of their rate on a religious/spiritual well-being scale, finding that highly involved yoga practitioners exhibited increased mindfulness and lower symptoms of depression compared to those who were less involved in yoga, in the gymnastics group, or control group (Gaiswinkler & Unterrainer, 2016). Ross et al. (2012) suggest that there is a lack of research on the relationship between yoga practice and health and focused their study on the relationship between a yoga practice and the following factors: subjective well-being, diet, BMI, smoking, alcohol/caffeine consumption, sleep, fatigue, social support, mindfulness and physical activity. The researchers found that any amount of some form of yoga had a positive effect (increase or decrease) in at least one of the factors mentioned above (Ross et al., 2012). A large amount of the research available regarding the benefits of yoga is quantitative in nature and involves often a single measured factor increasing or decreasing after a specific amount and type of yoga practiced (Büssing, Michalsen, Khalsa, Telles & Sherman, 2012; Cramer, Lauche, Langhorst & Dobos, 2016; Ross et al., 2012).

Although qualitative research on the influence of a yoga practice on mental and physical health is less common, research was found where yoga was being used alongside a medical-based treatment for illness. Anderzén-Carlsson, Lundholm, Köhn and Westerdahl, (2014) completed a qualitative study in Sweden, interviewing five women and one man who were

completing yoga along with standard care for stress-related illnesses. The data suggested that yoga was not being used as a treatment to illness, but instead a process towards a sense of wholeness, a tool to alleviate suffering, and a way to deal with stress (Anderzén-Carlsson et al., 2014). In addition, these researchers found that perceived self-awareness as well as self-esteem increased, and as the body was used in a new way, participants gained perspective leading to an enriched perception of themselves and their lives. A similar study was completed in Australia focusing on stroke victims, where yoga was being used less as an actual treatment, and more so to influence meaningful physical, psychological and social benefits (Garrett, Immink & Hillier, 2011). Their participants practiced yoga for 10 weeks, and following the analysis of the interviews, the following themes emerged: greater sensation, feeling calmer and feeling connected (Garrett et al., 2011). There appears to be a trend in the current research which suggests yoga as a positive factor in managing stress and improving general well-being.

Many spiritual yoga teachers encourage their practitioners to chant *shanti shanti shanti* at the end of a class. *Shanti* is the Sanskrit word for *peace*, and when chanted three times is thought to reflect peace in the body, speech and mind. While *yoga* refers to the union of body, mind and spirit, this chant may lead participants of the class to find peace in these areas through breath, movement, and reflective meditation. Due to the possibility of this state of peace translating to stress reduction in the workplace, researchers encourage further investigation into the topic, especially for those who often experience stressors in their daily lives, such as teachers.

***Shanti Shanti Shanti; yoga for teachers***

*“I bend so I don’t break” -Anonymous.*

*“You look miserable, like you don’t want to be here” As these hurtful words left the student’s mouth, I became enraged. The class was not listening to me, as well there were problems and stressors happening in my personal life. Instead of getting angry at the student, I turned to the teachings of my yoga practice. I thought about an important part of yoga philosophy: **Satya**-truthfulness. I shared with the student my truth, that it is really challenging being a teacher sometimes because I feel expected to be up at the front of the class with a smile, a positive attitude, and endless patience every single day. I’m human too, I have good days and bad days. I believe that sometimes vulnerability is a step towards understanding as well as respect, especially in a student-teacher relationship.*

Certain programs intended to promote teacher well-being are already in place in some schools. Examples of these programs are after school or lunch time yoga classes and professional development programs such as CARE, which promotes core skills to maintain supportive learning environments (Jennings, 2015). Several researchers support the use of these programs and have suggested mindfulness practices, particularly yoga to manage teacher stress and burnout (Abenavoli et al., 2013; Ancona & Mendelson, 2014; Anderson et al., 1999; Harris et al., 2016). A study completed by Anderson et al. (1999) which used standardized meditation, along with measures of perceived stress using Teachers’ Stress Inventory (TSI), emphasized that teacher stress has been an ongoing source of concern. They determined that a 5-week meditation program significantly lowered the teachers’ perceived stress. Ancona and Mendelson (2014) also used TSI before and after a 6-session yoga and mindfulness program, finding reduced perceived stress and emotional exhaustion among participants. Several of the above studies suggest a similar direction for future research and practice, which includes the implementation of beneficial programs and strategies for teachers to combat stress and burnout. Two examples are: after school mindfulness programs for teachers and yoga during professional development time (Abenavoli et al., 2013; Ancona & Mendelson, 2014), or modelling a healthy lifestyle for the

students by incorporating a yoga unit into health and physical education classes (Stanec, Forneris & Theuerkauf, 2010).

The studies completed by Abenavoli et al. (2013) and Harris et al. (2016) both used the Community Approach to Learning Mindfully (CALM) which is a yoga-based daily intervention in schools to promote educator health and well-being. Both studies found CALM to be a protective effect against emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and low personal accomplishment, which are all components of burnout. The results aligned with those of Roeser et al. (2013) which supported that Mindfulness Training among elementary teachers in the United States and Canada led to greater mindfulness, occupational self-compassion, as well as lower levels of stress and burnout. A significant amount of the available research in this area is quantitative in nature and focusses on the results of a short-term yoga program for teachers. My study is unique in that I conducted qualitative research by interviewing teachers who have a developed yoga practice and bring what they have learned from yoga into their classrooms as a way of managing stress.

## **Chapter Two: Description of the Study**

### ***Bodhi ; awakening / enlightenment***

*Laying in savasana at the beginning and end of practice, I presumably look peaceful, perhaps even asleep. My eyes closed and my body still, other than the conditioned movement as my breath travels in, then out. This pose, quite often meditative for practiced yogis, is where I find my truest, most unprocessed thoughts. This pose brought about the very idea for this thesis. While laying on a rubber mat in a room filled with 30 other people, I felt so calm and content. I am reminded of a compliment I received from a colleague—a teacher at my school. He told me that I have a calm demeanour, that it is something really special, it allows me to develop a special connection with my students and will take me far in my career. These were some of the kindest words ever spoken to me, and probed me to wonder ‘Why me?’ Laying in savasana one day, brainstorming potential research questions, I began to speculate ‘Could it be yoga? Does yoga influence the way I carry myself off of my mat and in the classroom? Are other teachers experiencing something similar?’*

The view of experience that yoga improves a teachers' capability to handle stress will be the phenomenon of interest in this study, and has inspired my research to investigate if other teachers are experiencing the same benefits from yoga as I am. More specifically, I will explore the effects of teachers' regular practice of yoga on their responses to the daily stressors encountered in their teaching practice. In order to do so, I will use narrative inquiry as a methodology, which is "the study of the way humans experience the world" (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990, p. 2).

### **Narrative Inquiry:**

*"You're doing yoga with your grade 10 boys?" My department head asked incredulously. It was the first day of the semester. I had been warned about the energetic group of teenagers I was about to meet, and I thought what better way to start off the semester than with a nice quiet, relaxing introduction to yoga?! "They can't sit still!" I was told by my colleagues. I was confused, wasn't this all the more reason to try?*

Narrative inquiry, along with any approach to a research project, often begins with an interest of the researcher. I believe in this project because it is something I experience every single day. I will weave pieces of my own narrative into the study, describing the ways in which yoga influences my experiences with stress in the classroom, thus including myself as a participant in this study. *Avidyā* (Sanskrit) can be translated into "not seeing things clearly", describing a state of mind and body unengaged with the present moment, unaware of reality as it really is (Stone, 2008). This word, often used in yoga philosophy, resonates with me as I consider how my yoga practice and teaching practice are connected, and/or influenced by each other. I practice yoga on a regular basis to create balance in my life, build strength and flexibility, as well as for reflection and healing. I have noticed that practicing regularly has a positive effect on my daily life in the classroom, particularly in handling stressors that can occur.

Creswell (2013) suggests that “narrative stories tell of individual experiences” (p. 71).

This was the most suitable method of research for this study in order to satisfy my research question, “What are the experiences of 4 teachers, including myself, who regularly practice yoga, in relation to the daily stressors encountered in their teaching practice?” In the gathering and telling of “stories”, we are gathering “knowledge *from* the past and not necessarily knowledge *about* the past” (Bochner, 2007, p.203, original emphases as cited in Trahar, 2009). This study will gather the knowledge and practice of teachers who use what they have learned in yoga when they encounter stress in the classroom, to develop the recommendation of a yoga practice as a way to help other teachers contend stress.

Narrative inquiry is increasingly being used for studies in education, as teachers can be considered storytellers, living storied lives, constantly constructing and reconstructing personal and social stories (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). Teachers participate in storytelling every day as they interact with and teach their students, and the way they handle daily stress in the classroom will shape these stories and the way they are told. By investigating experiences of teachers, specifically the ways in which stressors are encountered in the classroom from teachers who practice yoga, I hope to experience *vidya*, which translates to knowledge, or “to see things as they are” (Stone, 2008, p. 70), leading to the recommendation of yoga as a way for teachers to work with the stressors they encounter on a daily basis. Leggo (2004) suggests that when *narrating* or *researching* are regarded as verbs, rather than as nouns, the focus shifts to the creating and constructing of writing, which is the heart of narrative research. The construction of the participants’ narratives will be the main focus of this study, and particular attention will be paid to ensuring that I use language and voice which accurately represents the teachers’ experiences while composing them into a compelling story. It is my intention that readers will

experience captivating lived-through events as they read through the narratives of selected teachers who practice yoga.

I will draw on the methodology of Connelly and Clandinin (2006) who worked from a Deweyan theory of experience, thereby using a narrative theory of inquiry as a conceptual framework. Narratives will be formed based on a three-dimensional space including: (1) personal and social (interaction); (2) past, present and future (continuity); and (3) place (situation) (Connelly and Clandinin, 2006). The interaction dimension will not only refer to the participants' personal and social experiences at school, but also my relational inquiry with them as the researcher, as I co-construct their narratives. The continuity dimension will refer to the story's participants are telling, the series (which are not necessarily in chronological order) of experiences which make up their narrative, as well as the progression of interviews and multimodal materials I collect. Place/situation will give meaning to the story and provide the reader with context—the significance of these experiences happening in studios and classrooms. It is important to understand the “where” and “what” with respect to the narratives in order to make sense of the teachers' experiences in particular situations. I believe that forming narratives based on interaction, continuity and situation will allow participants to convey a detailed account of their encounters with stressors in the classroom, and (if applicable) an in-depth description of the different ways in which they handle these stressors before and during the evolution of their yoga practice.

### **Emergences and Interpretations:**

*Today a colleague gave me a compliment. He's a man in his 40's and quite honestly I categorized him into the group of teachers who aren't particularly passionate about their job, and to some extent are just counting down the days to retirement. He told me that I have a calm demeanor, and that it will allow me to do great things in my career. I was shocked that he noticed, or even cared about how I teach. (As a young female teacher, I find we are just expected to work extremely hard without much praise.) I wonder if he actually does care about teaching and maybe staying calm with students is a challenge for him? Why was I calm, and he wasn't?*

In order to capture the complexity of the participants' stories, I chose to offer multiple forums for the teachers to convey their experiences. Siegel (2012) explains multimodality as “the social practice of making meaning by combining multiple semiotic resources” (p. 1). Participants in this study engaged in interviews and created body biographies as part of my narrative inquiry research.

### **Collecting Stories:**

“Narrative research is best for capturing detailed stories or life experiences of a single individual or the lives of a small number of individuals” (Cresswell, 2013, p. 74), which is why I chose to interview 3 participants in my study, comprised of teachers (elementary, secondary and college level in the Ottawa area) who have developed a yoga practice within the last 5 years. Yoga has existed for more than 10 years in my life. Within the past 5 years, it has become increasingly important and I developed a regular practice, therefore I consider myself a participant in this study. After securing ethical clearance, participants were recruited through word of mouth at yoga studios in the Ottawa area and social media networks. I ensured that appropriate permission as required by ethics was obtained from the studios during the recruitment process. Participants were selected based on a first-come, first-serve basis who provided a written commitment to the study. Originally 5 teachers approached me who were

interested in participating in this study, however time constraints resulted in completing interviews with three of them. Narrative inquiry begins with the experiences as expressed in lived and told stories of individuals (Creswell, 2013), which is why 2 semi-structured interviews were completed with each participant (see Appendix A for interview questions), allowing the opportunity for interesting and unexpected emergences (O’Leary, 2014). The use of semi-structured interviews draws from the idea of rather than trying to close down understanding with a set of questions, the opportunity to explore questions and conversations further opens up possibilities for wide-ranging connections, questions, and insights (Leggo, 2008).

The reasoning for using two interviews is to allow time for participants as well as the researcher to reflect on the first meeting and build upon the first interview during the second. This may include any of the following: adding to the body biography, asking follow-up questions, and/or connecting previous ideas, thoughts and stories to each other. The first meeting with the participants consisted of a semi-structured interview, with the intention of learning the story of how and why the teacher came to practice yoga. Participants were asked to begin creating a body biography for which materials were supplied, with the intention of connecting their practices and experiences of yoga and teaching. In the second meeting, teachers had the opportunity to add to their body biography, share any thoughts that arose for them as supplementary information, and respond to a brief semi-structured interview in order to draw together their unique narrative of how yoga influences their day as teachers, specifically their ability to manage stress.

### **Body Biographies:**

Although interviews were the primary form of story collection, as discussed, participants were encouraged to express their experiences in multimodal forms (including art, body

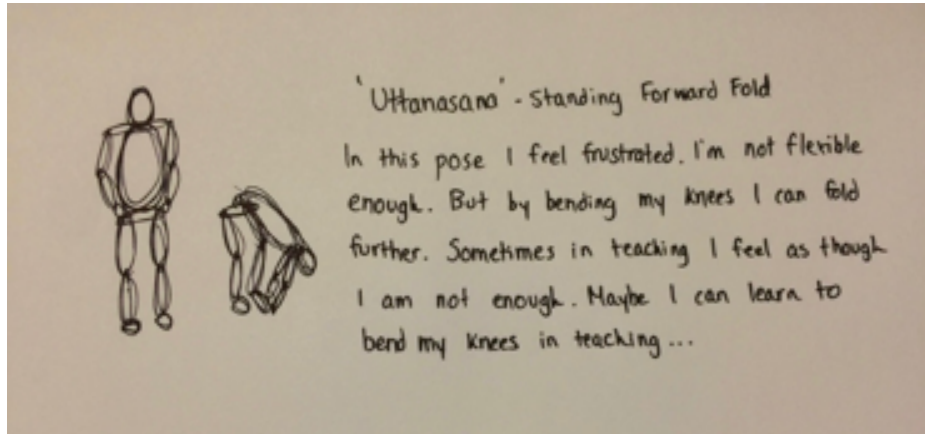
biography, etc.) Instructions given to the participants regarding the Body Biographies can be found in Appendix B. Underwood (1987) created an assignment for his eighth-grade students called a Body Autobiography. The idea for the assignment was to have students assemble various raw materials including: an outline of their body, collage materials including compositions and memorabilia from home, in a meaningful way. Underwood describes the difficulty of expressing oneself in plain language, “among other things, metaphorical language was one way, often possibly the only way, to express the complex, the seemingly inexpressible, and that there is a realm of experience—call it emotional, instinctive, what you will—beyond which literal language breaks down and the writer must resort to the truthful lies of comparison” (p.45). Drawing on this idea of metaphorical language, participants were instructed to use symbols, body parts, colours and more to express ideas based on yoga and teaching experiences. Underwood stated that “the body biographies, which provide students with a second outlet for self-expression, achieved... a vibrant visual and written metaphor for a life” (p.48). The participants in this study similarly created intricate and alluring body biographies which complemented the words from their interview transcripts so well.

Large brown paper, markers, pencil crayons and collage materials were provided at each of the interview sessions, giving participants an opportunity to represent their stories in more than one way, and any additions to the body biographies completed outside of the interview time were welcomed as additions to their narratives. Each of the three participants chose to complete their body biography outside of the interview time. Initially, teachers were hesitant and resistant to the creative freedom and vulnerability of completing a body biography. Interestingly after completing the creative pieces, the participants found they were able to persist through the discomfort, and even found the process enjoyable, therapeutic and something one participant feels her students would benefit from.

Much research has been done on the positive outcomes of multimodal development including learning and expression (Short, Kauffman and Kahn, 2000; Siegel, 2012, Graham & Benson, 2010; Meixner, Peel, Hendrickson, Szczeck & Bousum, 2018;) Short, Kauffman and Kahn (2000) suggest that learners who express their ideas in various forms, are able to push their understandings and create more complex meanings. By offering ways of thinking and expression outside of language and text, another dimension and possibility of a deeper understanding of the participants' narratives may be shared (Siegel, 2006). Graham & Benson, (2010) suggest that "Multiliteracies...focuses on how various semiotic modes, or sign-making systems, enable students to make meaning" (p. 94). The body biographies created by the participants in this study were a beautiful compliment to their interview transcripts. Quotes, pictures and representations of body parts on the large brown paper illustrated meaning and complex ideas of the participants' experiences, which proved to be difficult to put into words.

### **Interpretation of Stories:**

Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed by me, the primary researcher and then analyzed to find significant components, to be able to illustrate the essence of the experiences which emerged as the three themes of this inquiry (Creswell, 2012). I maintained a field journal throughout the course of this study for personal notes and reflection which included my experiences of yoga influencing my teaching practice. This journal was analyzed to be used as testimony of my own narrative and is incorporated into this thesis. An example is found below:



*Figure Two: A journal excerpt from the researcher, Lauren Owens*

Considering that this study involves examining teachers' experiences potentially influenced by stages of a developing yoga practice, and their narratives were not shared in sequential order, I will shape their stories into a chronology of significant events or epiphanies which will make sense to the reader (Cresswell, 2013). I hope to retell the experiences of the participants by including the three dynamics involved in narrative inquiry suggested by Leggo (2008): story, interpretation, and discourse. Essentially these areas will allow me to communicate what happened, why it is significant, and tell the participants' stories in a way that intrigues and inspires fellow teachers to begin a yoga practice of their own. Through the analysis process, I will attempt to highlight experiences and reactions to school-based stress, which teachers believe are specifically influenced by their yoga practice.

The transcripts were analyzed thematically in order to find commonalities within individual narratives, as well as across the three narratives. Instead of using a computer program to analyze the transcripts, I have elected to use a more organic approach by organizing them in hard copy, reading them through several times and using different coloured highlighters to indicate relevant words and similar concepts (McAteer, 2013; Mertler, 2009). Colours will be used to represent common themes in a two-step process: (i) within each narrative, as well as (ii)

across the three narratives. Sections of transcripts will be cut and sorted into groups where I can begin to look for patterns and interconnections (O’Leary, 2014). Although cutting and categorizing words and concepts may remove portions of interviews from their context from transcripts, it will allow for comparisons across individual experiences (Butler-Kisber, 2010). “Narrative researchers need to consider how to compose and interpret narratives in rich and full ways that recognize and respect complexity” (Leggo, 2004, p.102). Although there are software programs to code electronically, “There is something to be said for a large area of desk or table space with each code written on its own index card or “sticky note,” or multiple pages or strips of paper, spread out and arranged into appropriate clusters to see the smaller pieces of the larger puzzle—a literal, “old-school” perspective not always possible on a computer’s monitor screen” (Saldana, 2011. p.30)

In pursuance of an authentic representation of the experiences of my participants, taking an organic approach by reading through the transcripts to immerse myself in the narratives, I preserved the participants’ stories as they were told (and heard), compared to using a technological approach. I then offered each of the teachers an opportunity to read my analysis of their narrative and indicate any changes or misrepresentations to their response, ensuring that I accurately incorporate their voice into my final version. Any additional testimony including journal entries or visuals created by the participants will be used to highlight any themes found as part of the analysis. The process of analyzing the stories myself is time consuming and involves my interpretation of the participants’ stories and experiences. However, I believe that by reading through each transcript several times, I will gain a deeper understanding of the participants’ narratives and be able to find more authentic connections compared to a computer program. Upon conclusion of this study, all materials (journals, body biographies, etc.) provided by the participants will be returned to them.

**Introducing the Participants:**

Each participant came into their yoga and teaching practices in a unique way. They each practiced a variety of types of yoga at different studios including variations of Vinyasa Flow, Yin and Power Yoga. They teach different grades and subjects at different schools. They shared their reason(s) for attending their first yoga class, what they liked and didn't like, why they continued, or didn't, what type of class they prefer, how often they practice, etc. It is my belief based on experience and observation that each person who enters a yoga class is there for their own reason. Each individual brings something different to the class, and what they take away is unique as well. Similarly, each teacher has a unique style and philosophy. Their experience, although it may have many similarities to others, is their own. My interviews with the participants were essentially gathering information in order to retell their narrative regarding yoga and teaching in a purposeful manner: to determine if and how a yoga practice positively influences teachers. Each initial interview loosely followed a similar path of discussion: their yoga journey, teaching journey, and how the two intertwine. Sparked by these interviews, pieces of my own story emerged as our stories naturally flowed into sharing and comparing experiences. I believe that a brief introduction to each participant's story, including my own, will augment the responses that follow in this thesis.

***My Story***

I was drawn to yoga in high school. Gymnastics was my passion as a child, but I stopped in 9<sup>th</sup> grade. As a teenager with long limbs, I missed the flexibility and perfect posture I had as a gymnast. I belonged to the local YMCA, so I began to attend the yoga classes there once or twice per week. Almost immediately my flexibility improved, and I enjoyed being around the group of mostly older women and men who attended. During university I would take the odd class when I

could and when I moved to South Korea afterward, I did the same. I missed group fitness classes being abroad, and even though the instructors were speaking Korean, the movements in yoga were slow enough that I could watch and catch on. It was when I moved to Ottawa that I found a studio that became my second home and I was going to yoga every chance that I could, sometimes twice per day. I immersed myself in the practice, completed my yoga teacher training, attended workshops and read books on the philosophy of yoga. Now as a school teacher, my schedule only allows me to attend one or two classes per week at a studio, but my yoga practice has become a part of my daily life. It's not just a physical practice—it's how I carry myself, it's how I deal with conflict, and the way I know when I need to slow down. During my interview with Amy, she asks me if I incorporate meditation into my practice to which I respond:

I'm a fan of moving meditations. When I am feeling overwhelmed with my workload, I will walk to a coffee shop and I don't want to listen to music. To me, that's meditation, because I am walking in silence and not thinking of anything in particular to give my mind a break. Or sometimes before I fall asleep if I have had a really busy day, I will lay in bed and give myself five minutes of just laying, staring at the ceiling trying to clear my head. To me, that's a part of yoga. -Lauren

### *Sam's Story*

When I sit down with a hot cup of tea at a quaint cafe in the west end with Sam, I instantly feel as though we have known each other for years. A “calm and patient” kindergarten teacher is how her colleagues describe her, and her relaxed manner makes it obvious to me why. Within minutes we are chatting about the stress of report cards, laughing about comical experiences at school that day, and discussing yoga classes we plan to attend that week. As the interview unfolds, we comment several times on the similarities of our lives, and we chat freely like old friends.

Sam first started yoga in university with some friends 9 years ago. It was fun and new, and the girls laughed a lot at first, but they continued to attend class each week and slowly became more committed to a practice. While studying and teaching abroad, yoga was not as accessible as it was in her university town, and she began to notice how connected she became to her practice by how much she missed it:

I made a point of seeking yoga out when I was abroad. I think that's when I started to realize that it meant more to me than I thought. I kind of just thought it was this weekly fitness thing I went to with my friends. When I went to classes that were not taught in English, I really missed the direction given at the beginning of the class to set an intention or focus on your breath, so I realized it wasn't just the physical practice I missed, it was the other stuff too. -Sam

As Sam navigated her way through the arduous first few years of teaching at the elementary level back in Canada, she joined a yoga studio walkable distance from her house, and yoga evolved to an important part of her weekly routine. Fast forward a few years later and Sam remains a consistent yoga practitioner at the same studio who attributes a lot of positivity in her life to her practice, suggesting that it probably helps her in more ways than she is conscious of. She even uses poses and techniques she has learned in her classroom with students to help them stay calm and relaxed:

Yoga has influenced my teaching in the way that I teach my students to deal with frustration. My first inclination when kids are upset is to call them over and sit with me for a moment. We have done a lot of breathing practices, and it can be very random and in the moment. One example is I'll say, 'Rub your fingers together and think about this...' I am trying to teach them to think about something else and then return to the problem. I think about what yoga does for me when I am frustrated, and I am trying to teach them the same strategy. If I am worried about something, I'll go to yoga, and then after I can return to the problem. -Sam

Sam, a creative type, completed her body biography after school one day using some of the art materials in her elementary school. Although she was hesitant at first, Sam created a thought-provoking visual representation of her yoga and teaching narrative. She used mostly

words and quotes along with hand-drawn images to represent her experiences, feelings and philosophies. At her second interview, Sam shared that she found the process cathartic, and was able to make connections between her yoga and teaching experiences that she hadn't previously considered. Below is a photograph of her body biography, which will be referenced again later in this paper:

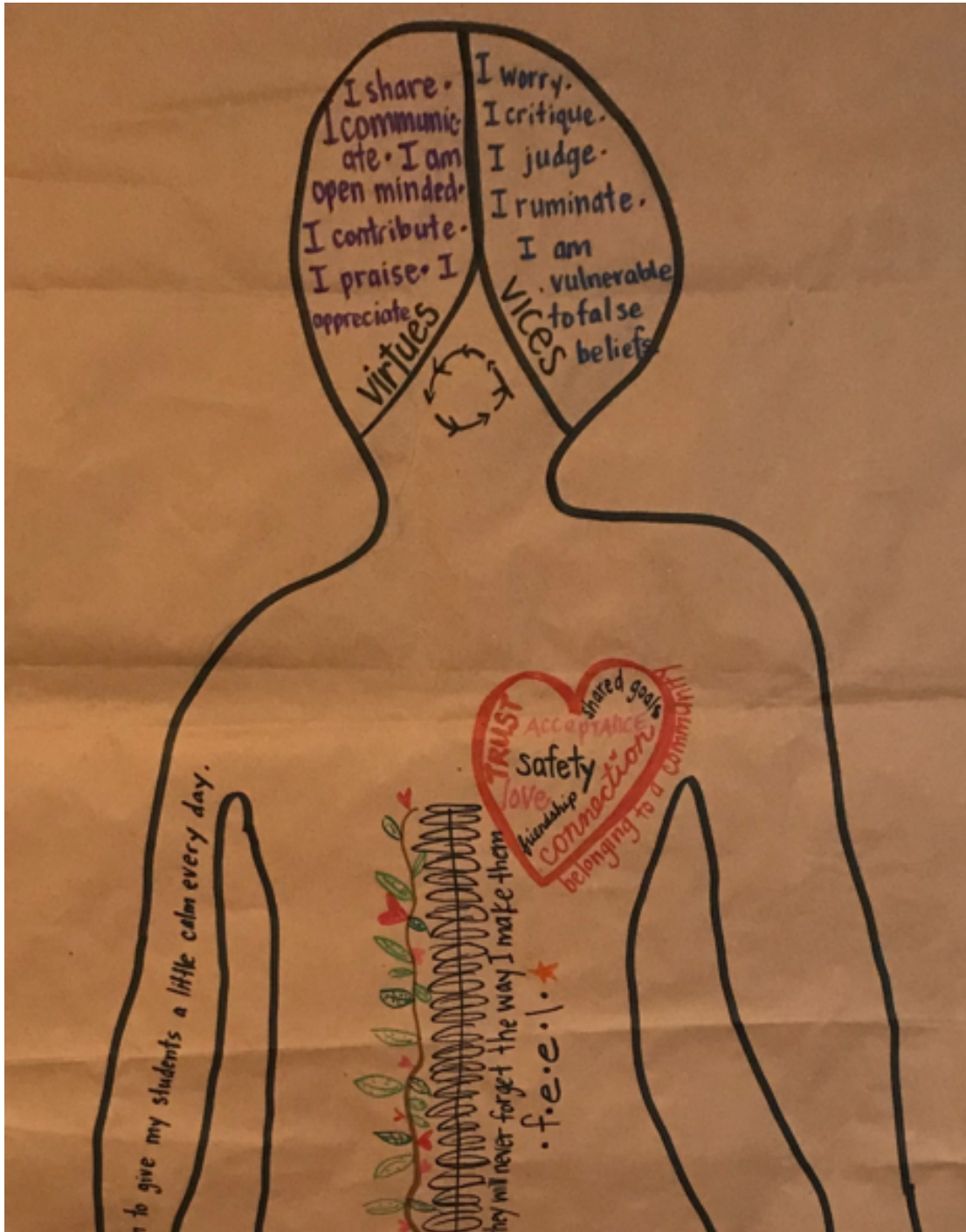


Figure 3: Upper half of Sam's body biography

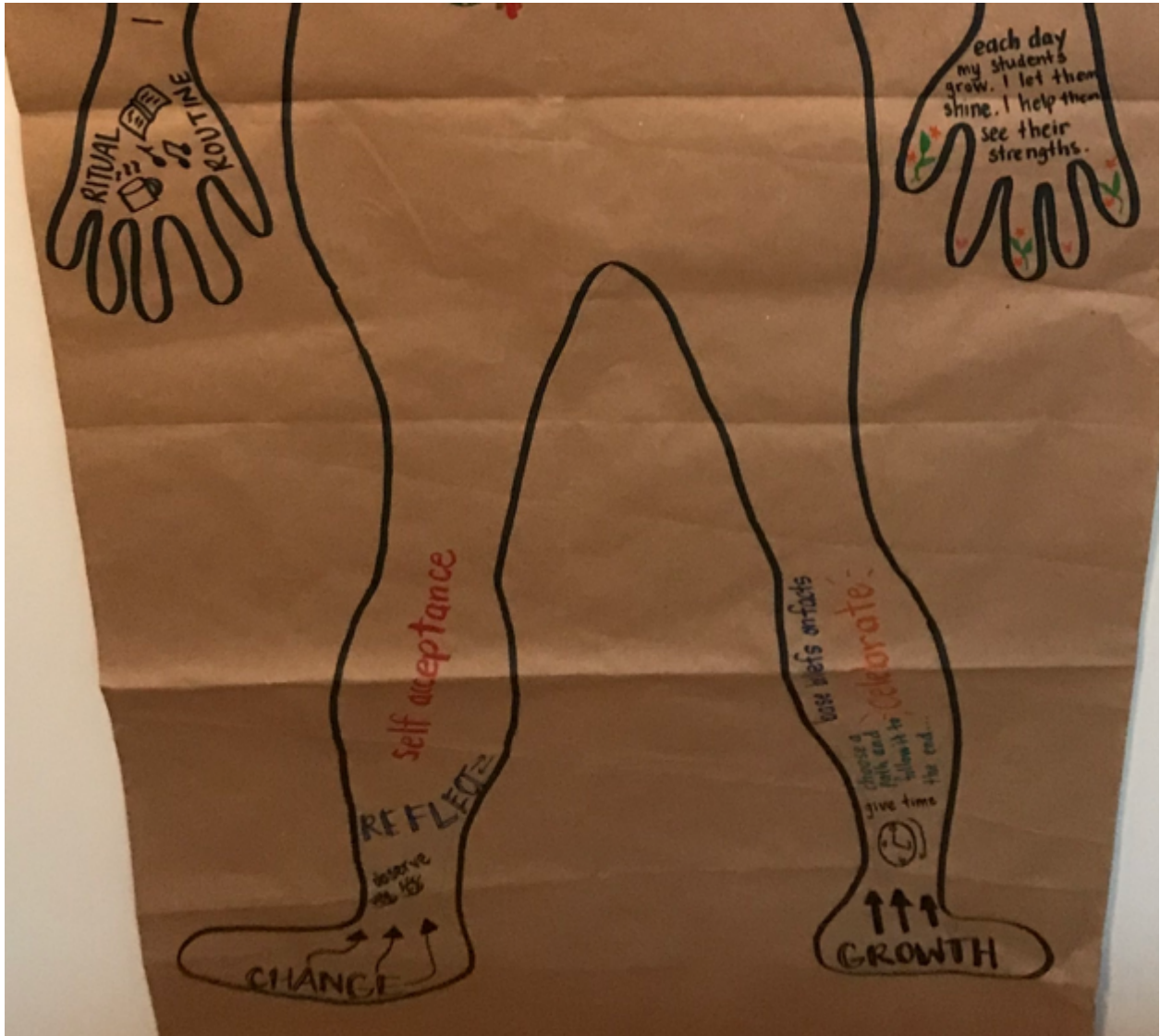


Figure 4: Lower half of Sam's body biography

### *Amy's Story*

Amy and I meet at a Starbucks near her home. We exchange brief accounts of our busy days as teachers, and once again I feel like I am chatting with an old friend. Amy has danced for most of her life and it is easy to tell. She has excellent posture as we sit on hard chairs, while her hands move in dramatic gestures to accentuate her story. She compares her yoga practice to her experience with dance:

I feel like I dance in yoga! You get into a rhythm and a sequence of moves and it becomes a routine, except it's different every time. Especially because there is music, but usually you don't really listen to the music. It's more so the music is the sound of your breath, as corny as that sounds, but I'm really focusing on my breath. I feel like I am pretty expressive, so I love movements like reversing your warrior and then moving into side angle, it's so flowy!"-Amy

Amy first tried yoga at a local studio several years ago and immediately developed an appreciation for the practice. "That feeling of laying down and just being... it's like a weight lifts off your shoulders when you walk into [the studio]". She liked the feeling she had after a practice, although didn't feel connected to that particular studio. It was really busy there and she felt a bit like an inconvenience as a beginner to some of the teachers. When a smaller studio opened up the following year, Amy joined and felt much more at home there. She explains that it was a handful of factors of why she felt so connected to this studio and enjoyed going so much, "It's the parking, and the music, and the teachers, and small classes, having towels and mats, all of those things have influenced why I have stayed so long."

The way Amy describes how yoga impacts her life almost seems like she is reading quotes out of a book on the subject, so elegantly articulated and infectiously passionate. Based on her creativity and permanent warm smile, it is not surprising that she teaches at the elementary level. Amy talks about the way yoga has made its way into her classroom and teaching practice:

I think I pay more attention to what I do in the classroom. I think maybe I'm more understanding of what [her students'] bodies need. Maybe it's not to lie still, that's hard for a lot of them, so maybe it's moving a little bit more...Similarly for me, last month was very busy, so when I wasn't able to go to yoga, I really missed it. I felt antsy and just not like myself. When I got back into it, I felt a lot better." -Amy

Although her 5-year teaching career has been challenging at times, physical fitness is important to Amy, and with that a consistent yoga practice is included. When I shared the Body Biography instructions with Amy, she didn't know where to begin. She asked to see examples of other body biographies, asked for clarification on the instructions, almost as if it was an assignment for school. She wanted to know what materials she should use and appeared uncomfortable with the creative freedom of this assignment. The resulting product from Amy was beautifully created. Her body biography is filled with colour, meaningful words and images. Observing her finished product gives me a true sense of what and who is important to her as a teacher. Below is a photograph of her body biography, which will be referenced again later in this paper:



Figure 5: Top of Amy's Body Biography

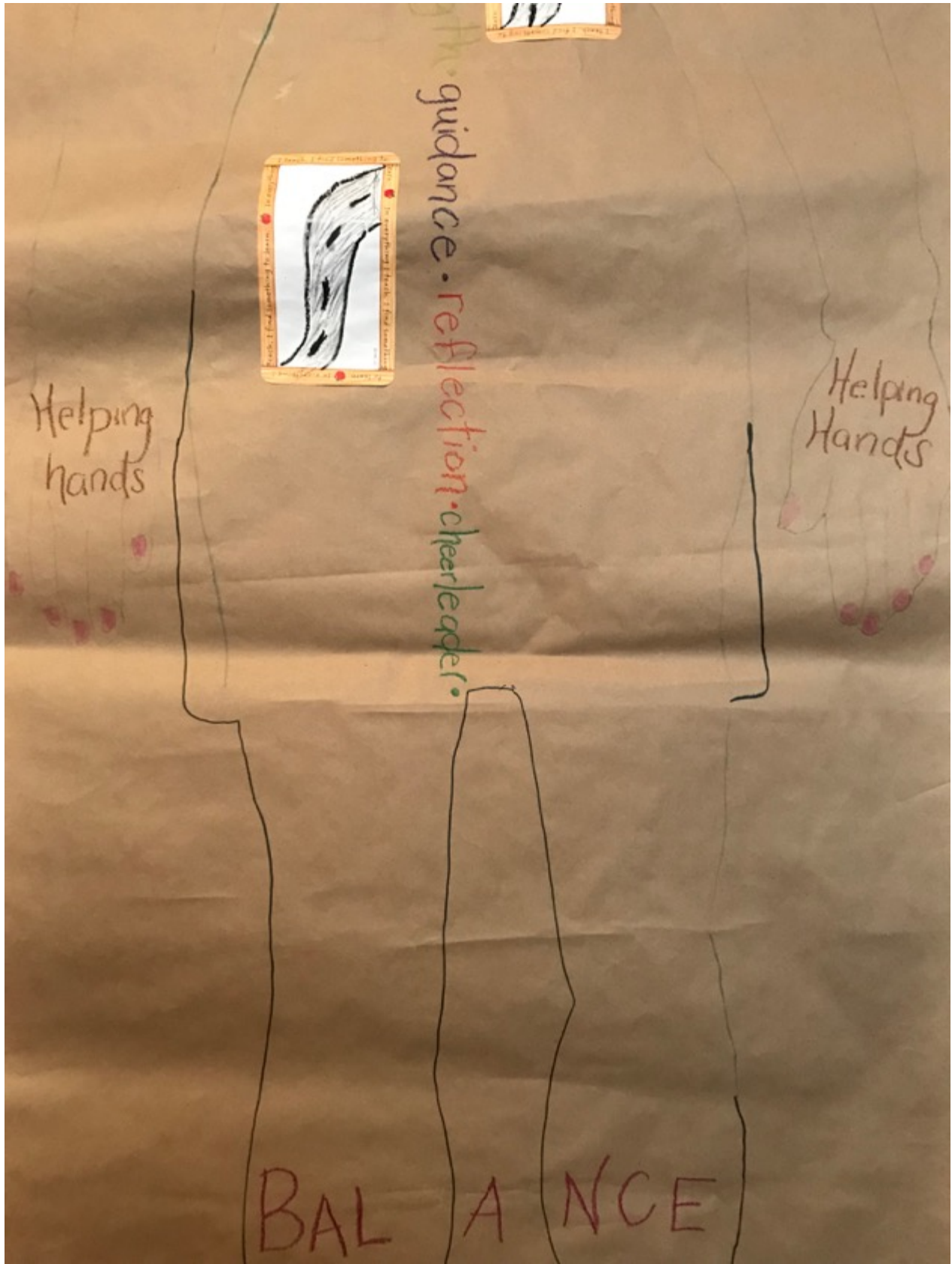
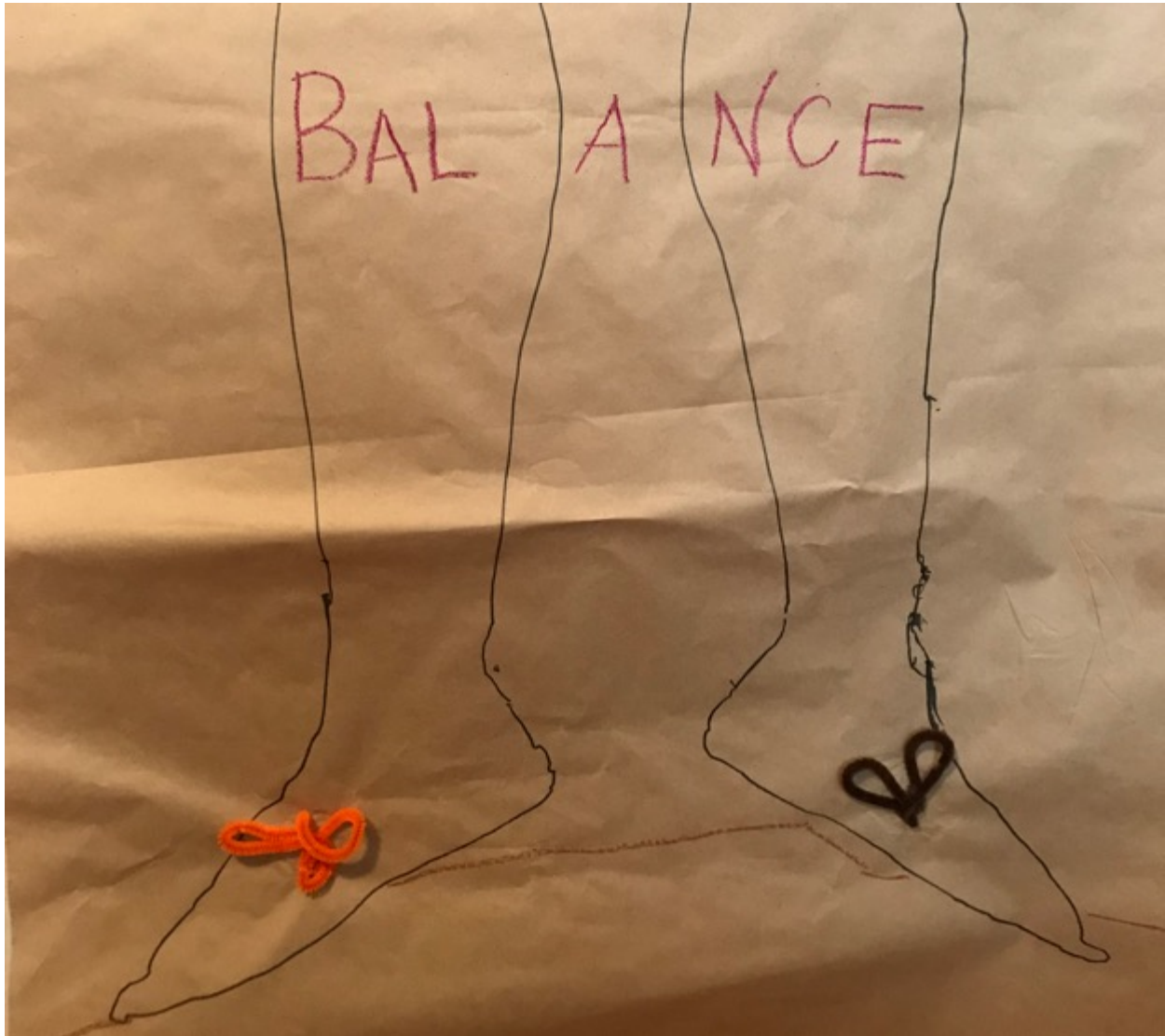


Figure 6: Middle of Amy's Body Biography



*Figure 7: Bottom of Amy's Body Biography*

***Rachel***

Rachel is down to earth, relatable. She has a calm demeanour which would be envied by any teacher. The way she speaks honestly and vulnerably about her challenging career and evolving yoga practice is alluring. She explained to me that before she began practicing yoga, she was “uptight and high strung”. After introducing yoga into her life, things have changed:

It's been healthy for my relationship, and just the way I am at home. I think it has helped me in my work life too. Just having an outlet to release some stress and tension. I'm more laid back in general, but obviously I still have my moments. But I think it has gotten me to see the world in a different way in some perspectives. -Rachel

Although she has been teaching for 10 years, yoga came into her life 3 years ago as the result of a Groupon deal purchased online. She attended a class, fell in love with the practice and the studio, and has been going ever since. She loves to be active and goes to yoga as her form of movement and exercise, although she cherishes the moments of stillness and quiet before and after class. Teaching full-time at the college level and taking on a coordinator role keeps her quite busy, so for Rachel, fitting in a yoga practice is all about scheduling and routine. When she can get to practice a few times each week, she notices a big shift in herself as a teacher, as well as in her personal life:

I took a week off from yoga because I was really sick last week. I feel like I lose my flexibility, stamina and strength so quickly as I'm getting older and it's really frustrating. I feel like I'm not as...peppy... So, I took a week off and then I went to class on Tuesday. I came home and I was just so much happier. I was singing, and I was aware of it. I noticed, "I feel different now", I was just so much more positive and happier. -Rachel

Now Rachel recommends yoga to everyone she meets, especially to her students and colleagues at school. Rachel appeared to be the least convinced of the body biography process. Perhaps because she teaches at a higher level, she isn't as exposed to arts and crafts or creative assignments as the elementary teachers. However, she created the most detailed body biography of all the participants. She used coloured markers and cut outs from magazines displaying words and phrases to categorize her thoughts and experiences as a teacher and yoga practitioner. Below is a photograph of her body biography, which will be referenced again later in this paper:

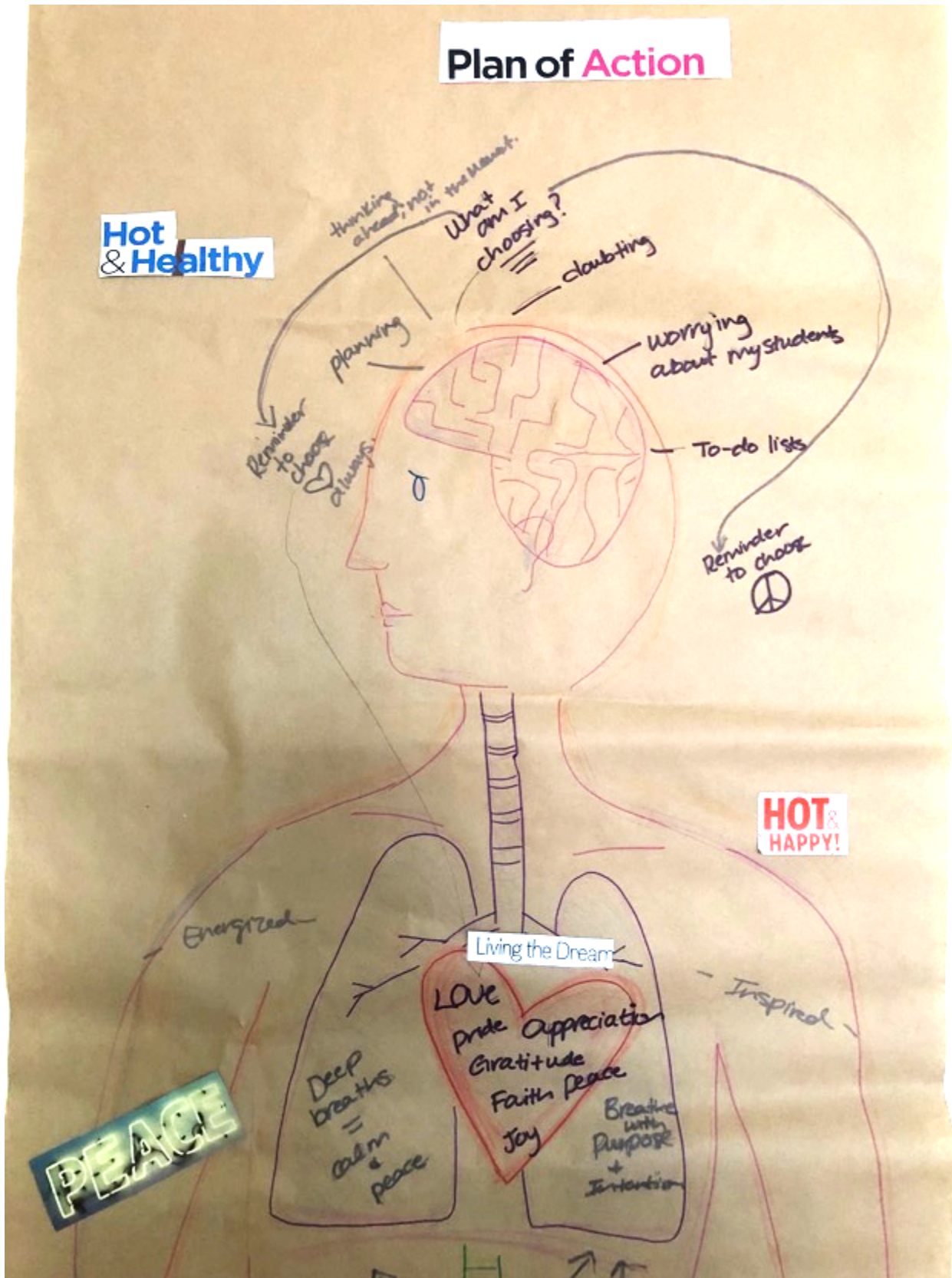


Figure 8: Top Half of Rachel's Body Biography

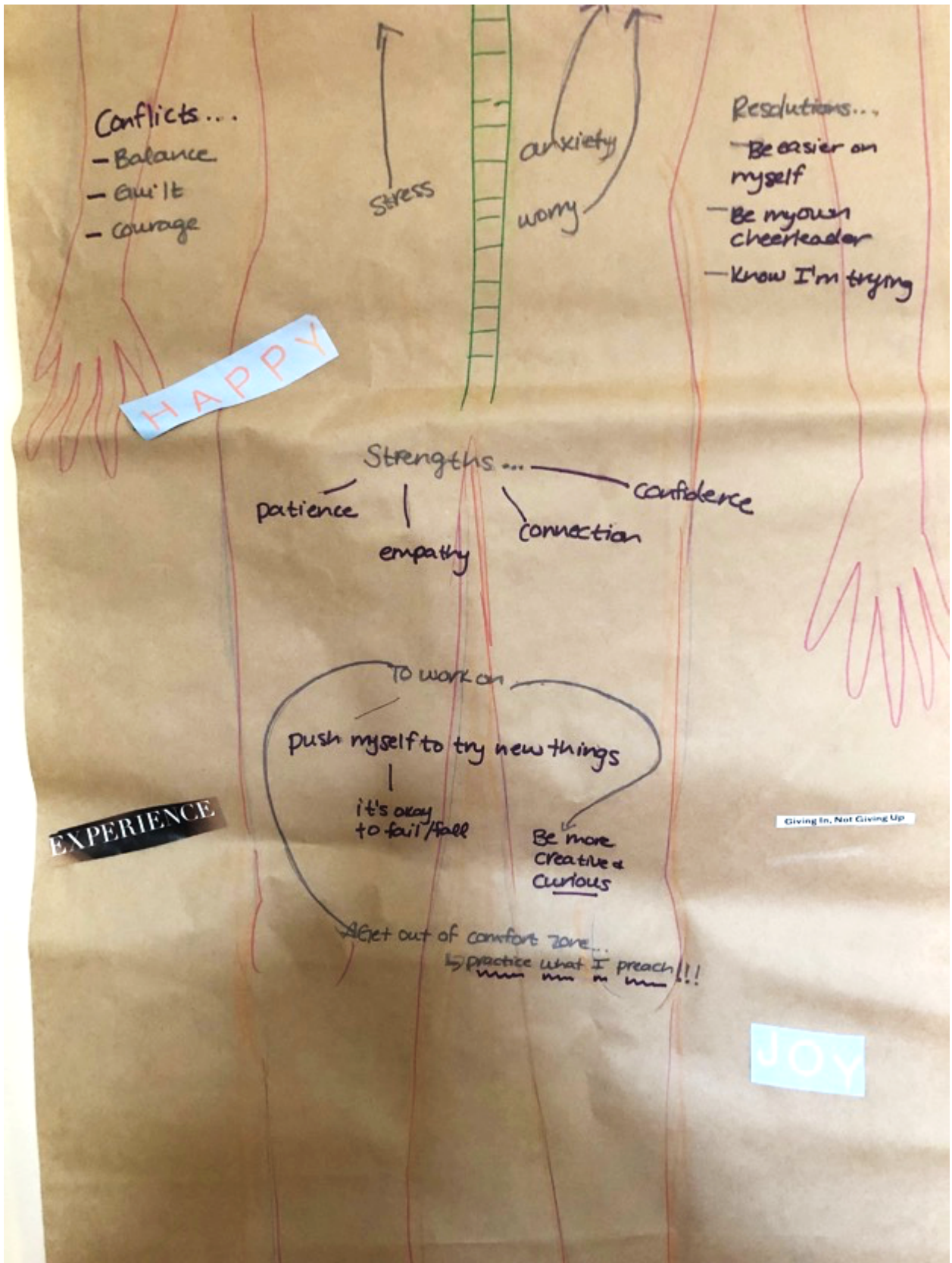


Figure 9: Bottom Half of Rachel's Body Biography

**Thematic Analysis:**

*I'm feeling exhausted, run down. I feel as though there is a never-ending to do list as a teacher. Lately It's feeling a bit monotonous... planning and assessing, planning and assessing. The last bell of the day rings and I wonder whether I took on too much by volunteering to coach volleyball this season. I take the last gulp of my third coffee of the day, and head into the gym to get the girls ready for their season. After practice finishes, I am rushing to my car hoping that traffic isn't too terrible. Initially I considered rushing to a fitness class, I crave the loud music and a good sweat. I'm feeling stressed and anxious-will I make it in time? Do I have enough energy to work out, what can I eat quickly? What time will I get home? Will I have time to walk the dog and make dinner and plan for tomorrow and finish up some marking and do laundry and, and, and... I laugh to myself. The loud music, whistle blows and 45 second stations of the gym are the last things I need right now. I picture laying in savasana in a warm room, stilling my mind, stretching out my sore muscles and stiff joints (caused by a mixture of the busy week I have had and the cold weather). Yoga-that's what I need, and so to yoga is where I go.*

The teachers who participated in this study all described similar experiences as mine. There were several moments where it was so clear that yoga was an answer to the problem, although the specifics of the yoga practice varied. Sometimes it was a fast-paced class with loud music and challenging poses, other times a gentler flow, and others a more meditative, slow stretch. There were several different aspects of the practice they enjoyed as well: learning components of the philosophy of yoga, different types of meditation, the music and companionship to name a few. There wasn't just one condition that drew participants to their yoga practice, and the processes of creating a body biography and interviewing allowed for the creation of a yoga story and a journey of deeper revelation about why a yoga practice was so important to these teachers. I began with asking participants for their definition of yoga and shared my own.

Yoga is giving myself love. It's paying attention to my inner voice, listening to what I need without judgement. Sometimes that means a physical practice or taking a walk with my dog. Sometimes that means a good cry alone or connecting with someone I trust. When I love myself, it's easier to love others. -Lauren

Here's how Rachel and Sam describe theirs:

(It includes) moving your body in a purposeful way, focusing on your breath, focusing on being present, letting go of any sort of attachment to worries, fears or insecurities. Just learning to appreciate yourself and be grateful for your body and your mind, indulging in yourself. -Rachel

The message is that worries are pretty insignificant. There is a lot of emphasis on what is important, and what isn't. The (yoga) teachers that I like the most, talk a lot about what it is to bring yoga off the mat. It means to be kind to others, kind to yourself, things that really matter in life. Going to yoga and continuously hearing those messages and meeting people who have the same values makes it easier to practice myself. -Sam

***Niyama:***

*Tapas* / being present / being attentive to how we are in our body, breath, heart and mind / being fully present for students without distraction from exterior factors

Thematically analyzing the interview transcripts initially seemed obvious. There were countless commonalities between the participants as they described the stressors that accompany the teaching profession, and yoga as a positive influence in their daily life. However, as I began to place their experiences into separate themes based on interview questions, their responses became much more complex. A single response seemed to weave into each theme I initially came up with, and I would have to broaden my tentative themes in an attempt to place responses and experiences into similar groups. The analysis process included reading, and then re-reading the transcripts several more times, highlighting passages, cutting and pasting into related concepts, creating flow charts and Venn Diagrams, and observing the body biographies long enough that the images felt permanently ingrained in my mind. I then categorized meaningful responses from individual transcripts into possible themes. After comparing these lists, I determined commonalities from the three participants which developed into the following three themes: Community and Connection, Mindfulness and Awareness, and The Feeling. These elements of a yoga practice will be explained in depth based on the research completed for this study in the next section.

***Sangha / Community and Connection:***

*“A sangha is a community of friends practicing the dharma together in order to bring about and to maintain awareness. The essence of a sangha is awareness, understanding, acceptance, harmony and love. When you do not see these in a community, it is not a true sangha, and you should have the courage to say so. But when you find these elements are present in a community, you know that you have the happiness and fortune of being in a real sangha.”*

*-Thich Nhat Hanh*

*Teaching can feel lonely at times. I put what feels like all of my energy into my days at school. The list of a teacher’s duties goes far beyond teaching and marking, and it feels difficult to explain the challenges to someone without it feeling like a complaint. When I get to the yoga studio after a tough day, I don’t feel so alone. Everyone is there for a different reason, and probably experienced their own difficulties that day. Whether it is a deep sigh I hear as someone lays down on their yoga mat, or the extra few peaceful minutes they take at the end of class before going back to the real world outside, I feel a certain kinship to them. Even though we may be strangers, it is as if whatever it is we each have going on in our lives, when we’re in the yoga studio, we’re in it together.*

This theme encompasses the importance of practicing yoga at a studio, rather than at home. The participants detail the unique relationships that were created with other members of the community, the teachers they came to trust and rely on, and an important sense of belonging they received from the studio.

Each participant mentions the words community and connection at least once in each of their interviews, and two of the three illustrates one or both of these words on their body biographies. This theme became more apparent however when reading through the transcripts. I created a chart with each participant’s name across the top, and underneath I would write down a few words to describe any experience in which yoga was influencing their day. As I read over these lists, it became evident that often it was seeing a familiar face in the class, or a teacher with whom they had a personal connection, that positively contributed the participants’ experiences. I chose the words *community* and *connection* to encompass this idea of being a part of something larger than oneself. Acceptance, empathy and safety were other words creatively expressed in the

body biographies which naturally felt a part of this theme. Interestingly each participant created a heart on their body biography.



Figure 10: Sam's heart

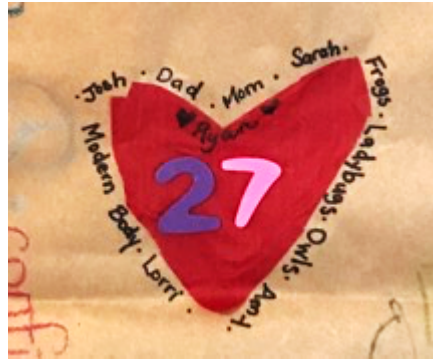


Figure 11: Amy's heart

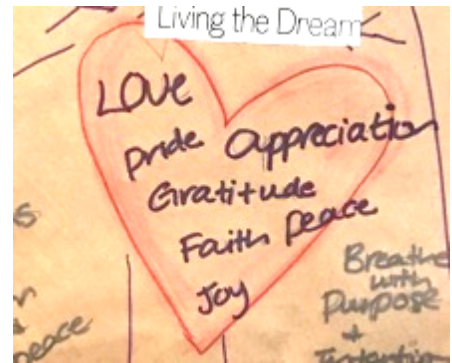


Figure 12: Rachel's heart

Amy wrote the names of peoples, places and animals that she cared about around the perimeter of her heart. Sam wrote meaningful words that connected with her yoga practice such as safety, love and friendship. Rachel also wrote words inside her heart that expressed the way yoga made her feel love, gratitude and peace. Although these body biographies are representations of a teacher's experience with yoga, there were numerous connections made to experiences outside of school, which reveals the significant influence yoga had not just on their life as a teacher, but their life as a whole. Examples include the names of Amy's loved ones, or Sam's drawings of coffee and books. This influence was not simply a solitary yoga practice. The participants suggest that being in the company of others before, during and after their practice contributed significantly to their experience.

In our first interview, I ask Sam about what it is that makes yoga a part of her lifestyle, and not just a practice. She describes her feelings when she left her studio after teaching abroad, and her decision to join a studio again in Ottawa...

It's really the community of the (Ottawa) studio. When I was [abroad] it was the people I met at the studio that I didn't already know from school. Those friendships only exist in the studio... You're not just going and doing the class and then leaving, you're also seeing the people that you only see in that setting. So those people then become associated with the feeling of being calm and you're always feeling good when you see those people. I think building that community abroad and now here in Ottawa is when I would say "I'm a yogi" and not "I sometimes go to yoga". -Sam

Community first came up in my interview with Amy, when she describes joining the studio she attends now...

I was really excited when [the studio was opening up], I just kind of fell in love with the community there and the teachers, everyone was really welcoming and willing to help, and when they were going along their journey, I was going along mine as well. -Amy

Rachel spoke about the ways she feels connected to the members and teachers at her studio.

I've bumped into people from my studio before and I don't even know their names. But I'll be in Sephora for example, and it's like you kind of see each other at your most vulnerable, when you're sweating and maybe in some weird position that you're not doing right, and then just seeing them out in public it's like I don't know you, but in a way, I'm connected to you. It's interesting, I like it... I feel like I get very connected with the teachers, there are certain teachers that I want to do the class because I know they are teaching, and I feel so safe and comfortable and I feel like I could just tell them anything. Legitimately there have been a few people who have left the studio and I have gotten so sad. It's like "No! I need that person! They are part of my therapy!" -Rachel

Despite the participants not admittedly spending any time with the people they met at yoga outside of their studio, relationships and connections were clearly formed. They weren't friends per se, but there was a different kind of bond between these people. Sam put this connection into the following words, "If I had coffee with anyone from the studio, I would have lots to talk about!" A feeling of connection and belonging to a yoga studio frequently emerged throughout the interviews. There seemed to be something powerful about recognizing others and being recognized or showing vulnerability and witnessing vulnerability. These occurrences

created an unspoken bond between people and played such an important role in manifesting a positive feeling.

This theme reminded me of the importance of familiar faces and relationships within a school. As a teacher, it is always nerve-racking going to a new school, not knowing where to put your belongings for the day or not knowing the names of the staff and students. There is a certain comfort in being greeted by friendly faces and knowing what to expect. Perhaps this experience of feeling connected to a community is fulfilling our human desire to belong and feel significant (Ferguson, 1989).



Sam's body biography representing her heart space spoke powerfully to this theme of community and connection. The words *trust*, *acceptance*, *shared goals*, *love*, *safety*, *friendship*, *connection* and *belonging to a community* are within and around a large red heart. Here's her explanation of how community and connection relate to yoga and teaching, and why it is so important:

Figure 13: Sam's heart

...belonging to a community would apply to yoga and school, I feel like that is important to me in both spaces. (In teaching) you have to pick one thing you do really well, do that thing, and then count on your team for the rest, and recognize that you are doing enough. There's the acceptance piece... Same thing with yoga, you can't let yourself feel bad. Some days, my energy level is not what I thought, I'm going to do what I can and not leave feeling depleted.

Connection is with my kids and my team, along with friendship and shared goals. Those things unite you as a class or team. Same thing with yoga. It's so important to find teachers that you align with, because you get so much more out of it... Connection comes into that as well, by knowing what your students can do and meeting them there. -Sam

Upon first glance, this heart is the focal point of the entire piece. The words connected to the heart align with her interview responses in that they are the reasons she missed yoga when it wasn't a part of her life, and they express the reasons she continues to practice. At times when Sam isn't able to make it to the studio, she doesn't have much success with home practice because she can't focus. She explains that having other people around keeps her accountable.

Rachel also mentions more than once her unique relationship with the participants in the yoga classes she attends. At the lower part of the spine of her body biography which she has labeled "*strengths*" are the words *connection* and *empathy*. When Rachel and I were discussing ways in which yoga has had an effect on her, she confides,

...just the collective energy and spirit that is built up in some of the classes, it makes me feel so proud of myself and proud of all these other people around me who are doing good things for themselves. Sometimes I wonder, what's going on in this person's life? Maybe this is helping them today...  
-Rachel

While reading the transcripts from my interview with Rachel, her body biography was laid out next to me, so that I could continually make connections between the two. It was like reading a story book with pictures on each page. When Rachel spoke about the people in her life, whether it was the strangers she saw at yoga (and then later at Sephora), her students and colleagues at school, or her family at home, it was so evident how much she cared about these people. She emphasized several times how positive yoga was in her life and just wanted to share it with all of those around her as if happiness were a collaboration of other people's happiness. As she put so eloquently, "We're all just out there trying to get by man!"

I notice a genuine, compassionate personality characteristic frequently in the people I meet at yoga, and it often makes me wonder about the common causality dilemma, the chicken or the egg comes first? Are people who do yoga generally more positive and happy people, or

did yoga influence who they are? Perhaps it is a bit of both? Sam mentions that this generalization is one of the draws to her yoga studio. She feels like yogis are like-minded people. There is a certain predictability to the class, and I have to agree. Walking into most yoga studios, a calm, quiet ambience pervades. People are generally respectful of silence in the studio, which is often my draw to yoga, to feel calm, quiet and Zen. When I ask Amy about whether or not yoga makes people calm, or if calm people do yoga, she puts it like this:

I feel like it's a mixture, but I definitely think that yoga helps you to become more so. There's something about it, eventually you become more calm, energized and passionate. I think you learn to be a little bit more mindful not just in a studio or a classroom. So, I would say, I hope it does, I think it does. Yoga makes you more mindful of your own happiness, how your body feels and of your energy levels.

-Amy

Rachel mentions something similar with her coworkers:

"They are generally happy and positive people, and I'm sure yoga enhances those feelings and qualities. They have mentioned to me that yoga helps them with stress". -Rachel

Amy puts it like this:

I think there's some connection. There must be. But then I try to think if I know anyone who practices yoga, and what is practicing yoga? Is it going to a class once and that's it? Or years and years? It's more just from people I know at the studio and they all seem to be, well relatively happy when I see them, but you don't really know. I think they're happy when they come in and feel good when they come out. So, it must do something, because usually when you walk out of the class, people are feeling pretty good.

-Amy

Whichever came first, the Zen or the yogi, this research would suggest there is a strong relationship between the two. Furthermore, this positive energy appears to be contagious. Rachel talks about the influence of a yoga teacher leading a class on a group of people. She talks about

the positive vibes of a teacher, and if he/she is a warm and positive person, and how that translates to the class. Rachel says that she feels encouraged, proud of herself, and proud of the rest of the practitioners around her.

***Sati / Mindfulness and Awareness:***

*“As the mind calms and the sway of the ego subsides, with the intellect becoming like a steady unwavering candle, a state of stillness emerges and a state of union with all the aspects of our being is experienced.” ~ Yoga Sutra*

*Something yoga teachers often say is “Practice makes practice”. Some days I can hold a handstand for 30 seconds and sometimes I can’t balance on one foot for 10. There’s too much chance of failure when you expect perfection all the time, especially as a teacher. I’m not perfect and I can’t expect my students to be. If I teach a lesson and half the class doesn’t understand, then I revamp my lesson or try a simpler concept. If a student fails a test, then we review it together and try again when they feel prepared.*

This theme explains the practice of yoga where students were able to spend time on their mat, whether it was in stillness or finding movement, and feel completely present in that moment. They were able to “let go” and frustrations from the day seemed to fade away. The interesting component to this theme was that the participants were able to translate this practice of letting go into their daily life—off the mat.

I spent roughly 90 minutes with each of the participants. As I listened to them speak about the ways in which yoga has influenced their lives, I couldn’t help but notice that each participant seemed to be incredibly self-aware. Sam talked about the importance of incorporating yoga into her routine, and how she is affected when she misses yoga. For example, she talks about a busy week filled with social commitments and attending a family member’s birthday dinner:

It was like, “Woe is me!” Two birthday dinners and a weekend away, it’s really not so bad. But I didn’t have time for yoga and it’s silly because I’m at a birthday just thinking “I wish I had time to go to yoga before this dinner, it would be so much better!” -Sam

Each of the participants described this feeling of being “out of whack” when they get busy and aren’t able to work yoga into their schedule for a period of time. I have experienced this feeling as well when life gets hectic and I have gone a week or so without yoga. Not only does my body feel stiff and sore, but I feel an increase in stress and irritability. Although I may not have time to go to a studio to do a practice in these situations, I believe that the important piece of the puzzle here is acknowledging the reason for my change in mood. Sam explains a similar feeling, that if she doesn’t go to yoga for a few days, it feels as though her body is craving it. Sam explains that “Overall, my mental well-being is positively influenced by yoga”. Rachel describes deep breathing as one of the tools that she learned in yoga, and shared with her students how it can be used in everyday life:

***Niyama***

*Saucha* / purity of body and mind / staying grounded and centered in daily life / modeling a healthy lifestyle and positive attitude will inspire students to do the same

I use (deep breathing) as my secret little weapon in my back pocket whenever I’m feeling stressed or anxious. Taking some slow deep breaths... no one even has to know that you are doing it. (After completing the breathing exercise with her students...) When we talked about how they felt, they said it felt relaxing and they felt lighter. Getting them to do things like that allows them to be a bit more focused inward. -Rachel

The participants in this study seemed to have this ability to realize when they are feeling “off”—whether it be physically, mentally or both—attribute this feeling to a specific reason (in this case, a lack of yoga) and consciously choose how to proceed. This may involve making time for yoga by declining other social events or activities, trying an at home practice, or practicing mindfulness in a different way. For example, the participants explain part of the attraction to

yoga is time to yourself, alone with your thoughts. A similar experience may arise from taking a walk or meditating. Perhaps there just isn't enough time to incorporate a yoga practice into your schedule that week, or even designated time to yourself. Being mindful and aware could be enough. The renowned yoga teacher Michael Stone describes one facet of yoga as "staying with feelings without seeking to avoid them—staying patiently and with an attitude of acceptance with whatever is occurring in the present moment as it arises, unfolds, and passes away" (Stone, 2008, p.73). At Sam's family birthday dinner, this meant realizing that she was feeling scattered and irritated. She acknowledged those feelings (and the reasons for them) and moved on with her evening. Although Sam didn't have time for her physical yoga practice that week, she was in fact practicing yoga by being mindful and aware of her feelings, leading to her developing an attitude of acceptance.

The words 'mindful' and 'awareness' were mentioned repeatedly in the interviews. The more I read through the transcripts, these words appeared bolder than the rest, it felt as though they were jumping off the page at me. It became clear that they were meant to be a major theme of this study. Sam explains how yoga makes her feel more self-aware as an introvert, noticing which activities make her happy and which don't:

... and [yoga] makes it easier to be self-aware. For example, "I don't like that, I'm not going to do it." Or, "I feel a certain way so I'm going to do this to feel better." I've always been like that and I think yoga has helped me to become even more so. It's the thing I know will make me feel better... I go to the class and then, "How do I feel after? Better? Good. Go to yoga again." -Sam

Sam and I discussed how this idea created a positive-feedback loop in her life. Yoga contributed to her self-awareness in that she is able to make connections between what serves her in a positive way. She felt good after practicing yoga so she would go again soon. If she was

feeling down, she was able to recognize that, and choose to go to yoga to feel better. As we discussed this, I envisioned a decision map, where no matter what the situation was, the end result was always to practice yoga.

Rachel describes a similar awareness as she describes how she feels both physically and mentally when she hasn't practiced yoga for a few days:

I took a week off because I was really sick last week and I feel like I lose my flexibility, my stamina and my strength so quickly and that's really frustrating. I feel like I'm not as peppy. But then I went to a class on Tuesday and I came home, and I was just so much happier. I was singing, and I was aware of it. I noticed, "I feel different now, so much more positive and happier." -Rachel

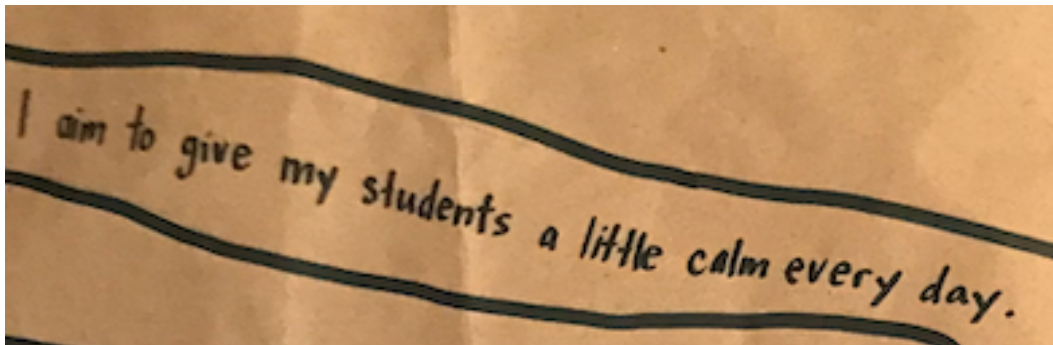
Amy describes her awareness specifically in relation to her body while we were discussing incorporating our knowledge from yoga into other forms of exercise:

I feel like I have such a better awareness of my body, what works and what doesn't, what feels good and what doesn't. -Amy

During the interviews it was easy to chat about how happy yoga makes us feel, and how with the absence of yoga we didn't feel as good. However, I think the more important and complex piece to this knowledge is the aspect of awareness. There is something about the practice of yoga that allows its participants to acknowledge how they are feeling in a specific moment, perhaps recognizing the cause of that feeling, and make a decision of how to proceed to either maintain positive feelings or modify negative feelings. Something as simple as "I feel good after practicing yoga today, I'll go again tomorrow." Or perhaps more intricate "I am feeling frustrated and grumpy with my students today and this lesson isn't working. Instead of going to that dinner party tonight, I need to revise my lesson plan for tomorrow, take a bubble bath and have some quiet time alone tonight."

Sam talks about the importance of routine, for herself and her students. She discusses how although there can be chaotic moments during the day, some level of expectation is important, especially for students. Yoga has played a part in Sam's development of this awareness.

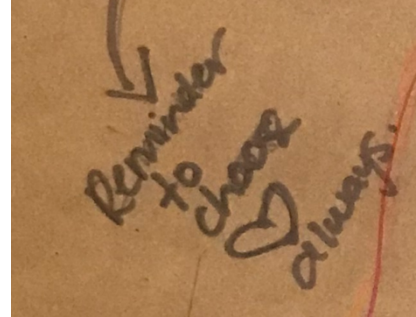
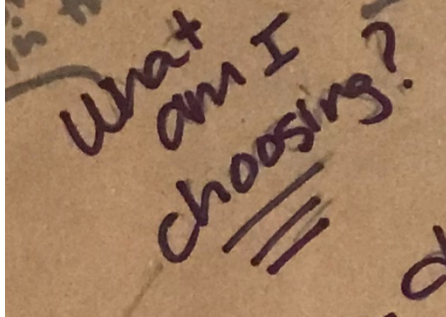
If I'm rushed (in the morning) or something, it's detrimental to my day. That ritual and routine is important to me, and I think that translates to the way I teach. I think that routine is built into yoga as well. If we ever start a practice standing (rather than lying down in savasana) I think "Oh no, this is not good." It's always good to challenge your routine I guess, but it's calming to have an expectation and know what might happen next. By giving students the same routine to start and end the day, at least they arrive feeling good and leave feeling good, even if it's rough in between. -Sam



*Figure 14: Sam's arm*

As part of the body biography guideline, a leading question for the spine was 'What drives your thoughts and actions?' Each of the participants connected the theme of mindfulness and awareness into the head and spine on their body biographies symbolizing the idea of being aware of our decisions and actions. Written above the head on Rachel's body biography are the words "What am I choosing?" In our first interview, I asked Rachel to describe any shift in her life since she had developed her yoga practice. She described how it helps her in her personal and work life, she feels more relaxed and less high strung, it provides her with an outlet to release stress, and she mentions that it helps to shift her perspective: "I feel like I'm more

positive, and I try to choose love more than fear”. That last sentence strongly resonated with me, and as she said it, I quickly jotted those words down in my notebook and drew stars around them.



Figures 15 & 16: Rachel's head

Rachel expanded on this thought:

Our anger is usually based around fear. I try to see the good in everybody, whereas before (yoga) I would have been quicker to judge. Maybe I wouldn't take the time to understand why somebody was being rude, or always coming late to class, or disrespectful in my classroom. Now I just try to think about where they are coming from. -Rachel

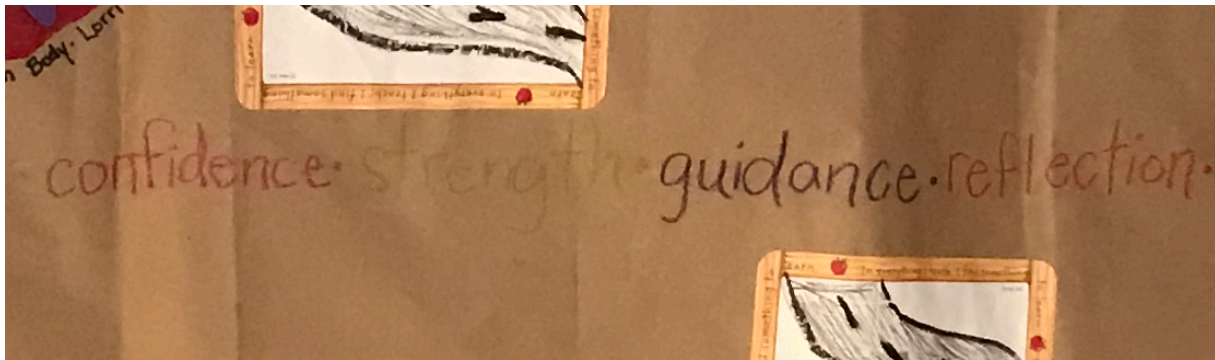
**Yama:**

*Ahimsa* / nonviolence / respecting one's own body and extending this to all other beings / creating a safe space, approaching students with compassion and understanding

I saw the following posted on social media: “Teachers make 1500 educational decisions per day” (Hieck, 2019). While I cannot speak to the veracity of that statement, it led me to reflect on the idea that each time I interact with a student, I have a choice. Whether they have not completed their assignment, are speaking out of turn, or having a tantrum, I can choose to be upset and come up with a consequence, or I can choose to show them love and support. In my experience the latter of the two is often more difficult but results in a more positive outcome. This awareness of our ability to choose how to react appears to be connected to yoga. When I ask Rachel how she thinks this connection is formed from practicing yoga, she explains that for her, it has to do with vulnerability. Yoga has allowed her to “let go”, for example caring less about what she looks like while doing a pose, or what her body looks like beside someone else's.

Rachel is conscious about where her thoughts are taking her, especially for those negative moments, and she is able to choose positivity.

Sam refers to this idea of letting go as “change and growth”, as well as “giving herself time to observe and reflect”. She talks about this in teaching if a lesson just doesn’t go right, she accepts that it didn’t work, and will try a new strategy the following day. Sam describes this process as patience, and attributes it to her yoga practice.



*Figure 17: Amy's spine*

“Guidance, reflection and confidence” are a few of the words Amy writes along her spine. She is a thoughtful person, and as I observed her during our interviews, I noticed that she always seems to reflect before speaking and speaks very intentionally. I wonder if this process of guidance, reflection and confidence is something that resonates with her in class as a teacher, and outside of school as well. Amy shared with me some of the challenges she encounters at school involving her students and colleagues.

I really admire the way Amy considers all aspects of challenging circumstances at school. She speaks about a particular coworker who is rather unkind and cold. Amy explores the possible underlying conditions causing this person’s behavior and notes that it likely has nothing to do with her. This coworker has a lot going on in her personal and professional life, and Amy has committed to the “kill them with kindness” approach. She mentions that she often thinks about

how she can approach this person with a calm demeanor and ask about what is going on, why their behaviour was such and if there is anything she can do to help. When Amy reflects on this thought process she discloses, “I don’t know if that is influenced by yoga in any way, but I like to think so.” As we chat about this practice of thinking about why someone acts the way they do and realizing it may not be about ourselves, Amy uses the same vocabulary as Rachel, “...it’s about letting go”. When Amy describes being frustrated with a student, she suggests an example of a moment influenced by her yoga practice:

I just take a deep breath. Today I was frustrated with a student and I asked another teacher to step in so I could take a moment to walk away. I thought to myself, “Ok, I just have to be more patient”. I might even seek out other people, like colleagues, who are able to help me out, and then go back to talk it out with the student. -Amy

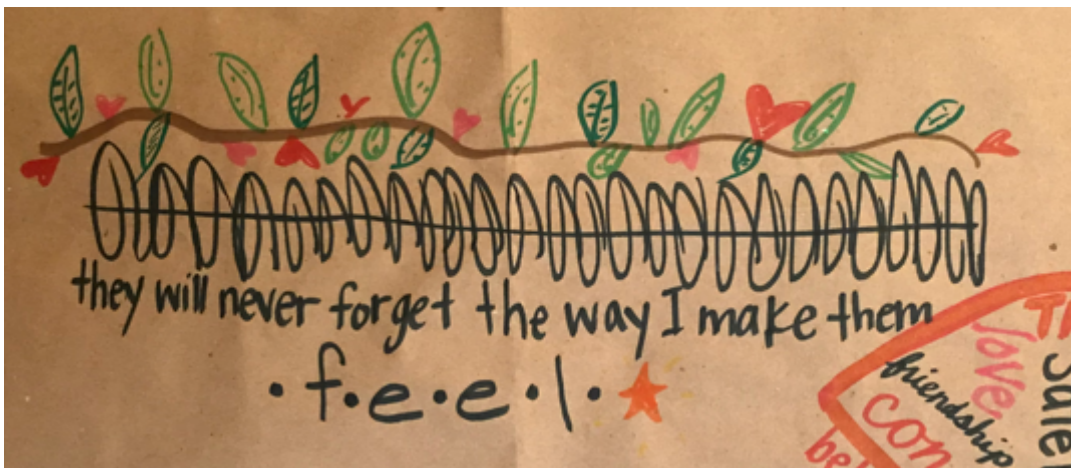


Figure 18: Sam’s spine

Sam writes “they’ll never forget the way I made them feel” with a vine of leaves and hearts along her spine and shared that her yoga practice and effort to remain calm is linked to that idea. She gave the following example:

I have one boy in my class who I think gets yelled at a lot at home—not in a scary way, I think that’s just his mom’s personality—she’s a bit abrasive. So, when I get strict with him, he just won’t listen. He probably thinks, “Oh,

this again!” With him in particular, I try to say, ‘I noticed you’re feeling a little bit upset’ It really came to the forefront for me how much effort that takes! But maybe through yoga, it takes less effort on my part because I am more calm.” -Sam

Approximately one month passed between my first and second interview with Sam, and she mentions that after discussing her calm approach to students in our first interview, she realized that it is actually a conscious effort for her to choose to be rational, calm and understanding with her students, especially in moments of frustration. She goes on to say that maybe it takes less effort for her (compared to other teachers) because she practices yoga and feels calmer.

***Yama:***

*Aparigraha* /  
noncovetousness / not  
being greedy, or being free  
of desire / giving to  
students without expecting  
something in return

Amy shared that in the time between her first and second interview, she reflected on ways in which yoga influenced her classroom practices. Amy explained that she feels more aware of her students’ needs perhaps surrendering control a bit, whether that is providing more time during transitions, moments of stillness and quiet, or even more opportunities for movement to release energy.

Amy, Sam and Rachel all use similar terminology referencing the idea of “letting go” both in their classrooms, and with respect to going easy on yourself and listening to your body during a yoga practice. She tries to apply this practice at school as well by not comparing herself to other teachers in a negative way;

It’s not easy... I’ll think, I am a good team member! But you have to remind yourself of this, which I think is good because in yoga you have to focus a lot on what you can do and listen to your body. You need to be ok with where you’re at, celebrate the things you can do and recognize the things you can’t or shouldn’t. Yoga helps you realize those as vices. Yoga makes you a more mindful person, so it’s easier to list my vices. I worry that some people, maybe if they don’t practice yoga, might not be able to recognize these things, and instead will just feel bad. Yoga is about being able to recognize the negative and shift to the positive. -Sam

**Raga / “The Feeling”**

*“Yoga does not transform the way we see things, it transforms the person who sees.”  
-B.K.S. Iyengar*

*The past week was challenging. My students were really badly-behaved last week, but it wasn't their fault. A lot of them come from tough homes which makes it hard to be angry with them. I'm feeling drained emotionally from school and my personal life. I finally had a chance to go to yoga today (it's been over a week). As I drive to yoga, I begin to think about the fact that even my stretchy pants feel too tight after all the stress-eating I had done this week and my greasy hair hasn't been washed in three days. I have marking and lesson planning I procrastinated doing at home waiting for me. It feels too easy to list the things I'm mad at myself about. Then I practice. When I stand in the changeroom after class I look at myself in the mirror. My pants are just as tight and my sweaty hair is now even more greasy. I know I still have work to catch up on at home, but somehow, it all just doesn't seem so bad. I'm proud of the girl in the mirror, and I leave feeling inexplicably better.*

This theme was the hardest to put into words other than simply “the feeling”. Participants repeated those two words several times in their interviews describing the way they felt after a yoga practice. I found myself offering various words such as better, happier, calmer, content—but it seemed that one word could not encompass this feeling. It was different from any other form of exercise or past time. One possibility is the intentional movement with focus on breath that we don't often experience in any other part of our day.

When I asked each participant if yoga influenced their teaching practice at all, they all responded “yes” without hesitation. The same answer followed when I asked about their reflections related to yoga and their stress levels, mood, energy, happiness, and more. It was clear that yoga made them feel good. The more challenging part of these questions was when I asked them to describe *how*. “If you go, you feel better”, “I walk out and I just feel better”, “I just feel good, I feel better” are all quotes from Sam, Amy and Rachel respectively. Multiple times throughout our interviews, comments like this arose. When I asked Rachel why she practices hot yoga in particular, she explains how it makes her feel:

I just love the feeling of being warm, I love sweating. I feel like I'm sweating out my stress and toxins. I just love the space that is created and how it's welcoming and non-judgmental. I always feel so much better after a class than I did before. I think yoga is really good for my mental state. I feel positive after and I especially love a more vigorous class where I feel like I've gotten a good workout, plus an opportunity to relax and clear my head. -Rachel

Each teacher in this study was asked the following question: "Would you recommend a regular yoga practice to your colleagues?" Each of the participants responded with a definite "Yes", almost with a sense of incredulity that I would even ask such an obvious question. Rachel went into more detail with her reasoning.

Yes! I tell everyone to practice yoga. I tell everybody! It has literally changed my life. I would tell you that it makes you feel great, you're going to get a great workout and a good stretch. You're going to feel so happy and positive afterwards. You're going to get some quiet time at the end, for an opportunity to reflect.

I feel like teachers spend a lot of time and energy worrying about their students and caring for their students. I find it's a very emotionally draining job, for myself anyways, so I think yoga is a good way to care for yourself, because you're getting the benefits of a workout, and some emotional self-care too. So, I feel like it's a nice way to worry about yourself and have some self-care, and physical fitness all in one... You have to put your mask on first before you can help someone else. If I wasn't looking after myself too, I wouldn't be able to look after all of them. -Rachel

Amy eagerly exclaims "Yes!" as she describes a coworker who she feels would benefit from yoga, but was feeling hesitant,

I told her "Look, I will go anywhere with you, I will take you to the studio I go to, but if you want to go somewhere else, I'll go!" I just want her to feel good. I know how good I feel after every class, so I would definitely recommend it. Just so she's not as stressed, or if she is sore or feeling tension anywhere...-Amy

Sam laughs at my question as she explains,

[Yoga] is my daily preaching in the staffroom! I would recommend it to basically anybody, specifically teachers, because I think the tendency to overwork is immense... You can so easily bend over backwards, and the learning isn't necessarily better. I feel like... yoga really helps you have a good perspective on that. It's about time for yourself. Fill your own cup, you can't pour from an empty cup. -Sam

**Yama:**

*Satya* / being honest with ourselves and others / knowing when we need to say no, take on less or put our own health first

It was a consensus among the participants that exercise in general could be attributed to a positive mood, in part by increased blood flow and release of endorphins. However, it was a shared thought between the participants and me that there was something different about yoga. Collectively, a list of aspects from the transcripts that could be attributed to this difference included attention to breath, involvement of meditation, allocated time to be mindful of yourself, and energy levels—your own and of those around you in the class. Stephens (2010) describes three main aspects of yoga: Relaxing, Breathing and Foundation. He describes the latter as “grounding and radiating with lines of energy”, suggesting that we as humans have a tendency to passively collapse into ourselves while sitting or standing (Stephens, 2010). During a yoga practice, we consciously root down into the floor or yoga mat, the immediate effect being the creation of space in the body.

Yoga teachers will frequently guide their students to make adjustments in the body to create more space, allowing for a deeper, fuller breath. As I recall such cues, I visualize Mountain Pose/*Tadasana*; Rooting down through the feet evenly to stand tall, tailbone heavy, shoulder blades pulling together, crown of the head lifting. This is the exact shape of the body biographies created by the participants in this study. It seems symbolic to think this shape allowed the participants space to create and express their connections between their yoga and teaching practices.

According to Stone (2008), as humans we experience feelings which are either positive, negative or neutral, with a corresponding reaction of either attachment or aversion. The Sanskrit word for attachment, *raga*, refers to the desire to repeat pleasurable experience. Consistently throughout the interviews, participants referenced a feeling they experienced because of yoga.

It was common knowledge between the participants that physical exercise produced a positive feeling. Sam discussed running, biking and cross-country skiing as enjoyable and relieving stress. Amy told me about how much she loves indoor cycling classes—the loud music and getting her heart rate up feels great after a stressful day. Rachel will also run occasionally when the weather is nice, but she explains “It’s just not the same as yoga”.

When I looked to the body biographies for some representation of this ‘feeling’, I found myself trying to look at the creation in its entirety. I read the purposefully chosen words which were connected to specific areas of the body, attempting to come up with some explanation of what this ‘feeling’ was, and what contributed to it.

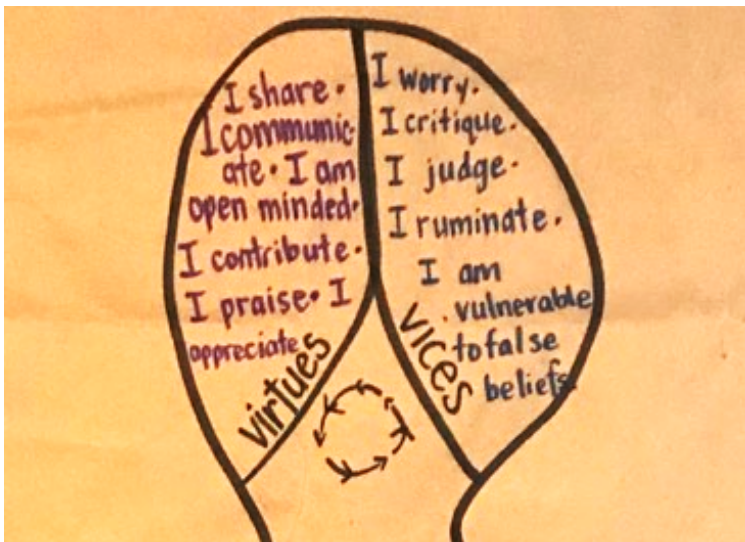


Figure 19: Sam’s head

As I looked at the head of Sam’s body biography, listing her virtues and vices, I was reminded of a story she shared with me. She talked about how she always feels better after yoga, especially on a stressful day. Her husband has noticed this about her, and recently during their home renovations this information has proved

itself to be beneficial. Sam mentions that the renovations are causing her stress, and her vices definitely speak to that stress: “I worry. I critique. I judge. I ruminate.” It is difficult for Sam to not be in charge and feel in control (she

attributes this to her being a teacher) and when she is feeling particularly overwhelmed and distraught by the work happening in her home, her husband will ask, “Is there a yoga class you can go to?”

Sam lives an active lifestyle. She will run with her sister, and cross-country ski with friends. She mentions that being around people and being active relieves stress and she enjoys it, but it’s different from yoga:

I think it’s the time alone thing. It’s quiet, and more than anything it’s time for myself that gives me that relief... the time to yourself away from whatever is worrying you. -Sam

As seen in the images of her body biography, Sam acknowledges yoga for giving her time, often used for reflection.

Sam feels better after yoga, whether she is having a stressful day or a wonderful day. She has favourite teachers, and really enjoys certain music, but ultimately no matter what her practice looks like, she feels better leaving the studio than when she went in. Words Sam uses to describe this feeling are: calm, relaxed, happy, at peace.

Although difficult to put into exact words how and why yoga makes her feel good, the connection is undeniable to her.

It makes worries seem smaller. After you give yourself an hour to not think about it, and then you think about it after...it’s not like the worry is gone, but you realize that it’s ok. I also feel more energized after. Before going into class I might feel tired and discouraged that I won’t get my work done that evening, and I leave feeling like I can do anything! -Sam

When I look at Amy’s body biography, I see positivity. She uses bright colours, large eyes, a yellow star for a nose and a large pink feather for lips. She draws a heart, peace sign and smiling face down one arm, nail polish on her fingers and little bows which remind me of

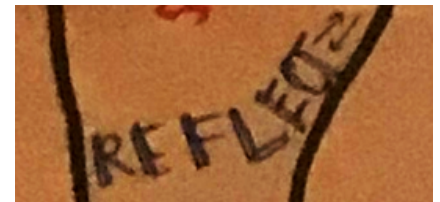
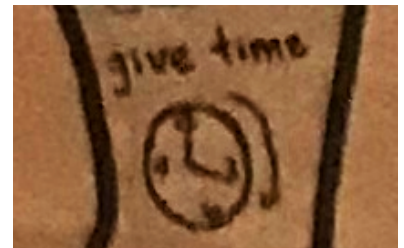


Figure 20 & 21: Sam’s feet

dancing shoes on her feet. When I asked Amy to create a body biography relating her experiences with yoga and teaching, she was given very little direction to encourage a creative outcome, and she did just that. Amy's body biography closely resembles her personality as we chat about her yoga and teaching practices: content, warm and inviting.

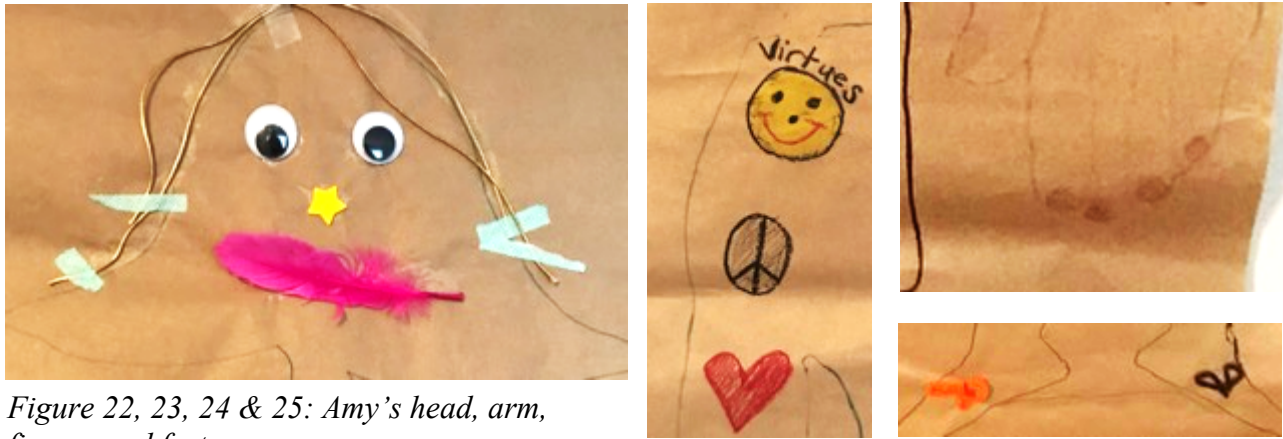


Figure 22, 23, 24 & 25: Amy's head, arm, fingers and feet

Amy comes across as such a positive and happy person, I inquire into whether she ever experiences frustrations or bad days, which she assures me she does and that would certainly be a factor increasing her likelihood to attend a yoga class. I ask her to describe her experience going into a yoga class when she has had a tough day:

I try to forget about [a frustration]. I don't. (laughter) There are moments when I do. The beginning I'm usually thinking about it, especially if I get there early and I'm just lying there. I think oh gosh I should have done this, or why didn't I do that! And then sometimes there are moments during class when I think of something and then I think no I shouldn't be [thinking about that], I need to breathe. Usually by the end I feel a lot better, probably 95% of the time. I walk out and feel better. And then I go to my phone... (laughter). It's that moment that I'm not on my phone, I'm not on social media, that's when I feel best... Usually [after class] I feel better, most of the time. -Amy

Amy has been enjoying attending indoor cycle classes as of late. She enjoys the cardiovascular exercise and the way she feels after, but she too notices that there is a difference compared to yoga, "It's a different kind of energy." I asked her to describe the difference which

she had difficulty with, and when I prompted if there were times when she would choose to go to yoga or spin, Amy considered,

I guess the teachers (for the yoga and spin classes), the day of the week... lately I have been spinning on the weekends in the morning when I have more energy, and then doing more yoga during the week. Maybe that speaks to how I am feeling during the day! Maybe there is a reason I choose to go to yoga during the week when I have less energy! -Amy

Amy's thoughts are consistent with Sam's in that they both notice this positive outcome from yoga.

When I ask Rachel if she experience the same benefits whether she is practicing yoga or another type of exercise, she explains,

Not the same way I do with yoga. I've always been a positive person, but I just feel extra happy and positive after yoga. Maybe it's the different hormones that are released and activated. And definitely the positive space that's created and the friendly teachers. I feel like I've done something good and healthy. -Rachel

Rachel's body biography reminds me of a mind map, showing relationships between pieces of a whole. Looking at her visual representation of yoga and teaching it feels like I am following her train of thought, working through how she feels and experiences yoga. My focus is drawn to the lungs and heart in the centre of the image, where the words "deep breaths = calm + peace" and "breathe with purpose and intention" appear, along with "love, pride, appreciation, gratitude, faith, peace and joy".

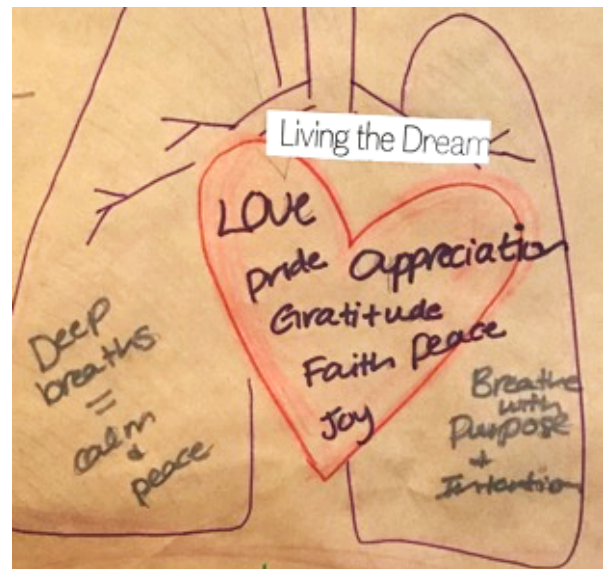


Figure 26: Rachel's heart

Rachel lists conflicts and resolutions, her strengths and what she is trying to work on. During our first interview I asked her how she feels after a yoga class, if she was feeling upset or frustrated

prior to her practice, she responded, “I’m more positive, so I’m able to see things in other ways and not be as narrow-minded.” Overall, I feel she is experiencing self-awareness, what she is working on and how she moves past negativity, being patient and kind to herself.

It can’t be a coincidence that Rachel teaches positive psychology, and she tells me about the ‘broaden and build theory’ and how she relates it to yoga.

Basically, negative emotions close you off, and limit your thinking. Positive emotions open you up, and it is almost like a domino effect. When you are more positive, you’re curious and interested and able to see things in different ways. When you’re angry or frustrated, you are more narrow-minded. So, I find with yoga, if you’re feeling more positive it just propels me into wanting to eat healthy and wanting to get a better sleep, it’s just a snowball effect. -Rachel

Yoga contributes to Rachel feeling positive, and that positivity builds and transfers through other areas in her life.

The participants all describe a positivity associated with yoga, unique to other forms of exercise. They speak about feeling good and happy, and those feelings transferring to other facets of their lives. Without being able to describe exactly how this feeling occurs and exactly why, the participants start to shape the contributing context—a positive energy, time to yourself, space for reflection, time to shut off, breath, acceptance and non-judgment. The teachers in this study shared common stressors encountered at school including assessments, student behaviours and collaborating with colleagues, to name a few. However, because of the benefits from yoga mentioned above, the participants feel better equipped to manage these stressors. The tools they learn from yoga not only help them after a stressful day, but better prepare them to take on the next. The next section will further explore these ideas and directly relate the benefits of yoga to supporting evidence in managing teacher stress.

## Chapter 4: Discussion and Implications for Further Research

*As I write this, the school year is coming to an end. It has been a year full of challenge and change, both professionally and personally. As a teacher still early on in her career, discovering my own teaching style and developing a personal teaching philosophy required more energy than I expected. The word “whirlwind” seems appropriate to describe the past 10 months, and as I reflect on the contributing factors that led to my successes, and allowed me to deal with my failures, yoga is an undeniable factor.*

*Some weeks when I felt organized and caught up with work, I would make sure to plan for 2 or 3 classes at the studio into my schedule. It was during these weeks that I felt accomplished and like I was succeeding in life, in and outside of school. Other weeks I was busy and tired and making it to the studio to practice was not a priority. It was during these times that I noticed yoga was missing. I felt irritable with my students, grumpy at home, and often sore from a lack of functional movement. Most often in these moments, I am aware of my short temper, lack of patience and physical discomfort, and I am able to combat these undesirable outcomes. My practice of yoga is different each time. I appreciate a really challenging class, I benefit from a slow yin practice, I have fun playing around with difficult arm balances and I would say most often my practice is sitting in stillness, breathing and clearing my head. Whether I am having difficulty sleeping, stuck in traffic or dealing with a difficult situation at school, taking deep breaths to calm my mind won't necessarily solve the problem, but it always helps. Giving myself that extra moment to reflect on the situation, to become aware of my body language, to think before I react, that is my most crucial yoga practice. That is what benefits me as a teacher, and that is the reason for this thesis.*

Although the purpose of this study began with a personal inquiry, there is a vast opportunity for its possible benefits in several areas. As discussed previously, teacher stress is a reality and a topic of research in several different countries. Not only is it a concern to educators as individuals, but also weighs on our population as a whole. In 2004, teacher attrition in the United States was estimated at a cost of 3 billion dollars when factoring in training, recruitment, hiring and professional development (Karsenti & Collin, 2013). Considering the alarming rates of teacher drop out due to stress, exploring yoga as a way of managing workplace stress can not only increase the health and well-being of individual teachers, but also benefit society as taxpayers by increasing teacher retention.

I can attest to the fact that teaching is a demanding job; to a new teacher, stress can seem inevitable and burnout seems likely. As I navigate through the first few years of my career, I am learning ways in which to manage and even mitigate stress effectively. Yoga has influenced my

life in a positive way, this study suggests that the participants experience benefits from a regular yoga practice integrated with yoga philosophy, and current research supports the effects of yoga on managing stress. My research question asks, “What are the experiences of 4 teachers, including myself, who regularly practice yoga, in relation to the daily stressors encountered in their teaching practice?” Upon analyzing in-depth interviews with the participants, the following 3 themes emerged: *Community, Awareness and The Feeling*, all supporting the general finding of this study that yoga provided a positive effect on managing stress.

### **Community and Connection:**

It is human nature to want to feel a part of something, or a sense of belonging. The participants in this study suggested that yoga did just that. Each of the participants preferred to practice at a studio with other people rather than alone in their home because fellow yogis provided the participants with energy and comradery. Similarly, a study looking at women who suffer from depression and their experience with a yoga practice suggested that yoga served as a self-care technique facilitating connectedness and shared experiences in a safe environment (Kinser, Bourguignon, Taylor & Steeves, 2013). Finnan (2015) suggested that students who practiced yoga not only showed an increased sense of community, but they and their teachers brought positive lessons from yoga practice such as focus, perseverance and positive social relations into the academic classroom. This information could suggest an opportunity to develop a connection and sense of community within a classroom by teachers integrating yoga into their classrooms.

Stanec, Forneris & Theuerkauf (2010), suggested that teachers should adopt a regular practice into their own lives, and encourage their colleagues to do the same, considering individuals that are aging might be intimidated to initiate a yoga practice and miss out on the

opportunity (p.19). There is an opportunity for teachers to create a safe and welcoming environment for colleagues the way Sam, Amy and Rachel did, by encouraging their peers to practice and even inviting them into their own yoga communities. Each of the participants in this study agreed that a commitment to yoga and making it a priority in their schedule was imperative to maintain a practice, and a factor in why they believe their coworkers may not practice. When I asked the participants in this study what factors contributed to their commitment to their practice, they mentioned the following, “the positive space created”, “the connection to the teachers”, “the collective energy”, “the people you see”. The participants acknowledged that it was difficult to develop and maintain a home practice, they became distracted by chores or electronics, but it was predominantly unsuccessful because they were alone. It became clear that belonging to a community when practicing at a studio was a key element of yoga which positively influenced the teachers’ ability to respond to daily stressors.

### **Awareness:**

Akinbode’s (2013) research stating the importance of reflective narratives for teachers in order to be more mindful of teaching practices, specifically emotions and responses to them. The narratives from this study suggest a yoga practice as a valuable tool in self-reflection, as well as increasing mindfulness and awareness. Teachers who develop a yoga practice, especially those that practice in a studio, dedicate time for self-reflection, often guided by an instructor. Atkinson & Permuth-Levine, (2009) found that yoga teachers who promoted self-acceptance and moderation were perceived as more favourable than those who pushed students beyond their physical capabilities. The researchers’ reasoning was that

### **Niyama:**

*Santosha* / purity, humility, modesty / recognizing and accepting that life is an ongoing process for learning, growing and evolving will lead to self-acceptance / being content with yourself, knowing you are doing your best, learn from your colleagues rather than compete and compare

perhaps the difference in teaching style reflects whether or not they participated in a training with an ethical component which incorporates teaching nonjudgement and acceptance (Atkinson & Permuth-Levine, 2009). Sam speaks to me about the difficulties with the teaching profession in weighing your capabilities and practices against those of colleagues. Something she is currently working on is “being happy with what I’m doing and looking for growth with the students, and not worrying about what the other teachers are doing”. I see a clear link here between teaching and yoga; In both instances, there is a fine balance in learning from and supporting others, while not judging and comparing yourself to them. Thus, learning self-acceptance—an extremely challenging concept—requires (a) practice.

Research suggests that the more often participants practiced yoga, the greater their awareness of internal body sensations and the greater their well-being (Impett, Daubenmie, & Hirschman, 2006). The same researchers go on to hypothesize that awareness of discomfort may be the first step toward becoming empowered to create change and enhance well-being (Impett, Daubenmie, & Hirschman, 2006). As a teacher, I feel we are expected to constantly be happy and positive and give one hundred percent to our students each day. I think it is important to note that awareness in this study and in current research, refer to acknowledging how one’s feeling, whether that is positive, negative, or somewhere in between, and using that information to assess what they need. By having this awareness, it gives the individual the power of how to act or react to those feelings. Some days I do not feel happy, lucky and grateful, similarly with Sam, Amy and Rachel. Being able to acknowledge this feeling allows us to choose to celebrate the small victories with our students. When the teachers in this study were able to practice regularly, they developed a sense of awareness—unique to yoga—leading to a more positive attitude toward their students and colleagues.

**The Feeling:**

James Morley (2001) wrote an essay interpreting the practice of breath control and combining the internal and external, that is influenced by the existential phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty. I believe that Morley's work explains the experience that the participants in this study experienced in regard to their breathwork. "Take a moment..." is a phrase so often used by a yoga instructor during class, especially at the beginning or end of practice. It is commonly followed by "...listen to/follow your breath", "...check in with how you are feeling", "...take a scan of the body."

Through the practice of postures (asana) together with pranayama, we develop an inverted sense of our muscles, tendons, heart valves, and lung cavities. We come to live the opening and closing of these corporeal zones as we do with external visible limbs. We experience the expansion of the chest in inhalation, the quickened tempo of the heart, and the blood's flow through the course of the arteries. We incorporate the autonomic nervous system into the realm of the voluntary. We note how the lungs change tide between breaths, and the movement of interior contraction as expiration moves outward only to pause between breaths before beginning the cycle again. (Morley, 2001).

The participants in this study all mentioned breathwork in their interviews, either commenting on the deep breathing during their practice, or how it translates into their daily life. This practice of conscious breath was a result of yoga and I believe it translates to both themes "awareness" and "the feeling". These results are not unique to this study, as shown in Villate's (2015) study where students had similar experiences: "Also at work I often get very busy and have a million things to do at once, and since I have been practicing yoga, whenever we start to get busy, I stop and take a few deep breaths and really try to concentrate on every single thing that I am doing individually, and I have found that I end up making way less mistakes when I do this" (Villate, 2015, p. 56).

The consensus in the narratives, including my own is that yoga is good for you. Rachel describes it as a "snowball effect of positivity". Amy explains that it gives you the well-known

benefits of being physically active, but there is something different about yoga. Sam attributes this difference to the non-physical aspect of yoga—the calm and quiet, the time for introspection, which she tries to impart on her students. This aspect—likely the combination of several components of yoga listed—is best described as “the feeling”. For the participants and I, the most powerful part of our practice was feeling good, feeling positive, and having that feeling translate into our lives as teachers who encounter stressors daily.

**Putting a practice *into* practice:**

*I am waiting by the door of the classroom. The final bell has rung for the day, and the student who completed very little work in the previous period and was constantly chatting with his friends is taking forever to pack up. Feeling frustrated, I check my watch knowing that I need to rush out to beat the traffic to get downtown for a yoga class. I look at the student and smile at the irony. I practice yoga because it makes me happy, it makes me a better teacher. I am feeling impatient and bothered by a student who may just need a little bit of attention today. I mentally plan the later yoga class into my schedule and walk over to the student to ask him how his day went...*

Villate (2015) completed a study in her Physical Education college course by offering semi-weekly yoga classes which included information on traditional yoga philosophy, reflection questions, and movement. The following were the 4 emerging themes from her study; calming, perspective, focus and empowerment. Gillan, Naquin, Zannis, Bowers, Brewer & Russell (2013) completed a study correlating Stress, Physical Activity and Nutrition for School Employees. They suggest that selecting strategies that address stress management and physical activity could reduce absenteeism and health care costs while improving staff productivity. This study goes on to mention that having onsite facilities and programs to increase the likelihood of employee participation, as well promoting skills to reduce perceived stress could result in happier, healthier employees (Gillan et al., 2013). This study has congruent findings to current research that suggest yoga can improve perceived stress (Anderzén-Carlsson, Lundholm, Köhn and

Westerdahl, 2014; Park, Riley, Bedesin and Stewart, 2016; Stück, Meyer, Rigotti, Bauer & Sack, 2003.) This finding suggests that teachers would benefit from access to a yoga practice. With additional research to support this study, there are countless ways in which yoga could become a part of teacher practice and policy, whether it be a part of professional development, or perhaps a stipend for teachers to specifically spend on yoga classes at a local studio. This would allow teachers to choose whichever is more convenient for them to fit into their schedule, as well as to increase a community presence among their colleagues by practicing yoga together.

I believe that this study can positively contribute to teachers of all experiences, at any stage of a yoga practice. I anticipate that teachers' firsthand accounts of how a yoga practice positively influenced their ability to manage stress will act as a motivator for other teachers to consider practicing yoga as well. Perhaps teachers may also be influenced on the type and frequency of practice they choose, as well as interest in learning further about yoga philosophy and the ways in which it can be translated into their everyday life. Atkinson & Permuth-Levine, (2009) suggest that yoga can be presented as a positive health behaviour to the general public, therefore an at-risk group such as teachers would be an excellent focus for future research.

It was undeniable to the teachers that yoga would benefit not only their colleagues, but also friends and family, and even their students. Amy uses yoga with her students during transition periods, which can be difficult for her young students. After recess she leads her students into child's pose, where students have their shins on the ground and curl into a small ball shape similar to the fetal position. Not only does this give them quiet and stillness for a few moments, she has seen improvements with their flexibility, and her coworkers have begun to adopt her methods as well! Sam uses yoga if her students are having a tantrum or behavioural issue. She leads them through breathing exercises or have them perform calming repetitive movements in order to calm down before returning to the problem, something she directly relates

to her yoga practice. Sam shares that teaching students to cope with frustration has been the largest influence of yoga on her teaching practice. I asked Sam if she predicted yoga to be a phase in her life and she made it quite clear that it was not, “I can’t ever imagine not going!” Since Rachel teaches students at the college level, she shares that they have extremely high stress levels and recommends yoga frequently to them. Rachel teaches positive psychology and explains that aspects of yoga such as deep breathing and wellness align well with her curriculum, and often shares her yoga experiences with her students.

The detrimental effects of stress and high burnout rates for teachers is increasingly worrisome. This study supports the call for further research on the benefits of yoga in managing teachers’ stress. Studies completed on the type of yoga and meditation, as well as frequency of practice would positively contribute to teachers as well as other various occupations with high stress and burnout rates. Additionally, I believe we would benefit from investigation into the promotion of yoga for teachers, as well as the prospect of making a practice accessible to teachers, for example in the form of studio passes or monetarily through health benefits.

### **Related Considerations:**

It is important to recognize the profound contribution of the body biographies to this study. I was able to use multimodal representations of the participants’ experiences to enrich the narratives for the reader. The words and images created by the participants added a layer of meaning to their experiences, much like pictures in a storybook. The inclusion of myself as a participant transpired late in the process of this thesis, which is why I did not create a body biography. However, I feel as though it would have augmented the research well, likely by allowing a deeper understanding of my own narrative to emerge. This exercise of constructing a

body biography, created by Underwood (1987) would complement many forms of qualitative research, narrative inquiry in particular, where a story of experience is shared.

One aspect of narrative inquiry is the relatively small sample size, which in this study reflects 3 participants that were interviewed. Originally five participants expressed interest, however time constraints from two of the participants resulted in them withdrawing from the study. The purpose of this research was to perform in depth interviews with teachers to gain an understanding of how their yoga practice has influenced their life as a teacher. A small sample size, which may be considered a limitation, is considered an asset in this study. Interviewing a small number of individuals allowed more time with each teacher which I used to perform semi-structured interviews using a set of prepared questions as guidelines. Our conversations were expanded as I used follow-up questions based on the participants' responses, multimodal expressions and the directions their narratives took.

As a teacher and a practitioner of yoga, I live my own narrative which has created a relationship between these two practices, thus giving me a personal lens that a yoga practice positively influences the daily experiences of my life as a teacher and the way I manage daily stress. As the primary researcher in this study, with such an invested interest in the topic, it proved impossible for me to completely bracket myself out of the inquiry. I acknowledge that as I inquired into the participants' experiences, my own experiences as well as co-constructed experiences developed, therefore I included myself as a participant (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006).

“We need to be constantly aware of the complexity of the stories we live” (Leggo, 2004, p. 98). The stories of my participants are their accounts of how they believe a yoga practice has influenced their experience with stress in the classroom. There are several reasons that contribute

to the way a teacher experiences stressors during their day. However, the purpose of this study was to determine if teachers who practice yoga experience similarities in their ability to handle stress and if they believed that one is related to the other.

*Each time I teach something new, whether it be a new group of students, a new subject or a new lesson, I feel vulnerable. I think it is human nature to experience the fight-or-flight response. As a teacher, each time I choose to fight. I stand at the front of the classroom for my students. Not only to teach them the required course material, but for so much more. To show them how to feel vulnerable and work through it, to show up every day, to try my best, to make mistakes and learn from them. Being a teacher is not my job, but rather who I am. Most days it is fun, rewarding, and wonderful. Other days it is frustrating, heart-breaking, even disastrous. My yoga practice has taught me how to enjoy the good days, and how to work through the bad. It all seems pretty simple when I think about it. Breathe, let go, smile, send love and gratitude into the room and be open to receiving it back.*

**Niyama:**

*Ishvarapranidhana / letting go of the ego / grounded in a sense of being that is greater than the individual self / being vulnerable with students, accepting that best efforts are enough*

*Om* in Sanskrit is a sound often chanted at the beginning and end of a yoga practice. It has a different significance for everyone and can be followed by traditional or personal mantras. Essentially it is thought that *Om* is everything, and also nothing. It is the universe and it is silence. When I hear the sound *Om*, each part of my day, including my yoga and teaching practices, feels connected and complete.

-OM-

**Final Words:**

*I believe that I was born to teach. Some days I cry in frustration over students, parents, support staff, administration, salary... the list goes on. There are moments when I wonder if I can possibly do this long term. It takes a toll on my health, my personal and social life and my relationships. I believe my students can learn from me, and I in turn, from them. Without my yoga practice, I don't know how I would have handled the past 7 years. I have not only withstood teaching but grown as an educator because of yoga. It's because of the people I have met and the connections we have created. It's the way I can forget about everything bad that happened before arriving at the studio. Mostly, it's how I am calm and ready to take on the next day's challenges... it's the feeling.*

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## Appendix A: Interview Guide

*Time of interview:*

*Date:*

*Place:*

*Interviewer:*

*Interviewee:*

Participants will be asked to describe their yoga practice, as well as the ways in which their experiences during the day are influenced by it. Participants may decline to answer any or all questions.

Questions:

Intro: How did you come to practice yoga? How long ago? Did you immediately feel connected to the practice? Please briefly describe the transition yoga made into your life.

1. Please describe the type of yoga or meditation you practice.
2. At what time and in which space do you prefer to practice?
3. Please describe the differences you feel before, during and after a practice. Is there a different experience during/after a more challenging class compared to a more relaxed style of yoga?
4. Can you describe the shift from practicing yoga to it becoming a part of your lifestyle? (If applicable)
5. Can you describe the way in which you felt before, during and after this transition?
6. What are some typical daily stressors as a teacher?
7. Do you think yoga has specifically helped with any of these stressors? Please describe in detail if so.
8. Can you describe any specific experiences with a student or colleague which you felt was influenced by your yoga practice?
9. Are there any situations during the school day you are able to handle differently as a result of what you practice in yoga?
10. Are there any other times during the day that you feel your yoga practice has influenced?

Information/answers from participants will be audio recorded and transcribed by myself (Lauren Owens).

## Appendix B: Body Biography Instructions

Adapted from: Morawski, 2010 and O'Donnell-Allen & Smagorinsky, 1999.

A body biography was first formulated by Underwood in 1987. Used as an outlet for self-expression, “a vibrant visual and written metaphor for a life” was created. As part of data collection for this study, you have the opportunity to create a body biography—a visual and written portrait illustrating several aspects of your personal experiences as a teacher who practices yoga. You may use a variety of materials such as markers, crayons, and found materials (e.g., wrapping paper remnants, tissue, yarn, and string).

You have many possibilities for filling up your giant sheet of paper. The choices you make should be based on your experiences with your yoga practice as well as your daily experiences at school, particularly if and how these experiences are related.

### Body Biography Suggestions

**Placement:** Carefully choose the placement of your text and artwork. For example, the area where your body's heart would be might be appropriate for illustrating important relationships within the school or yoga studio.

**Spine:** The spine can be related to a person's objective(s). What are your most important goals as a teacher and as a practitioner of yoga? What drives your thoughts and actions? How can you illustrate this spine?

**Virtues and Vices:** What are your most admirable qualities as a teacher? Worst qualities? How can you visually represent them?

**Colour:** Colours are often symbolic. What colour(s) do you most associate with yourself? Why? How can you effectively work these colours into your portrait?

**Symbols:** What objects do you associate with as a teacher and yoga practitioner? Are there specific objects that are particularly significant to your day?

**Changes:** How has your teaching practice changed as a result of your yoga practice? Trace these changes within your text and/or artwork.