

**Witnessing a mosaic emerge:  
The phenomenon of transformative learning  
within a professional master's degree program**

**by**

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**Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the  
Requirements for the Degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy**

in the

Educational Technology and Learning Design Program

Faculty of Education

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**SIMON FRASER UNIVERSITY**

**Spring 2020**

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## **Abstract**

Personal and professional growth experienced by adult learners has been explored by education researchers for decades. Now in a second wave of theory development, transformational learning research has broadened from its earlier focus on cognitive and rational processes, to explore methods that promote and acknowledge a more holistic view of learning processes and an enhanced range of expressed and demonstrated outcomes that reflect multi-dimensions of transformative growth. What is not currently well documented in the research literature is evidence of sustained changes to personal and/or professional ways of being in the world arising from graduate level professional education programs.

Unstructured phenomenological interviews were conducted with 20 alumni of a Master of Education in Educational Practice program (M.Ed. EP) 16-20 months post-graduation. Conversations focused on what the M.Ed. meant to them personally and professionally, experiences of sustained growth, as well as meaningful processes that facilitated and supported their expressed changes. Through phenomenological reduction, a common essence of the experience emerged which highlighted the role of the learning community and a variety of learning activities that were meaningful for the alumni's change processes. A range of personal and professional outcomes were expressed as either transformative in nature, or professionally grounding, validating, and affirming in terms of professional identity and praxis. In this thesis, the phenomenon of the M.Ed. EP experience is presented as a narrative utilizing phenomenological reductions as exemplars to the nuanced experiences. Potentially adding to the second wave of transformative learning research, it is proposed that these varied accounts may all be expressions of transformative learning when applying a broader interpretive lens that includes professional praxis and professional identity changes as evidence of transformation. Collectively these 20 individual experiences, interpreted as nuanced accounts, act as pieces of a mosaic converging to provide a contextualized vision of transformative learning in the professional practice master's degree. Findings may support faculty and educational designers who wish to facilitate transformative outcomes for their students.

**Keywords:** transformative learning; professional education; professional identity; learning communities; designing for transformation

*I dedicate this thesis to my mother,  
Anna, who models courage and curiosity;  
to my father, Harry, who throughout his life  
demonstrated tenacity, fairness, and how to hold an  
ethical stance with others; and to my children,  
Oliver and Emily, for being my greatest teachers.*

## Acknowledgements

Like all the important journeys in my life, there have been wonderful people along the way to whom I am truly grateful. Firstly, I would like to thank my supervisors, Dr. David Kaufman and Dr. Cher Hill, for your unwavering support and belief in me throughout this research process. Thank you to Dr. Allan MacKinnon for participating as a committee member, to Dr. Margaret MacDonald for taking on the task of internal examiner of this thesis, and to Dr. Susan Brigham for agreeing to be the external examiner of this work.

To Dr. Cheryl Amundsen, I would like to express my gratitude for your exemplary teaching and early guidance as I developed my research ideas and methodological approach. To Dr. Kevin O'Neill, who invited me into the Educational Technology and Learning Design (ETLD) fold—I appreciated your welcome, capacity to create a community of learners, and your overall leadership. To the wonderful educators who engaged in this research process as participants—I thank you all for being so open and willing to share personal details of your experience and reflective insights with me. And to the faculty who teach the Master of Education in Educational Practice—thank you for agreeing to allow me space and access to explore the alumni's experiences. I recognize the possible vulnerability that comes with that level of witnessing from an outsider.

I feel gifted to have a wonderful employer, the British Columbia Institute of Technology (BCIT), who has provided me with professional leave to work on my thesis at two separate intervals over the last few years. Without this dedicated time, it would have been extremely challenging to complete. I would specifically like to thank my director, Brian Hosier, and department colleagues in the Learning and Teaching Centre at BCIT for their encouragement and support. In particular, thank you to my fellow Instructional Development Consultant colleagues; Bonnie Johnston, Cathy Griffin, Jennifer Madigan, John Mills, Michele Bridge, Lauren Schutte, Oleg Lungu, Peter Fenrich, Rosario Passos, Sylvia Gajdics, and Youdan Zhang, who pitched in to cover project work (or provided cheer-leading) when I took professional development leave. Working within a department that values both the scholarship and practice of teaching and learning has been a blessing and enabled me to integrate my learning gained from this research, and the Ph.D. generally, directly and immediately, into my praxis.

To my ETL D Ph.D. colleagues, in particular, Dr. Patrick Pennefather, James Rout, Chris Jeschelnick, and Dr. Sanja Boskovic—it has been an honour to learn in community with you. I enjoyed, and thank you for, the many deep discussions as well as the introspective and humorous interludes!

Thank you also to good friends, Sheila Szekely, and Sally and Bill McKinstry—I appreciate you all so much for the Monday evening diner meals, and the welcoming tea and chats in your home. A special thank you to my walk-and-talk, Netflix watching buddy, and compassionate listening friend, Jayne Blemings, whose gentle encouragement, support, and humour has been so appreciated and helped to keep me sane while juggling all that life has thrown at me over the last few years! Thank you, dear friend.

And finally, to my family, my wonderful mother, Anna, my father, Harry (in spirit but always present in our family), my brothers Steve and Doug, sister-in-law Candace, and my son, Oliver, and daughter, Emily—family is so very central in my life. I am grateful to have you all in my life, and in my heart. Thank you for being willing to navigate around my “I’m working on my thesis” weekends and for your votes of confidence along the way! I am delighted to be celebrating completing this Ph.D. journey the same academic year my daughter, completes her bachelor’s degree.

#grateful

## **Land Acknowledgement**

I acknowledge that Simon Fraser University’s Burnaby campus where I completed my studies is located on the traditional and unceded lands of the Coast Salish Peoples, including the territories of the kwikwə́ləm (Kwkwetlem), xʷməθkwə́yəm (Musqueam), səliilwə́taʔt (Tseil-Waututh) and Skwxwú7mesh Úxwumixw (Squamish) Nations.

Thank you for the honour of being able to gather to learn, work, and commune with others on these lands.

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## List of Acronyms

Term	Initial components of the term
BC	British Columbia
BCACC	British Columbia Association of Clinical Counsellors
BCIT	British Columbia Institute of Technology
CoP	Community of Practice
ETLD	Educational Technology and Learning Design program
GDE	Graduate Diploma in Education
IDC	Instructional Development Consultant
M.Ed.	Master of Education
M.Ed. EP	Master of Education in Educational Practice
Ph.D.	Doctor of Philosophy
RCC	Registered Clinical Counsellor
SFU	Simon Fraser University
TL	Transformative Learning
TTM	Transtheoretical Model of the Stages of Change

## Tree of Life Mosaic



Tree of Life mosaic by Fran S. Kremen (2009).

Note: Artist and photographer: Fran S. Kremen (2009). Original image sourced from Seattle Mosaic Arts. Copyright release to use this image within this thesis document granted by artist and Seattle Mosaic Arts.

# Chapter 1. Introduction

Education is an act of love, and thus an act of courage. It cannot fear the analysis of reality or, under pain of revealing itself a farce, avoid creative discussion. (Freire, 1974, p. 33)

## 1.1. Introduction

For as long as I can remember, I have been fascinated by other peoples' stories. Personal histories, stories of overcoming challenges and traumatic situations, personal and professional growth, helping others, and being change agents in the world. In this thesis document I offer insight into the collective stories of others—20 alumni of a Simon Fraser University (SFU) Master of Education (M.Ed.) program—their stories of change and growth that occurred during and following their master's degree experiences. Conducting the research and making sense of those stories, has been a profound learning experience for me as well and has impacted me both personally and professionally. Throughout this document I draw reference to my own learning journey as a researcher and as an educator as I outline the choice of methodology, the impacts of witnessing the alumni, and the wrestling with the data and ultimate phenomenological presentation of the essence of the alumni's experiences.

My personal and professional life has spanned two continents, and two professional disciplines. I began working in post-secondary education as a junior lecturer 20 years ago for three years following the completion of my education bachelor's degree in East London, England. At that time, I was a mother of young children, and was active in local charities that supported and advocated for children with exceptional needs. Following my M.A. in Education (London), I began taking the lead with classes as a lecturer with undergraduate students and integrated my personal interest of supporting children with exceptional needs into my teaching praxis helping to prepare future grade school educators in London to work in inclusive, diverse classrooms. The exploration

around concepts related to special needs, (dis)ability, and non-neurotypical or atypical lived experiences often resulted in these undergraduate students expressing shifts in their worldviews and ways of being in the world. I did not at that time, relate these profound changes in both myself and others as being expressions of transformative learning but rather natural consequences of participating in higher education. I was, at that time, unaware of transformative learning literature and areas of research. Returning to Canada in 2005, I worked at City University of Seattle in British Columbia as a program director and faculty member for M.Ed. programs and furthered my professional training by completing a M.A. in Counselling Psychology and becoming a Registered Clinical Counsellor (RCC). Through my work as a counsellor, and as a faculty member for counselling programs, I have again witnessed many people describing deep, profound, changes in their worldviews and ways of operating in the world. I began to realize that these changes were both healing and growth orientated for people. As I began my doctorate degree in the autumn of 2012, I began exploring literature on transformative learning and change theories more earnestly and have incorporated that directly into my praxis as both an educator and counsellor. In early 2013, I changed my full-time work joining the British Columbia Institute of Technology (BCIT) as an Instructional Development Consultant (IDC). The IDC work is diverse and includes supporting the teaching faculty and schools at BCIT with program design and review, curricular review and innovation, and faculty educator development. I continue to teach, as an adjunct professor, students who are training to become counsellors (in schools and/or community settings) and have maintained a small private counselling practice for the last ten years.

This thesis research study evolved as a result of multiple interests arising out of the complex web that is my personal and professional background and current work. In this introductory chapter I position myself as a researcher and describe why this study was of interest to me personally and professionally. I then outline the research study in terms of the methodological approach, the research focus, and provide a forecast of the results. I conclude this chapter with a description of the remainder of this thesis document, briefly outlining each of the following chapters.

## 1.2. Positioning myself as researcher

I recognize that my own experiences provide both insight and bias and are integral to the research process. As Clandinin and Connelly (2000) note, “we are in the parade we assume to study” (p. 81). For over 20 years I have been engaged in teaching and learning within faculties of education, both in the UK and in the Greater Vancouver Regional District (GVRD) of British Columbia. Having been a program director and faculty member for two cohort-based M.Ed. programs, I have witnessed over 200 end of program presentations where declarations of personal and/or professional life changes had occurred as a result of the learning throughout the M.Ed. program. Some students spoke of change processes (e.g., specific coursework, reflective self-work, and/or the value of learning alongside peers in a learning community), some spoke of outcomes in terms of their practice as counsellors and how that has influenced them on a personal level (e.g., new abilities to interact, hold space, and build or repair relationships with others, and/or personal healing). For many years, I thought these expressions of transformation were a direct result of the focus of the study as training to be a counsellor requires a significant amount of self-reflection and personal (healing) work. I also imagined that some expressions of change were a result of what I would term ‘completion euphoria’ as these end of program presentations occurred within a few weeks of the completion of all coursework and comprehensive exams. I was curious as to whether such expressions of change and growth were deeply transformative and held true over time. I was also curious about how such changes occurred—whether facilitated or hampered by environmental contexts and specific learning activities.

As I had experienced two Master of Arts programs as a student—one that was a non-cohort modular program, and one that used a cohort approach, my own lived experience of learning with a cohort, strengthened my belief in the social nature of education and the power of learning and growing in a cohort community with others who shared a common purpose. I was curious, therefore, about what influence the learning community had on the master’s students’ abilities to engage in vulnerability, self-reflection, growth, and sharing of their stories and change journeys. These curiosities were central to me as I began this doctoral journey and began developing my research ideas, and deepening my understanding of transformative learning, and learning within a cohort

community. I was curious to explore learning journeys with graduate students who were not training to be counsellors, but who were engaged in reflective work related to their professional practices as educators; I felt that insight may be directly relevant for my work at BCIT in assisting faculty develop as educators, as well as my own praxis as an educator and counsellor.

In my work as an Instructional Development Consultant (IDC), I assist faculty from multiple disciplines in the design of educational programs and I also support faculty in developing their educational practice. One of the workshops I offer is titled *Education is a Relational Endeavour*. In that workshop, I introduce faculty to the value of community development within a classroom, the essential aspect of empowering and witnessing the hearts of the learners when assisting them in their personal and professional growth, as well as the courage it takes to be imperfect as an educator. I have witnessed faculty engage in pedagogical exploration—often for the first time—wrestling with their preconceptions about the purpose and processes of post-secondary education. It is such exploration that I have found so rewarding personally and validating professionally and it also highlights a potential bias I could experience as a researcher—that of focussing more on descriptions of affective and worldview changes and less on technical competence development.

In recognition of how my lived experience provides both insight and various biases, I am aware that my own cultural identity and White race has influenced my worldviews, biases, and experience with privilege and accessibility in society. As an adult, I have lived in both England and Canada, and while I encountered moments of 'othering' due to gender or accent, I have not faced systemic barriers or racism due to my physical appearance of race. My cultural heritage is mixed working class European with three of my grandparents being child immigrants in the early 1900s and the fourth grandparent being a first generation born Canadian. I am the first generation in my extended family to attend post-secondary education. I faced some barriers to access as a young adult due to financial constraints but was able to re-engaged in post-secondary education as a mature adult. This Ph.D. is my fourth degree since becoming a mother—in addition to my own personal developmental trajectory, I have integrated my part identities (Illeris, 2014a, 2014b) of mother, student, educator, and counsellor throughout my professional career. This

complexity has had a direct positive impact on my ability to connect and empathize with the many graduate level students I have been working with over the last 14 years as well as those that were the participants of this study. Personally relating with many of their experiences of juggling work, family, and study commitments, provided a strength to my work as a faculty member, and also—I propose—to this research as I feel my lived experience provided a polyfocal reflective space from where I was able to understand and bring forward the various stories expressed by the participants. I was also aware, and anticipated, that my working-studying-mother experiences may show up as bias when hearing the participants' narratives. I anticipated that through empathy of lived experience, I may pay greater attention to some expressions of challenge and triumph compared to others that may not align with my expectations or experience. I was acutely aware of this possibility and took steps associated with the phenomenological epoché process (Giorgi, 2009; Moustakas, 1994; van Manen, 2014) to ground myself and bracket my biases in a mindful way prior to engaging in interviews as well as throughout the data analysis processes. The process of phenomenological epoché, and my approach as a researcher is described in greater detail in Chapter 3 Methodological Approach of this dissertation.

### **1.3. Description of the study and purpose**

In this section I outline the theoretical foundations, the research questions, purpose, methodological approach, as well as an overview of the findings. My own experiences as an educator, counsellor, and student have informed the design and focus of this research study. I was curious about the stories of working professionals enrolled in graduate studies, their descriptions of change and growth, and insights into the processes and attributes that facilitated such changes (i.e., personal, environmental, and/or learning activities). I was also curious to gain insight into the descriptions of the experience as reflected upon 16-20 months after graduation so as to witness sustained impacts of the learning experience and whether any changes described could be identified as transformative based on the depth and type of change expressed, as well as the lasting nature of the change. Added to this, was a desire to integrate my two disciplines (education and counselling) in both the selection of the study participants and in the methodology employed. The study participants were all professional K-12 educators and alumni of a

M.Ed. program that focussed on educational practice (M.Ed. EP). The M.Ed. EP's focus on inquiry-based practice was of particular interest to me as an educational practitioner, researcher, and in my role as an Instructional Development Consultant working in a faculty development capacity. The methodological approach—phenomenology—I felt resonated with me as a counsellor as the unstructured interview style invites the telling of meaningful experiences while adopting a not-knowing position with the other (van Manen, 2014) which is not too dissimilar from a therapeutic stance. I anticipated that using a phenomenological approach would enable me to remain curious without judgement and be open to the emergent expressions of the participants with minimal influence from myself.

### **1.3.1. Theoretical foundations**

In developing this research study, my focus for the literature reviewed evolved following two directed reading semesters I undertook as part of the Ph.D. program. In one semester I focussed on community of practice learning environments, and during the other semester I focussed on transformative learning research. These areas of study align with my previously stated lived personal and professional experiences and supported me in the study design, phenomenological data collection and interpretation, as well as providing a platform for understanding my own discomfort and ultimate growth throughout this research process.

As I engaged in this study, the literature related to transformative learning theory became the primary theoretical foundation I drew upon for the design and analysis of this research. I reviewed the theoretical development initiated by Jack Mezirow in the late 1970s and developed over the following four decades. From around 2000 to present day, the research into transformative learning has grown in numbers and breadth and this time period is known as the second wave of transformative learning theory development (Taylor & Cranton, 2012). Numerous investigations into the both the processes and outcomes of transformative learning demonstrate a shift from Mezirow's earlier focus on individual cognitive processes (e.g., meaning schemes and perspectives) (Kitchenham, 2008; Mezirow, 1990a, 1991; Taylor, 1997) associated with transformative learning to include more affective, environmental, cultural, and other social and personal considerations (Arends, 2014; Cranton & Taylor, 2012; Dirkx, 1998; Dix, 2016; Gunnlaugson, 2008;

Mälkki, 2012). Emerging in the second wave of transformative learning theory development is an awareness of the pivotal role that others play in facilitating and supporting reflective practices and critical discourse essential for transformative learning to occur (Arends, 2014; Bondy, Tripp & Alvarez Caron, 2012; Brookfield, 2005; Illeris, 2014b; Mezirow, 1991; Taylor & Cranton, 2012). A secondary theoretical foundation of this study is, therefore, related to learning within a community (Hill, 2012; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998) and while this literature is not covered in depth, I integrate some relevant theory and studies into the literature review found in Chapter 2.

### **1.3.2. Research questions**

Adopting a not-knowing stance, I was curious to hear from participants descriptions of their experiences of being a master's degree student in the M.Ed. EP program, and any expressions of sustained changes in their personal and professional lives.

The core research question under investigation in this study is:

- What are the essences of the experience of being a master's student in the M.Ed. Educational Practice degree program?

Sub-questions explored are:

- What are the learning design influences (environmental and activities) that impacted the alumni's experiences as a learner?
- In what ways, if any, do alumni report fundamental, or transformative, changes in their professional practices?
- In what ways, if any, do alumni report fundamental, or transformative, changes in their personal lives?

### **1.3.3. Research purpose**

The purpose of this phenomenological study is to reflectively explore 16-20 months post-graduation with alumni of a M.Ed. program in Educational Practice (M.Ed. EP), their experiences of learning within a professional cohort community. At an institutional level, the outcomes of this study may help justify the educational design of the M.Ed. EP, as this

research study is focussed on shedding light on the lasting professional and personal impacts of a context rich, professional educational experience. For myself, as an educator and as an IDC, gaining insight into the learning activities and context issues that support sustained personal and/or professional growth and change has been helpful for my teaching praxis and in supporting faculty development in my workplace. As a counsellor, hearing the impact of specific, helpful reflective practices has supported my work with clients as they navigate their life challenges, transitions and personal healing. This research has, therefore, multiple uses for myself in my mosaic of personal and professional practices. I am hopeful that education professionals reading this work will likewise find the essences of the experiences outlined in this document (Chapter 4 Findings and Chapter 5 Discussion), useful for their own praxis as educators.

#### **1.3.4. Methodological Approach**

Phenomenology as a research methodology enables researchers to gain a deeper appreciation of a contextualized lived experience (van Manen, 2014). When conducting research in educational settings, phenomenological studies typically describe a collective expression (i.e., feelings, perceptions, lived experience) of a phenomenon experienced by multiple people (Yüksel & Yildirim, 2015). It was such a description of experiences that I wished to explore with the master's students for this study and for that reason, I embarked on a phenomenological approach as I felt it would allow for depth of exploration of the lived experience. Utilizing a phenomenological unstructured interview, I asked three core questions of all participants:

1. Please describe what taking your master's degree meant to you personally and professionally.
2. What would you say were the most memorable, deeply impactful, or otherwise significant learning experiences during your master's program?
3. Learning is often the result of many different factors such as curriculum, past experiences, ideas of others, mediums of instruction, forms of representation, community expectations etc. coming together sometimes in complex and unexpected ways. If you think about your significant learning experiences you've described in this program, how did they come about?

Each interview lasted an hour. I asked follow-up and expansion questions unique for each person based upon their responses to the core questions. Being mindful of my

own biases and expectations was essential so as to not lead the participants, but rather to follow their lead. I believe that my counselling background was helpful in this regard, and I also took time to prepare myself before each interview, engaging in the epoché process, grounding myself and bracketing my biases in a mindful fashion as described by phenomenological researchers such as Giorgi (2009), Moustakas (1994) and van Manen (1990, 2014).

When conducting a phenomenological study, the analysis process is designed to allow for an emergent telling of a common experience. A process of phenomenological reduction (Giorgi, 2009; Moustakas, 1994; van Manen, 2014) allows for finding common themes, and applying those to individual narratives through a process of reauthoring the interview transcript to a narrative (reduction). Comparing the individual reductions to identify the common essence of the experiences expressed by the participants resulted in the telling of the phenomenon of being a master's student in the M.Ed. EP program. The methodology and analysis process are outlined in depth in Chapter 3 Methodological Approach and Chapter 4 Findings.

### **1.3.5. Outcomes and relevance of this research**

Through this research endeavour I was hoping to identify commonalities—the essence of the M.Ed. EP experience—amongst the 20 participants of the study. Due to my own previous experience as a graduate student, and faculty member of M.Ed. programs, I acknowledge that I had some expectations that alumni of the M.Ed. EP program would speak about changes in their practice as well as changes at a personal level. What was of particular interest to me was whether any changes were sustained (i.e., still actioned in their lives 16-20 months after graduation), and whether I could gain insight into how alumni described the mechanisms of change—personal attributes, learning environment, learning activities—so as to better inform my own practice, and that of others seeking to develop transformative learning experiences for their students. Through the process of phenomenological reduction, a common essence of the M.Ed. EP experience emerged. With 20 participants, there were a myriad of descriptions, focussing on specific issues relevant for the individuals, but there also were many commonalities that enabled me to articulate the common phenomenon in terms of meaningful processes and

outcomes. Perhaps because of the heterogeneous nature of the participants (i.e., range of years and context of teaching experiences, range of personal life experiences), there also emerged two similar, but discrete, descriptions of experiences. Some (7/20) described professional and/or personal experiences that aligned closely with transformative learning theory (Mezirow, 1990a, 2000) articulating stories of disorientation, facing dilemmas, wrestling with sense of self, and altered worldviews and actions in the world. Others (13/20) described experiences that articulated feelings of becoming more grounded, affirmed, validated, and/or confident resulting in sustained changes in their professional practices which may more closely align with Illeris' (2014a, 2014b) concept of part-identities transformation.

I imagine the outcomes of this study may add to the second wave of transformative learning literature in terms of recognition of the significance of professional identity to core self (Illeris, 2014a) and how, even if descriptions of change are not articulated at a personal level regarding worldview changes or experiences of significant dilemmas and/or disorientation, that sustained professional identity and practice changes may be seen as a form of transformative learning (Illeris, 2014a, 2014b; Tennant, 2005). Through recognition of sustained change (Mezirow, 1990a, 1991, 2000; Hoggan, 2016), the results of this study may also be useful to the M.Ed. EP faculty and staff as evidence of impact of their program.

## **1.4. Outline of the remainder of this thesis document**

This document is comprised of six chapters. In Chapter 2 Literature Review, I explore the theoretical foundations that influence this research—namely—transformative learning theory, learning within a community, and relevant research that assists in contextualizing the findings of this research. Starting with an overview of transformative learning theory, I outline how the theory has evolved from Mezirow's initial description in the late 1970s through to current, second wave, theory development and research practices. Exploring how transformative learning has been theorized, I describe the concepts of the theory, how and what is transformed for people when they experience transformative learning (e.g., Cranton & Taylor, 2012; Gunnlaugson, 2005, 2007, 2008; Hoggan, 2016; Illeris, 2014a, 2014b; Mälkki, 2010; Tennant, 2005), and how educators

may design their courses to best facilitate transformative outcomes for their students (e.g., Kasworm & Bowles, 2012; Mälkki & Green, 2014; Mezirow, 1990b, 1997, 2000; Taylor & Cranton, 2012). Integrating environmental factors related to learning within a community (Hill, 2012), I draw reference to some of the literature related to community of practice (CoP) learning (Hodge, 2014; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger 1998) and link some of those ideas to the section on educational design for transformative learning. It was my intention that this literature would allow a platform for the analysis of the data while at the same time, providing an insight into areas to be further explored.

In Chapter 3 Methodological Approach, I outline phenomenology as a research method used in this study (Giorgi, 2009; Moustakas, 1994; van Manen, 2014), and provide details of the M.Ed. EP program, the timing of the study, the participants, the data gathering approach and analysis, the multi-stage phenomenological reduction process, as well as ethical considerations. My own wrestling with phenomenology, my lack of confidence and comfort with my own capacity to do justice to the methodology, as well as faithfully honour the participants' stories is discussed. My ethical stance as a researcher, informed by my counselling work, is outlined and I draw reference to the importance of open-hearted witnessing, active listening and reflecting, as well as following up with people when the research evokes high affect in the participants.

In Chapter 4 Findings and Discussion, I further describe the multi-step phenomenological reduction process that I engaged in to enable the emergence of the phenomenon of being a master's student in the M.Ed. EP program to be illuminated. The findings are presented in a phenomenological narrative format starting with a description of the overall common essence of the experience as told by the participants, followed by nuanced expressions of personal and professional changes using four phenomenological reductions, as exemplars of the expressed experiences.

I follow the data presentation with a discussion of the findings in Chapter 5 Discussion. I offer an interpretation of the findings outlined in Chapter 4 drawing reference to the literature reviewed in Chapter 2. In keeping with phenomenology as a methodology, the discussion does not draw reference to individual instances but rather I connect the common essence of the phenomenon of being a student in the M.Ed. EP program to the

literature with specific focus on ways expressions of professional growth and change may be aligned with transformative learning theory.

In Chapter 6 Strengths, Limitations and Recommendations, Summary and Conclusions, I outline the potential contributions and limitations of the research, offer conclusions to consider, as well as a provide a reflection of how the research process has impacted me personally and professionally. While recognizing that research with human subjects is never complete, nor fully comprehensive, I hope that this work may be of use to other education practitioners and serve the M.Ed. EP program staff and faculty as evidence of the long-term, sustained impacts of their program on the master's students and alumni. For myself, the growth I have experienced as a researcher, scholar, and educator has been transformative (in the traditional sense and second wave theory perspective). I have overcome my own discomfort and disorientation, engaged in a process that required self-reflection, vulnerability through being witnessed, critical discourse with my supervisors and other stakeholders. The result is that I have adjusted aspects of my sense of core self, and also altered and enhanced my professional praxis.

I invite you to partake of this research story and hope that there will be something, within these pages, that will be of service to you.

## **Chapter 2. Literature Review**

Transformative learning includes learners making informed decisions of how and when to act upon new perspectives. We have an obligation to assist them to learn how to take the action found necessary by the new perspective. ... [T]his may involve new ways of understanding and using knowledge or new ways of understanding oneself and acting in interpersonal relationships. It may also involve taking individual social action ... or group political action. (Mezirow, 1990a, p. 358)

### **2.1. Introduction**

My educational practice, and this research study, is informed by a long-standing interest in Mezirow's transformative learning theory (1990a, 1990b, 1991, 1997, 1998, 2000, 2003, 2012) as well a diverse range of literature related to learning communities (Hill, 2012; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998) and adult professional learning literature (e.g., Brookfield, 1986, 1990, 1995, 2000, 2005; Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993, 2009). Transformative learning theory has been developing over the last four decades since Jack Mezirow first articulated it in the late 1970s (Baumgartner, 2012; Hodge, 2014; Kitchenham, 2008; Taylor & Snyder, 2012) with adult learning literature evolving since the 1980s onwards to consider the developmental considerations for adult learners (e.g., Brookfield, 1986) as well as specific contextual issues associated with learning environments, situated learning, and communities of practice (Hill, 2012; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998).

These conceptualizations of adult learning are discrete and have developed their own research communities and foci. In the earlier decades of research into transformative learning, the primary focus was on the internal world of the learner as they navigate their awareness of self in "an increasingly conscious and critical relationship with social context" (Hodge, 2014, p. 166)—meaning the individual is assessing the socio-political landscape that has informed their self-identity in various ways. Whereas, situated learning and

community of practice theory and research viewed the social context as the “fundamental learning mechanism” (p. 166) and it is the learning trajectory of individuals within the social context, their developing awareness of identity and the inter-relationships with others that facilitates learning. There are, however, a variety of different types of learning communities beyond, yet inclusive of, Lave and Wenger’s (1991) concept of situated learning and communities of practice. There is continued interest in exploring the communities of practice for continuous professional development in different professions, such as education (e.g., Kimble, Hildreth & Bourdon, 2008), as opposed to the mentoring into a profession which was Lave and Wenger’s focus in their earlier work. These types of learning communities include formal and informal learning environments, as well as a range of modalities from technology absent through to technology facilitated (Hill, 2012).

These different areas of theory development in adult learning developed their own research disciplines and this is represented in much of the literature reviewed on transformative learning and learning communities. One is often researched primarily as a theory of learning (transformative learning) describing processes of individual meaning-making and perception adjustments (Poutiatine, 2009; Tanaka et al., 2014; West, 2014), whereas the other is more typically researched as a context for learning through which individuals engage in a practice-based learning trajectory within a social context (situated learning/community of practice) or in a collaborative inquiry into a shared problem and/or discipline (Kimble, Hildreth & Bourdon, 2008). There is evidence, however, that research into transformative learning over the last two decades in particular, is beginning to broaden away from the exploration of individual cognitive functions to include social context and affective domains in relation to affordances for transformative learning (Baumgartner, 2012; Boden McGill & Kippers, 2012; Cranton & Taylor, 2012; Daloz, 1986; Illeris, 2012, 2014a, 2014b; Kasworm & Bowles, 2012; Kitchenham, 2008; Mezirow, 2000). The literature on learning communities has also developed beyond a focus on practice-based apprenticeship contexts to include a more complex intersection of adult and professional learning theories (Brookfield, 1995; Campbell & Groundwater-Smith, 2010). Additionally, the modalities through which the communities of practice are facilitated have broadened from primarily work-based situated learning to include a diverse range of contexts including, but not limited to, in-class formal programs (Green, Hibbins, Houghton & Ruutz, 2013; Liu & Xu, 2013) and mixed mode cohort learning programs (Kapucu, 2012; Rausch

& Crawford, 2012) to fully online forum uses for problem solving and connection (Ke, Chávez, Causarano & Causarano, 2011; Ma & Yuen, 2011; Pratt & Black, 2013; Tu & Mclsaac, 2002).

Despite these disparities, I believe there are some complementary and mutually informative theoretical foundations and practices between these transformative learning and community of practice literatures. For example, they both arguably draw on aspects of adult learning theory albeit they appear to focus on different mechanisms for explaining and evaluating learning that results in personal and/or professional development and changes. Transformative learning theorists appear to have focussed more on the individual developmental and intellectual capacities to engage in the critical self-reflection required for transformative learning (Arends, 2014; Brookfield, 1995; Dix, 2016; Mezirow, 1990b, 1991), whereas learning community literature appears to be more focussed on pedagogical and contextual factors that lead to worldview broadening and professional identity development (Bondy, et al., 2012; Hill, 2012; Wenger, 1998). In support of the idea that these theories may be mutually informative, however, Hodge (2014) positions his argument that practice-based learning can be analyzed in light of both theories—transformative learning and situated learning—and that transformative learning may be viewed as a form of “inter-practice phenomenon” (p. 167) when an individual is confronted with conflicting assumptions that are associated with social and/or professional practices that result in transformative learning. That is, transformative learning occurs within the learning trajectory process referred to by community of practice literature. Others, such as Cranton and Taylor (2012), Tanaka et al. (2014), and West (2014) look to evaluate whether transformative learning may be a lens through which to explore the efficacy of pedagogical practices. More recently, the different disciplines noted above are researching more into the affective domain in education and the roles that relationships, context and emotions play in learning (Fisher-Yoshida, Geller & Schapiro, 2009; Illeris, 2007, 2012; Jordi, 2011; Kasl & Yorks, 2012; Lange, 2018 ).

In this literature review, I am drawing on the scholarship from transformative learning as well as learning community research disciplines to provide a platform from which to explore the expressed experiences of teachers 16-20 months post-graduation from a Master of Education in Educational Practice (M.Ed. EP) program. Because the

M.Ed. EP program has been designed as a community of practice (Hill et al., 2019; Hill & MacDonald, 2016) I also reference CoP literature related to the design of adult educational programs.

I start this literature review with a brief outline of transformative learning theory and how the theory has been developing over time. Using Mezirow's (1990b) phase theory, I explore the processes involved in transformative learning—specifically the processes of critical reflection, reflective discourse, and transformative action. This is followed by a review of literature that proposed what is transformed through the processes of transformative learning—aspects of self, identity (Illeris, 2014a; Tennant, 2005), along with altered ways of thinking about, and being in the world (Mezirow, 1990b, 2012; Illeris, 2014a). This is followed by a review research that has been conducted using transformative learning as both a conceptual and analytical lens to evaluate formal education outcomes. I then explore ways to design transformative and professional learning opportunities. This includes a discussion of communities of practice theory and how that is relevant for this research study.

## **2.2. Transformative learning**

In this section of the literature review I provide a brief outline of the philosophical and theoretical background of transformative learning as an evolving discipline. A discussion of relevant research studies that have used transformative learning theory as an evaluative lens is presented, followed by proposals for pedagogical design considerations that support transformative learning which have been proposed by researchers in the field.

### **2.2.1. Background of transformative learning theory**

Jack Mezirow is arguably the founding father of transformative learning theory, which has evolved over the past four decades (Kitchenham, 2008). The Initial theory (published in 1978) revolved around a phased approach that although the theory was not considered completely linear, as shown in Table 2.1 below, it did have a sequential aspect that outlined steps the learner was expected to go through in order for transformative

learning to occur. In this initial presentation of his theory, Mezirow described transformative learning as resulting from a critical self-awareness of how and where one's assumptions have dictated relationships with others and actions in the world, and then making changes to knowledge, beliefs, and actions to become more inclusive and integrative of new meaning perspectives.

**Table 2.1 Mezirow's Ten Phases of Transformative Learning (1978)**

Phase 1	A disorientating dilemma
Phase 2	A self-examination with feelings of guilt or shame
Phase 3	A critical assessment of epistemic, sociocultural, or psychic assumptions
Phase 4	Recognition that one's discontent and the process of transformation are shared and that others have negotiated a similar change
Phase 5	Exploration of options for new roles, relationships, and actions
Phase 6	Planning of a course of action
Phase 7	Acquisition of knowledge and skills for implementing one's plans
Phase 8	Provisional trying of new roles
Added in early 1990s	Renegotiating relationships and negotiating new relationships
Phase 9	Building of competence and self-confidence in new roles and relationships
Phase 10	A reintegration into one's life on the basis of conditions dictated by one's perspective

Note: Reset from Kitchenham, 2008, p. 105.

Over the following decade Mezirow adjusted the description of his theory to more clearly articulate an iterative or multi-dimensional concept that focuses more on critical self-reflection of assumptions (Kitchenham, 2008) and this is shown by his adding 11<sup>th</sup> phase "renegotiating relationships and negotiating new relationships" between the original phases 8 and 9. In the early 1990s, Mezirow's transformative learning theory was outlined as a theory for adult learning in two specific texts; *Fostering Critical Reflection in Adulthood* (Mezirow & Associates, 1990) and *Transformative Dimensions of Adult Learning* (Mezirow, 1991). In Mezirow's (1991) text he articulates his philosophical foundation and rationales which include constructivist assumptions for knowledge acquisition, humanist psychology to explain how individuals interact in the world, and critical social theory as a mechanism through which individuals need to confront dominate and oppressive discourses in order for transformative learning to occur. He describes two dimensions of learning as being 'meaning schemes' (interpretative rules and expectations based on prior knowledge of cause-effect) and, 'meaning perspectives' which are higher-order

conceptualizations and personal filters about situations and new information which are based on assumptions developed through lived experience. For transformative learning to occur, an individual must experience a 'disorientating event' or 'crisis' that requires them to wrestle with new ideas and examine critically how those concepts fit with their existing meaning perspectives. It is hypothesized by Mezirow (1990a, 1991) that this will result in critical reflection and an expanding worldview or 'perspective transformation'. In 1995 Mezirow further clarified the differences between meaning schemes and meaning perspectives and their relationship to transformation when he articulated three different types of reflection (Mezirow, 1990b). Content reflection refers to reflection on what was done before in order to create new learning. Process reflection refers to reflection on how things were done before (the actions) in order to predict cause and effect of new actions. Both of these reflection types relate to 'straightforward transformation' of meaning schemes. Premise reflection relates to reflection on one's value system within the socio-cultural context of a specific situation. By considering this larger view, individuals may transform meaning perspectives resulting in what Mezirow terms "profound transformation" (Kitchenham, 2008, p. 114-115).

The focus of theoretical discussion and research into transformative learning during the first few decades of theory development was, therefore, predominately focussed on individuals' rational and cognitive aspects of learning, and definitions of critical reflection. That is, what catalysts were involved in enabling critical reflection to occur, and how individuals 'made sense' of or 'reflected' on the disorientating event, or crisis (Taylor, 1997). Mezirow further clarified 'assumption reflection' in 1998 by describing the difference between 'objective reframing' of assumptions which may result from dialogue or taking action to explore ideas, and 'subjective reframing' of assumptions which requires critical self-reflection on the core premises by which assumptions came to be in the first place. It is this subjective reframing of assumptions that is aligned more directly with premise reflection, which in turn, is more directly related to profound transformation (Kitchenham, 2008). Although Mezirow did refer to the need to be aware of context, environment, and individuals' variables in his earlier discussion of the theory, these did not appear to be accounted for in the 'meaning making perspective' first proposed nor did these issues seem to be considered in research that utilized Mezirow's theory until the mid-1990s onward when aspects of subjectivity were explored more explicitly.

As noted by Clark and Wilson (1991), amongst others, in order to be more holistic and truly reflective of adult meaning making and perspective shifting, Mezirow's theory needed to make more explicit the consideration of the puzzling aspects of environment and human predispositions or characteristics, such as the role that context, social, cultural, and individual characteristics play in learning. In 1997 Mezirow wrote an article titled *Transformative learning: Theory to practice* in which he provided guidance for adult educators to assist their students in challenging their frames of reference to become "more inclusive, discriminating, self-reflective, and integrative of experience" (p. 5). In this article he describes that it is vital that learners recognize their own frames of reference and develop ways to redefine problems from alternative viewpoints. He describes the role of critical discourse as being essential for transformative learning and espouses that educators need to create situations where learners are able to engage in discourse that is free from judgement and coercion. The ideal conditions for discourse include opportunities for all to take on different roles in the discourse (e.g., advancing ideas, challenging, defending, assessing evidence), as well as being open to others' perspectives, empathically hearing others, finding common ground or synthesizing perspectives, and identifying ways forward. It is incumbent upon the adult educator to create opportunities for an adult form of discovery learning, whereby the learners are able to problem solve, participate in reflective discourse, and apply learning in real life contexts. It is from such experiences, Mezirow (1997) contends, that opportunities for critical reflection on assumptions and meaning perspective transformation will occur.

A number of researchers and theorists have taken up the challenge to shed light on how transformative learning theory can be expanded upon to incorporate context and other human dimensions beyond the cognitive (Cranton & Taylor, 2012; Jordi, 2011; Lawrence, 2012; Taylor & Snyder, 2012), and, as discussed by theorists in Taylor and Cranton's (2012) edited book, transformative learning theory has evolved to include situated, relational, and post-modern theories and understandings as well as critical social theory and feminist theory. According to Gunnlaugson (2008) and others (Arends, 2014; Cranton & Taylor, 2012; Dix, 2016), we are now in a second wave of transformative learning theory development where the focus is moving beyond individual critical reflection (i.e., sense of disorientation and guilt/shame) proposed necessary for transformative learning (Table 2.1 above), to include an expansion of theoretical proposals which indicate

that reflection of environment and not just self, may develop an awareness of contextual, social, cultural, relational, individual influences, and non-individual impacts, that may facilitate transformative processes and outcomes (Arends, 2014; Dix, 2016).

### **2.2.2. Beyond the cognitive and discursive beginning of transformative learning theory**

In this section of the literature review I discuss a selection of literature which is relevant to my research study. Firstly, I discuss pre-requisites to engage in transformative learning as noted by theorists and researchers in the field. This is followed by a description of transformative learning processes—critical reflection, rational discourse, and social action. This section of the literature review is concluded with a discussion of what changes for people when they experience transformative learning—what is transformed.

#### ***Emotional consciousness and readiness for change***

There is a commonly known saying; *You can lead a horse to water, but you cannot make it drink*. I believe the same can be said about transformative learning. As an educator, one can develop a curriculum to enable transformative learning, but ultimately, it is up to the learners whether they wish to, or are able to, engage in the activities, critical reflection, and self work required for such learning to occur.

Emotional readiness to reflect on crisis moments (a requirement of transformative learning) has been studied by psychologists for over a century (Illeris, 2014a) and, as such, some theorists (e.g., Moore, 2005) are considering psychological change models to be similar to transformative learning. For example, the Transtheoretical Model of the Stages of Change (TTM) proposed by Prochaska in 1979 has been utilized by psychotherapists for the last four decades to explain clients' conscious and emotional capacities for operationalizing change in their lives (Prochaska & Norcross, 2018). Moore (2005) compared the TTM to Mezirow's transformative learning theory. He concluded that the two models are compatible in that they both recognize there is a catalyst needed to prompt a conscious awareness that change is needed to resolve the dilemma or crisis. According to Moore, whether individually driven, or facilitated by another (e.g., teacher, counsellor, friend), being mindful of the TTM with the focus on conscious and emotional

awareness, will assist people experiencing critical reflective processes through their transformative learning journeys. As a practicing clinical counsellor, the understanding I have of the TTM partially aligns with Moore's contention of the process of change in that consciousness raising is important for sustainable and purposeful change to happen. Having reviewed such work, however, I believe utilizing the TTM for transformative learning is confounding two disciplines. It is important to note that the TTM is meant to be a guide for psychotherapists as to the types of interventions and therapeutic modalities that may assist people in enacting change depending on what their underlying issues are—it is not a guide for educators—and that, ultimately, it is a person's readiness for change that will enable change (transformative or otherwise) to happen (Prochaska & Norcross, 2018). As noted by Mezirow (2012):

Critical reflection in the context of psychotherapy focuses on assumptions regarding feelings pertaining to interpersonal relationships; in adult education its focus is on an infinitely wider range of concepts and their accompanying cognitive, affective, and conative dimensions. This distinction is important in differentiating between these two fields. Subjective reframing commonly involves an intensive and difficult emotional struggle as old perspectives become challenged and transformed. A mindful transformative learning experience requires that the learner make an informed and reflective decision to act on his or her reflective insight. (p. 87).

To me, recognizing the differences between transformative life experiences—perhaps processed therapeutically—and transformative educational experiences is important and requires an ethical stance as an educator to not push students to analyze situations beyond the capacity to appropriately support such insight orientated processes. Ways to safely assist participants in educational settings to be ready to engage in change processes is something transformative learning theorists have been exploring over the last several decades and is discussed further in Sections 2.2.3 and 2.3 below.

Supporting the concept of the need to be ready for change, Mälkki (2010) theorized a challenge to critical reflection as the driver of transformative learning using Mezirow's theory and Damasio's neurobiological theory on emotions and consciousness (cited in Mälkki, 2010) and how those relate to one's ability to moderate one's emotional field in order to reflect. The premise is that reflection requires some prerequisite states of being. Damasio's theory emphasizes the role that the body plays in enabling a sense of

conscious 'safety' in order for exploration of emotions (conflict) and therefore, reflection, to occur (Mälkki, 2010). Others, such as Dirkx (2008) explore how adult learning is connected more to emotional and imaginative capacities as opposed to the cognitive and rational as espoused by Mezirow. By becoming more conscious of the basis of emotional responses, individuals are able to engage in reflective practice that result in new perspectives and understandings (Dirkx, 1998). Mezirow (2012) cites Goleman (1998) as recognizing the need for "emotional intelligence—knowing and managing one's emotions, motivating oneself, recognizing emotions in others, and handling relationships—as well as clear thinking" (p. 79) as being the core to emotional maturity required for transformative learning.

In an attempt to better understand the mechanisms (emotional and social) that launch reflection from a transformative perspective, Mälkki (2012) conducted a study to identify how the cognitive dimension (Mezirow, 1991) and the emotional dimension (Dirkx, 2008) relate to one another in the process of reflection. The author investigated this 'launching pad' or catalyst by exploring "the ways in which a disorientating dilemma may (or may not) launch reflection" (Mälkki, p. 209). Specially, the author focussed on the emotional and social dimensions of the relation between a disorientating dilemma and reflection. Using a real-life crisis that individuals may not have prior experience to draw upon (involuntary childlessness), and therefore may not have prior assumptions about the experience, she was able to differentiate between reflective processes that follow a crisis in personal life versus a crisis in facilitated educational setting. The subjectivity of the reflective experience for the individual was found to be influenced by the context of the situation (how they came to experience childlessness), and the emotional readiness to process the crisis. Transformation was at times seen as the 'end point' and for others as 'the process.' Mälkki's (2012) study highlights that the analysis of the reflective moments needs to be done in light of context, with an understanding of the emotional readiness involved in crisis or dilemma reflection, in order to more accurately identify transformative moments. In some instances, the process of recognizing the changes occurring in one's life result in worldview and perspective transformations without the need to actually live through a specific crisis.

The requirement to be aware of both internal and external influencers on transformative learning is an area of continued study (Taylor & Cranton, 2012). An example of such study is Gunnlaugson (2005) who endeavoured to develop the transformative learning framework, indicating in his theoretical ponderings how Mezirow's ideas could be more comprehensive, more holistic, incorporating aspects of context. In 2005, he utilized Wilber's integrative AQAL metatheory exploring four quadrants for "integral transformative practice" (p. 333). This framework calls upon individuals to consciously recognize influences that shape their learning and development. These are 1) intentional internal characteristics, 2) externalized individual behaviours, 3) internal collective (cultural) influences, and 4) external collective (social) influences. He contends that it is by recognizing these various biases and perspectives, learners' "opportunities for learning about oneself, others, and the world grow in a more comprehensive fashion" (p. 334). Such awareness both internal and external contextual issues has also been explored in the study by Mälkki and Lindblom-Ylänne (2012) when they examined the relationship between critical reflection and conscious action in teaching. They aimed to identify where there are barriers experienced by teachers specifically related to their practice. They explored why teachers do not change their practice even though they want to, or can see good reason to, as well as the instances where 'bridges' enabled critical reflection to result in action (akin to transformation in professional practice). This study provides some practical considerations for the teaching context and considerations for critical self-reflection that, on the face of it due to the conscious awareness of need for change and possibilities of change, could have resulted in transformative changes in professional practices, but did not. Providing support to enable empowerment of the teachers appeared to be key in this study—this involves both institutional (context) issues as well as the setting where critical self-reflection took place.

It is such emotional readiness that Mandell and Herman (2007) identified in their case studies which explored, from the perspective of the learners, the external and internal influences that impacted their abilities to engage in transformative learning. The authors note that transformative learning requires finding a balance (or space) between the academy and real-life where it is 'safe' to explore theories/ideas in relation to real world understanding and/or practice. They query what draws some students to particular areas of inquiry citing that it is typically a personal interest and/or previous (or ongoing)

experience. It is because of the personal relationship between the learning and the experience that

sometimes making these connections in the academy is not safe. Sometimes students choose to study material from their lives that is inherently risky because it is personally troubling and intellectually bewildering (Herman & Mandell, 2006). Alienation from the familiar (Kegan, 1994, p. 272) and the disorienting dilemma (Mezirow, 1991, p. 168) may be necessary conditions for significant transformation. Such studies can be rich with consequences. They also stress the balance between life and learning. (Mandell & Herman, 2007, p. 340)

Mandell and Herman (2007) identified that sound tutorial practices, open dialogue, and curiosity as being techniques for facilitating deeper thought and exploration for the students. Through these processes, worldview and professional practice changes occurred for the students as a result of being willing and enabled to challenge themselves both theoretically and in terms of their ethical/moral/lived way of being. The authors go onto to conclude that there are roles that the institution and faculty play in enabling (or allowing) flexibility within the confines of academia and degree quality rigour. They acknowledge that although it is incumbent upon adult educators to create safe learning environments in which the conditions necessary for transformative learning are fostered, there are external factors that influence learners too, and that ultimately, it is the learners who make the leap:

Our final thought is cautionary and hopeful. One might conclude that a proper worldview, a flexible institution, and a skilled faculty are sufficient conditions for producing learning that matters. However, it is necessary to pause and acknowledge it is the students—who they are, what they want, how they live—that hugely affect possibilities for learning. The experiences the students unpredictably bring into the academy evoke and stimulate the content and pathways of the inquiry. (p. 351)

In addition to emotional and psychological readiness and ability to contextualize both internal and external factors in perspective development, Merriam (2004) contends that there is a baseline level of cognitive development that is required for transformative learning to occur stating that “[a]lthough cognitive development can be seen as an outcome of transformative learning, I argue that mature cognitive-development is foundational to engaging in critical reflection and rational discourse necessary for

transformational learning” (p. 65). Mezirow himself conceded that transformative learning may not be within the reach of everyone—at least, not at all times. Notwithstanding the need for physiological wellbeing, Mezirow has noted that there are preconditions for transformative learning which include “elements of maturity, education, safety, health, economic security, and emotional intelligence” (2012, p. 82). Merriam, in her argument, notes that age does not equal cognitive maturity and that without mature cognitive development two components necessary for transformative learning (i.e., critical reflection and rational/reflective discourse) will not be possible as these processes require firstly, the ability to self-reflect at a metacognitive level to understand one’s own premises upon which situations have been defined by oneself, and secondly, the act of rational and reflective discourse with others “assumes the ability to examine alternative perspectives, without premature judgment, and basically to think dialectically, a characteristic of mature cognitive development” (Merriam, 2004, p. 61). Similarly, Dix (2016) stated that “[a]ctively confronting perceived limitations or inadequacies of one’s frame of reference is the crucial metacognitive motivation and cognitive dynamic of transformative learning” (p. 156). This ability to be able to think dialectically, and engage in critical reflective discourse, as a form of advanced or mature adult cognitive development, has been shown to be linked to higher levels of education—such as graduate and professional education (King & Kitchener, 1994; Wilson, 1996), as well as with increasing age in adulthood through to middle-age, with indicators that the ability for “critical rationality” (Mezirow, 2003) are rarely noted in adults before thirty or forty years of age (Kegan, 1994; Mezirow, 1991).

### ***Processes of transformative learning***

As outlined above, in order to engage in the process of transformative learning, it is theorized that an individual needs to have some prerequisites characteristics—a readiness to change, an adult level of emotional intelligence, and a mature level of cognitive development. In this section, I further explore the processes of transformative learning—critical reflection, reflective discourse, and social action—as they pertain to transformative learning within an educational context.

## **Critical reflection**

The act of critical reflection, whereby one challenges one's own preconceptions, thoughts, values, biases and assumptions has, arguably, been the foundation of the first wave of transformative learning theory and continues to be a focus of second wave theory (Arends, 2014; Dix, 2016; Gunnlaugson, 2005; Merriam, 2004). As defined by Mezirow, "[r]eflection enables us to correct distortions in our beliefs and errors in problem solving. Critical reflection involves a critique of the presuppositions on which our beliefs have been built" (Mezirow, 1990b, p. 1). Brookfield (1995) describes different forms of reflection, all may be useful for day to day activities, but not all of them being what would be termed 'critical reflection' as relevant for transformative learning. Some levels of reflection are more relevant to reviewing processes (i.e., teaching tools or strategies), others may be almost automatic or non-conscious and related to the everyday technical decisions that we make. These two forms of reflection are descriptions of what Mezirow (1990b) termed reflection in 'thoughtful action' which involves a brief "pause to reassess by asking, What am I doing wrong? ... Reflection may thus be integral to deciding how best to perform or may involve an ex post facto reassessment. When applied to a problem and deciding how best to perform immediately, reflection becomes an integral element of thoughtful action" (p. 6). When ex post facto reflection focuses on the "presupposition on the basis of which the problem has been posed" (Mezirow, 1990b, p. 6), that is considered to be the type of critical reflection from which transformative learning can occur as it evaluates core beliefs and prior held meaning perspectives.

Dix (2016) queried the requirement for critical reflection to be focussed on self-examination (as per Mezirow's Phase 2 of his model). He proposes that a "focus on the problematic situation might be just as emotionally intense, disorienting, critically exploratory, and metacognitively critical of previous ways of thinking ...[and] that involvement in things 'bigger than oneself' can be life changing even when those things are not 'about' one's life or self" (p. 143). If that is the case, the possibility is raised that there are other forms of critical reflection that may also lead to transformative learning. Others (e.g., Brigham, 2011; Fisher-Yoshida et al., 2009; Illeris, 2007; Jordi, 2011; Kasl & Yorks, 2012; Lange, 2018) express how embodied learning may offer opportunities for critical reflection noting that reflection may not be solely cerebral and may include imagination, emotion and intuition which can "facilitate a learning dialogue between our

implicit embodied experience and conceptual aspects of our consciousness” (Jordi, 2011, p. 181) or left-right brain integration (Lange, 2018). Drawing reference to the literature on experiential learning and learning cycles (e.g., scholars such as Dewey, Piaget, and Kolb), Jordi notes that reflection has been studied for decades within various proposed models of learning. Whether the ‘pause and reflect’—as learning or afterwards—equates with transformative level learning is not something that was espoused within these theories specifically, but rather it was proposed that the act of reflection was part of human learning. This could, arguably, be focussed on task or concept level learning (i.e., Mezirow’s meaning scheme or process level learning), and not necessarily related to challenging deeper held assumptions, beliefs, and values which inform choices about how such tasks or concepts are actioned in the world. Lange (2018) indicates that transformative learning can be explored through a relational ontology drawing reference to concepts related to quantum physics as well as Indigenous knowledge when she argues for a holistic approach to transformative education that “addresses the whole person—body, mind, emotion, spirit, and will” (p. 291) that will enable a right and left brain integration connecting a conscious insight with an embodied awareness to open “a significant channel of energy and knowing” (p. 291). She contends that as transformative learning theory evolves, more attention to the processes of critical reflection is needed to explore further the roles that emotions, and whole person learning—in addition to critical reflection and dialogue—play in transformative learning. She proposes that such a holistic approach is beyond the cognitive approach to critical reflection and requires a nudging and opening of energy fields to experience perturbations that may result in a chaos state—the ‘dilemma’—identified in Mezirow’s theory. This is echoed in the words of Fisher-Yoshida et al. (2009) when they wrote that the “extrarational body, spirit, and emotion/feeling” (p. 290) are often as prominent in transformative learning as the rational and cognitive dimensions.

Highlighting some challenges with fostering critical reflection for transformative learning, Taylor and Laros (2014) quote Boud and Walker’s 1998 research review when they note often research studies indicate that education that has been designed for critical reflection often presents evidence that is not clear that any depth of reflection has occurred or that the “reality falls very far short of the rhetoric” (Boud & Walker, 1998 cited in Taylor & Laros, 2014, p. 143). Taylor and Laros (2014) indicate that critical reflection requires three dimensions—purpose, focus, and process—and that it is possible that many

educational situations focus more on the process of reflection, without adequate enabling of engagement with the purpose (or goal), and focus (thoughts, feelings, emotions). The result may be that students treat reflection as a technical or intellectual exercise which may downplay, or bypass, emotional awareness. From an educational lens, Brookfield (1995) contends that for teachers engaged in reflection, in order for it be deemed 'critical reflection' teachers need to challenge their thinking on two fronts. The first is the illumination of power dynamics within the classroom and in education generally, and the second is on uncovering the hegemonic assumptions held by society about teaching and the purpose and processes of education. This is aligned with Mezirow's development of his theory which was based on his awareness of change happening through the feminist movement in the 1970s and the work of Paulo Freire (1970, 1974). Likewise, Hart (1990) wrote of the liberation that occurs through consciousness raising experiences that can occur when oppression is recognized and challenged within relatively homogenous groups that ensure personal experiences can be shared in a mutually safe way. Similarly, Bondy et al. (2012, p. 18) cite Bakhtin's 1981 work that examines the concept of "ideological becoming" whereby one develops an ideological self or worldview through processes akin to Mezirow's description of transformative learning—critical reflection, and discourse with others exploring the problem or topic of focus. The struggle or conflict that can trigger critical reflection is proposed to be something that is worked through in discourse with others, within an open and emotionally safe environment, and not necessarily concepts wrestled with on a solely individual level (Bondy et al., 2012).

The concepts of critical reflection that leads to transformative learning have developed beyond Mezirow's (1978) initial theory of the individualized, and predominately cognitive, phases of transformative learning (shown in Table 2.1 earlier). While many researchers have espoused the need to consider more holistic ways in which individuals may engage in critical reflection beyond the cognitive dimensions, facilitating such reflection within an education setting remains a challenge due to the nature and diversity of learners in any given learning environment (Bondy et al., 2012; Taylor & Laros, 2014). As noted by Mezirow (1990a) and in later publications, transformative learning requires critical discourse to challenge and assist with the development of new meaning perspectives. In addition to the critical reflection conducted on an individual level, transformative learning is now proposed to be, at least partially, enabled through

collaborative and meaningful discourse within a safe, equitable, and collaborative environment with peers (Ball & Freeman, 2004; Schapiro, 2009) followed by action (Dirkx, 1998; Mezirow, 1990a). It is this concept of reflective discourse that I explore next.

### **Reflective discourse**

Because critical reflection is a process of testing the justification or validity of taken-for-granted premises, the role of dialogue becomes salient. It is through dialogue that we attempt to understand—to learn—what is valid in the assertions made by others and attempt to achieve consensual validation for our own assertions. (Mezirow, 1990a, p. 354)

As stated by Mezirow (1990b, 1991), and others (e.g., Brookfield, 2005; Illeris, 2014a; Taylor & Cranton, 2012), in addition to critical reflection, “transformative learning involves rational discourse and applying reason ... when assessing the social, historical, and personal factors present in transformative learning” (Arends, 2014, p. 359). Similar to the proponents of widening the concepts of critical reflection, there are those that challenge the term ‘rational’ when applied to discourse associated with transformative learning (Arends, 2014). The premise is that following an experience that sparks critical reflection, engaging in dialogue will enable an individual to try on various lenses of ‘rationality’ that will facilitate personal perspective challenging and adapting, leading to transformative learning (Illeris, 2014b). The processes of transformative learning (Mezirow, 1991) including rational discourse, planning for altered ways of being, adapting relationships, and actioning new ways of being in the world, may also suggest that there are some ways of viewing the world that are better than others (i.e., there is a universal truth). Arends (2014) noted, there have been some challenges to this concept of rationality, claiming that post-modern scholars critique rationality for its claims of universal truths, which may undermine perspectives that are alternative to the dominate discourse. She argued that in designing transformative learning curriculum, the educator’s agenda to facilitate the discussion to lead toward concepts of enlightenment, empowerment, or social justice, may actually impose a dominate Western liberal perspective on situations and challenges. The risk, proposed by Arends, is that such agendas—hidden or otherwise—run the risk of subjugating the learners which may further enforce a dominate perception of ‘truth’.

Habermas suggested (1984) that authentic dialogue promotes equity by the very nature of enabling access to truth. Arends (2014) expands this by stating “the practice of dialogue has the capacity to promote not only relationships but also equity, a common goal of transformative learning” (p. 363). Bondy et al. (2012), when considering educational settings where transformative dialogue is desired, noted there must be characteristics of gentleness as well as courage demonstrated by the educator. Being gentle refers to the act of deep listening, with unconditional positive regard or acceptance for the other, witnessing others, acknowledging their struggles, and offering silence to enable the speaker space to explore their ideas, asking thoughtful questions based on curiosity and not judgement. The courage, or being brave, characteristic refers to being willing to take pedagogical risks with students. The very nature of “intentionally destabilizing participants’ taken-for-granted beliefs ... risks placing oneself and the students in the uncertain and uncomfortable arena of student resistance” (Bondy et al., p. 24). It is probable that when educators model such dialogic processes, the students in the class are supported and facilitated in engaging in safe, collaborative, exploratory dialogue with each other. The participation in the mutual sharing of personal and professional stories can enable a holistic view of the practice, each other, as well as provide a medium through which individuals are challenged to reflect upon their narratives, and how they have made sense of them both cognitively and somatically (Dirkx, 1998; Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2007; Stroud, Prindle & England, 2012). The disjuncture that may arise is one of that can create a transformative learning environment that “supports and honors the experiences of students, encourages connectedness in the learning environment, instills a value of reflective learning, and empowers adult learners to trust their stories and expand them through reflective and shared learning experiences” (Merriam et al., 2007, p. 67).

Brookfield (1995), in writing about how to facilitate critical conversations between teachers, outlined how critical reflection and discourse are connected. He suggested that critical reflection is a social process. “It happens best when we enlist colleagues to help us see our practice in new ways. For many teachers, the best chance they have to learn critical reflection is through conversations with peers” (p. 141). This act of sharing stories, narratives of practice, moments of discomfort and vulnerability, and having critical reflective discourse with colleagues aligns with the broader, holistic concepts of critical

reflection (Fisher-Yoshida et al, 2009; Illeris, 2007; Jordi, 2011; Lange, 2018) and reflective critical discourse outlined earlier (Dirkx, 1998; Merriam et al., 2007; Stroud et al., 2012) and indicates that transformative learning, can be—at least in part—facilitated through social learning strategies and not constrained to the individuals' cognitive reflective practices. The sharing of stories also suggests that there is an iteration to the process. That is, individuals would go away from that experience and reflect further, perhaps try out new ideas, come back together and discuss again (i.e., phases five onwards of Mezirow's transformative learning process shown in Table 2.1 earlier).

The idea of iteration in critical reflection and dialogue has been explored further by others including Gunnlaugson (2007), who built on his earlier work (2005) to continue his exploration of conscious self awareness in relation to transformative learning. He outlined four fields of generative dialogue with others and how those are related to self-reflection. The fields of generative dialogue involve traditional cycles of dialogue (action and critical reflection) supplemented by a third cycle of meta-awareness. He proposed that it is from the meta-awareness dialogic position that individuals' higher levels of consciousness may be developed. He proposed that through generative recursive dialogue with others the members of the group learn “to explore the subtle, emergent territory of learning, which tends not to be immediately recognizable to others who adhere to conventional standards of group discourse (e.g., task-based learning or critical reflection)” (p. 145) and this enables, over time, the capacity to operate from higher levels of consciousness. Through the medium of generative dialogue, and developing expanded states of consciousness, Gunnlaugson (2007) ponders whether a disorientating dilemma is necessary for transformative learning (as proposed by Mezirow's theory), or whether deep perspective transformations can occur through contemplative practices and dialogic processes.

Critical reflection and discourse are, therefore, acknowledged by many theorists as part of the process of transformative learning, but the catalysts for critical reflection and the object of that reflection are proposed as including constructs broader than one's own beliefs and may include an acknowledgement of external dilemmas such as environmental, societal, organizational oppressive or unjust practices that require change. Awareness, while essential, does not in of itself lead to transformative change. According

to Mezirow (1990a; 1991), in order for transformative learning to occur, a level of action and enacting change is needed too.

### **Transformative action**

As noted by Mezirow (1990a), critical reflection and reflective discourse alone do not equate to transformative learning. “Acting upon these emancipatory insights, a praxis, is also necessary” (p. 354) and may be “epistemic, sociocultural, or psychological in nature” (p. 355). Sociocultural action may involve standing up to, or challenging, institutionalized oppressions or systems, and often involves a collective political action at the community level (Brookfield, 2000; West, 2014), or it may be more individualized, such as action to improve/change interpersonal relationships or taking corrective measures within workplaces (Mezirow, 1990a). Mezirow explained that for epistemic and psychological distortions, the action will likely also require adaptations in social behaviour but may be more specific to how individuals judge situations and interact with others based on their perspective changes and how those have influenced personal worldview and sense of core self. Noted by Mezirow are the comments by Habermas (1984) as defining epistemic and psychological actions as being focussed on communicative competence with Bowers clarifying this type of action as being “the individual’s ability to negotiate meanings and purposes instead of passively accepting the social realities defined by others” (1984, cited in Mezirow, 1990a, p. 355). Within formal education settings, Mezirow reiterates that transformative learning doesn’t end in the classroom, and that:

There is a major difference between learning to negotiate meanings and purposes, realizing values for oneself, and validating one’s personal beliefs through reflective dialogue and the task of learning to successfully overcome oppressing power in one’s external world through social action. (p. 356)

Action, as it relates to transformative learning is, therefore, arguably unique to each circumstance and learner and may be influenced by environmental factors (e.g., safety, timing, lack of information) and personal factors (e.g., emotional readiness/capacity, lack of skill) (MacKeracher, 2012; Mezirow, 1990a; Taylor & Cranton, 2012).

The transformative learning processes—critical self-reflection, dialogue, and action—described by authors noted above, recognize that transformative learning theory

is an evolving theory and that there are researchers and educators that seek ways to widen its applicability. There are also those who disagree with the belief that transformative learning theory is effective and the right way forward within educational settings. Bowers (2005) for example, provides a critique about western globalization and the dominate culture that results in desire for continual transformation. Bowers analyzes critical pedagogy (e.g., Freire, 1970, 1974) and aligns the misconceptions around critical reflection in terms of cultural embeddedness. He states that what is lacking (or holes) in transformative learning theory are overlooked by those with power, due to the desire for quantifying a sense of transformation without recognizing that there are other ways for individuals to experience transformation and change that are more culturally appropriate. It is with such critiques in mind that I explore what is considered transformed as a result of transformative learning experiences.

### ***The nature of transformation in transformative learning***

In an article published in 2014, West takes the reader on a journey, exploring the different aspects of a person that transform while challenging the limitations of the predominate cognitive understanding of transformative learning and incorporating a more holistic view of individuals within contexts, as well as, the psychosocial affordances and hinderances for such learning. Within an individual level, the shifts in cognition, as described by Mezirow (1990b), refer to change at the meaning perspective level which include “higher-order schemata, theories, propositions, beliefs, prototypes, goal orientations and evaluations, and what linguists call ‘networks of argument’” (p. 2) which are formed from childhood and subject to an individual’s level of development (i.e., moral, ethical, cognitive, psychological development) which enable a person to hold habits of assumptions and interpretations regarding experiences. Transformative learning would, from a traditional theoretical viewpoint (Mezirow) be a result of significant changes to an individual’s meaning perspectives having engaged in the (cyclical) processes of critical reflection, reflective discourse, and social action following an initial experience of crisis, disjuncture or intellectual dilemma. West (2014) in his article, draws upon biographical narrative research and expands upon the meaning perspective shifts to include a complex interplay between the self and the context of the experience resulting in “fundamental changes in mind-set ... deeply intertwined with shifts in inner–outer psychosocial dynamics” (p. 164). This results in a fundamental change of sense of self in relation to

oppressive forces (whether external or internal) as well as having the capacity to engage in action with a greater sense of personal authority and purpose.

### **Sense of self**

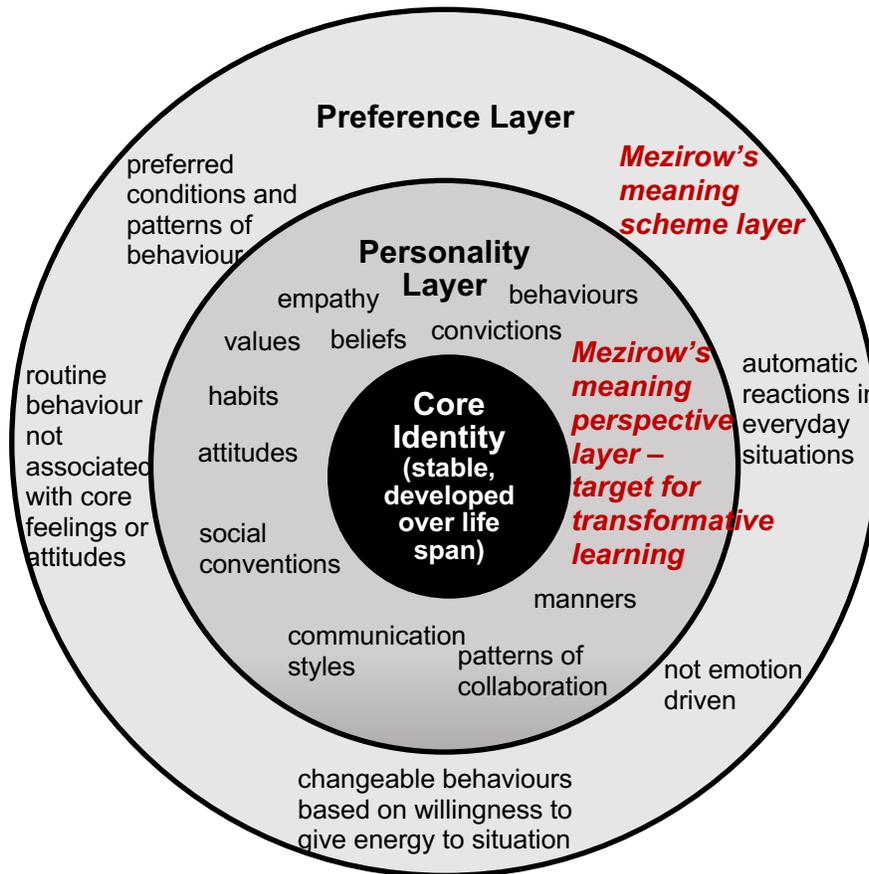
Similar to the growth in second wave transformative learning literature that explores different forms of critical reflection and dialogue, other authors have explored identity theories in light of transformative and adult learning theory and how the concept of 'identity' may be impacted by transformative learning experiences. In this section, I choose to elaborate on two authors, Illeris (2014a; 2014b) who proposes a way to conceptualize layers of identity and intersecting identity structures, and Tennant (2005) who explores how the concept of self has been articulated in different ways in light of societal impacts on identity formation. Both authors explore the role transformative learning may play in identity development or change.

Illeris (2014a; 2014b) maintains that the concept of identity has changed over time. He describes that prior to the 1970s, identity structure was considered to be developed in childhood and stabilized by young adulthood. Over the last four to five decades, a growing awareness of socio-cultural influences on identity constructs has developed and there is more acceptance for the idea that identity is multifaceted and adaptable in our dynamic and rapidly changing (Western) world (Illeris, 2014a). Figure 2.1 below is replicated from Illeris' text (2014a, p. 71) where he conceptualizes what he terms as being the 'general structure of identity' which relates to personal identity that relates to the whole person (he noted that this is not significantly different from psychological models produced by Freud, Erikson, Piaget and others). I have added to this figure an overlay of how Illeris (2014a) describes the layers (shown in black text), as well as how he describes Mezirow's concepts of meaning schemes and meaning perspectives (shown in red text), and where their impacts on personality layers are likely, which indicates what elements of the identity can become the 'target' of transformative learning.

The core identity refers to "the self-identity, or the biographical identity that "normal" people develop and try to maintain in spite of all the tendencies toward instability and fragmentation" (Illeris, 2014b, p. 155). By adulthood, it is proposed, the core identity is relatively stable with changes happening overtime as the course of life unfolds. Illeris

(2014a) posposed that the core identity is not open to significant or rapid change without a sudden, dramatic, or crisis level event which could align with transformative learning theory.

**Figure 2.1 The general structure of the identity with Mezirow’s meaning scheme and meaning perspective overlay**



Note: Adapted from Illeris, 2014a, p. 71.

The ‘personality layer’ is related to how one identifies self in relation to others, and influences from society in general. This layer of identity, Illeris proposes, experiences more demands to make changes due to “radical changes in both the life situation in general and all sorts of technical, organization, political, and private changes in everyday life” (Illeris, 2014b, p. 156). This layer of identity includes the typically stable conditions of interacting in the world and the underlying conditions for doing so (e.g., values, attitudes, habits, social conventions adhered to, empathy ability, worldview). Because changes at this level

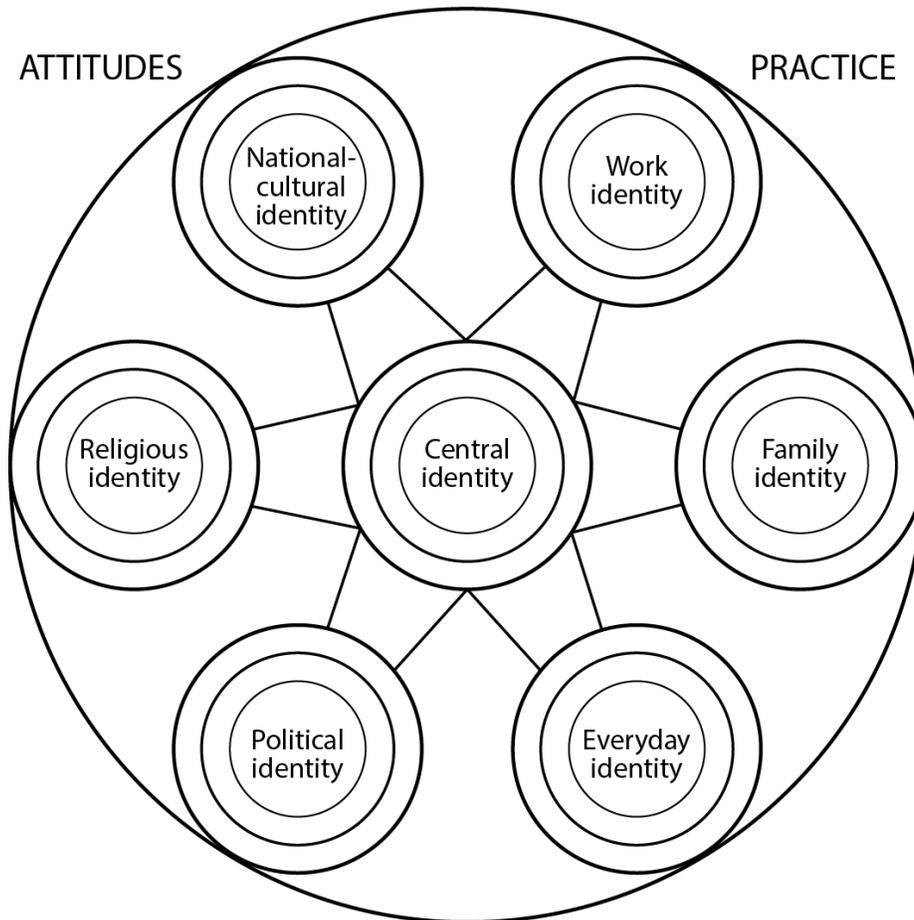
impact belief systems, it is this level of the personality that Illeris argues is most often the target for transformative learning that doesn't involve a dramatic, or crisis level life-event.

The 'preference layer' of identity is the peripheral layer that is made up of other areas in life that impact the sense of self. This, Illeris proposes, "has to do with how we do all the many things we are used to doing, our routines, our more or less automatic reactions in different situations ... in the many everyday situations we deal with but are not so strongly committed to" (2014b, p. 157). The preference layer represents aspects of life where individuals are willing to make changes depending on whether the benefit for doing so (energy wise) makes sense. The changes at this level do not necessarily impact core beliefs which would be more central to the personality layer of identity. Illeris (2014a) proposes that Mezirow's 'meaning structures' are typically found at this layer of identity and because of the peripheral impact on values, and emotional connection, changes at this level are not generally connected to transformative learning.

These layers are what make up the core personal identity (Illeris, 2014a). It is proposed by Illeris that people also have several other 'part identities' such as religious identity, work identity, political identity, family identity, cultural identity etc. which are connected "to one of two main areas that can be broadly termed our attitudes and our practice" (p. 74). Some of these part identities represent our attitudes (e.g., culture, religion), and others, our practice (e.g., work, family) in the world. Illeris proposes that these part identities are not necessarily the same for everyone, as for example, some people may not have a work or clear family identity, and in some cultures or professions, different part identities would be more dominant than others. He also proposes that these part identities may be more fluid and changeable citing the example that for some people work identity may be replaced by student identity and that not all of these part identities may be harmonious. Illeris terms this complex interconnection of part identities with the core identity "a transverse identity structure" (p. 75) which would have satellite part identities connected to the core identity structure and "each of these part identities can in principle, like the central identity, be differentiated into a relatively stable core area, around this a more flexible layer in which changes typically can take place by transformative learning, and outside this a more unstable layer in which changes usually do not require

great effort or determination” (p. 75). Figure 2.2 below provides an example of what Illeris calls the transverse identity structure.

**Figure 2.2 An example of the transverse identity structure**



Note: Reproduced from Illeris, 2014a, p. 76. Permission to reproduce this figure granted by author and copyright holder.

In terms of dominance of part identities, Illeris (2014a) explains that for most adults, the part identity related to working life is central, and “it is closely connected to and in most cases more or less integrated into the personal identity” (p. 76). This is perhaps especially true for work identities where the work is professional in nature, or where a developmental component, qualification, or mastery, is required in the practice as that would indicate a longer time span where the work identity, both for entry to practice, and while in practice, becomes integrated with the personal identity. Transformative learning provides

opportunities to enhance the coherence of part identities such as work identity with the central personal identity (Illeris, 2014a).

Also recognizing the influence of external factors in the development of identity or 'self', Tennant (2005) in his paper *Transforming Selves* draws upon psychological theory when he outlines five of the different ways that the concepts of 'self' and 'identity' are described and theorized. When referring to the concepts of self and identity, Tennant states:

[I]t is important to acknowledge the diverse and overlapping ways in which these concepts are distinguished. I find it useful to think of the self as the I who experiences and identity as the me or object who can be known by both myself and others as a cluster of attributes and identifications. However, there is no consensus on this matter, and it is doubtful whether a consensus is desirable or achievable. For this reason, it is best to live with the ambiguity and to consider them as similar phenomena, sometimes interchangeable, sometimes not, and sometimes embraced by the single concept of the person. (p. 103)

Each of these five theoretical conceptions of the self are influenced by society in different ways, and it is wrestling with these influences that Tennant suggests form the basis of identity from different theoretical perspectives. Table 2.2 below is adapted from Tennant (p. 104) with an additional column on the right authored and added by me which outlines the difficulties experienced by individuals due to the societal input and potential opportunities for self transformation, based on the descriptions provided by Tennant (2005).

For example, as seen in the first row of the table below, if one views the concept of self as being driven by the need for authenticity, then the input of society can be seen to be the distortion of authentic self due to alignment with societal expectations. The goal for transformative learning is to become aware of societal oppressions of the authentic self, become emancipated from those expectations to be able to act, think, live authentically. This can include challenging dominate discourses akin to Habermas' (1984 cited in Tennant, 2005) description of ideal communication, "unconstrained and free of ideological disortion" (p. 105) which can enable communicative action aligned with social action as part of transformative learning. Our conceptions of self, and experiences of distress in the world can be seen to be based on psychological theories of identity and

how that identity is influenced by environmental influences. The goal of transformative learning is to facilitate emancipation, insight, new awareness, and actions in the world which, in turn, will influence an individual's sense of self.

**Table 2.2 Concepts of self, how society influences, difficulties experienced and opportunities for self-transformation**

<b>Conceptions of the Self</b>	<b>Input of Society</b>	<b>Difficulties Experienced and Opportunities for Self Transformation</b>
Authentic or real self	Distortion	Individuals become adrift from authentic self through pursuit of achievement and alignment with distorted societal expectations. Self-transformation through becoming emancipated from dominate discourse to enable authenticity in actions and choices.
Repressed self	Oppression and domination	Individuals constrain basic instincts in order to live within societal expecatations. Self transformation through learning to act in own best interests, and using authority in the service of personal freedom of choice.
Autonomous self	Shaping	Individuals are complicit in lack of choice or agency, and in extreme cases, experience a sense of automation, due to being manipulated or 'shaped' by societal forces. Self-transformation through learning to become self-directed, critically analytical of own (and others') beliefs and actions.
Storied self	Constraining/ generating	Individuals engage in an internalized self narration which cycles through periods of reauthoring and reassessment. Self-transformation through recognizing the internalized narrative and the societal frameworks that influence the authoring of that narrative and constraints it imposes.
Entangled self	Providing a framework of social relations	Individuals view of self is based on the perception of how others see them. Different from storied self in that this is a process of transference (from other to self) rather than an internalized narrative of self. This represents a form of enmeshment in relationship to significant others. Self-transformation through developing a sense of self differentiated from others.

Note: Adapted from Tennant, 2005, p. 104.

Transformative learning design, Tennant (2005) argues, can take different forms depending upon what the educator's philosophical beliefs are regarding identity

constructs, societal influences, and the challenges posed by those influences on the individuals. A common feature of educational design for transformative learning is that “participants are invited to ‘act upon themselves’ in various ways” (p. 108) which, albeit may cross between the philosophical constructs of identity formation noted above, invariably fall into one of four categories of education design: knowing oneself; controlling oneself (self-efficacy); caring for oneself (paying attention to oneself, watch yourself); and (re)creating oneself. The design for transformative learning within educational settings is explored in Section 2.3 later in this chapter.

### **Ways of thinking about, and being in the world**

The changes in sense of identity (Tennant, 2005), and integration of central core identity with other part identities (Illeris, 2014b) are brought about by transformed meaning perspectives, frames of reference, and habits of mind (Mezirow, 1990a; Illeris, 2014a). Within formal education settings, theorists and educators, while recognizing that discipline knowledge and skills developed in adult education as being important, have proposed that the core focus for adult education should be the emancipation of the self and/or the becoming of the authentic self (Barnett, 2004; Ferrer, Romero & Albareda, 2005; Morgan, 2012; Su, 2011; Tennant, 2005), the nurturing of the soul and development of ego-consciousness (Dirkx, 2012) and that such considerations should be broader than the Westernized concepts to include alternative cultural experiences (Bowers, 2005). This is not restricted to the students either, as there is an increasing call for educators to engage in inner work (Cohen, et al., 2012; Dirkx, 2012) citing that by doing so, the personal and professional selves can become more integrated (Bai, 2012). This integration may lead to “more embodied, enactive, and alive teaching ... which, in turn, can facilitate transformative learning in our students” (Bai, p. 69). Dirkx (2012) advocates for a fundamentally different approach to teaching and learning to enable a paradigm shift to enable “our inner selves greater expression and voice” (p. 127) to facilitate spontaneity, and dialogue between conscious and unconscious which “recognizes the experience of meaning as always coming from both within and without. It is about attending to and nurturing the soul” (p. 127). Freire (1974), in his discussion of Brazil as it transitioned from a closed society prior to the 1960s through to a more open society, spoke of the need to educate the people in order for them to raise their consciousness to be able to embrace the new societal dynamic. His words speak to the process of education and the need to

facilitate a stance of inquiry, wonder, and action in order to develop a critical consciousness within self and society at large.

We needed, then, an education which would lead men to take a new stance toward their problems—that of intimacy with those problems ... of “I wonder,” instead of merely, “I do”. ... Our traditional curriculum, disconnected from life, centred on words emptied of the reality they are meant to represent lacking in concrete activity, could never develop a critical consciousness. Indeed, its own naïve dependence on high-sounding phrases, reliance on rote, and tendency toward abstractness actually intensified our naïveté. (Freire, 1974, p. 32-33)

Aligning with the concept of ‘self’ being what is transformed, and critical consciousness as being what is developed, in transformative learning, Su (2011) adds to this second wave of transformative learning theorists in a paper exploring the ‘being’ approach to lifelong learning, and subsequent changes to the being—i.e., the transforming of the self. Su takes the position:

that lifelong learning ability needs to be grounded within the framework of being, rather than that of having, to avoid reducing the development of lifelong learning ability into a process of transmission, acquisition, or delivery. The being approach employs a gestalt, one that holistically captures learning and makes impossible the separation of process from content and the self from context. These four basic elements, which constitute the learning activity, are completely interwoven and intermingled. The focus of learning as being does not depend on any one solid element but rather on the flowing, liquid relationship between them. (p. 59)

Su (2011) proposes that lifelong learning ‘as being’ should be the focus of adult learning, and that theories of self-directed learning need to take into account aspects of affectedness in order to develop a fuller account of self-directed adult learning. Su’s argument is that self-directed learning theories refer mostly to self-discipline and self-management in terms of outward action and these theories do not account for the inner work that is required—the ‘affective domain’. Su notes that in today’s modern and dynamic world, the concept of ‘knowledge’ is temporal. Therefore, “it is being-in-the-world, rather than knowledge of the world” (p. 67) that needs to be the centre stone of adult learning design. Integrating constructivist theory with contemplative and transformative learning,

Morgan (2012) looked to quantify a “ground-of-being” experience, hypothesizing that this ‘state’ is “a fundamental tenet of contemplative and transformative education” (p. 55).

Similarly, Barnett (2004) calls for the focus of adult higher education to change from a focus on content to that of development of the individual. He proposed that the pedagogical task of adult learning is none other than the development of one’s authentic being. In order for this to occur, educational programs need to develop curricula beyond the disciplinary skills sets to include multiple perspectives and flexible attitudes toward change both for the individual and the educational programs themselves. Drawing on earlier work published in 2000 on ‘supercomplexity in the curriculum’, Barnett outlines a pedagogical schema for educational transformation—not stated as transformative learning per se although the fourth quadrant which falls into ‘educational transformation and high risk’ is related to the transformation of human beings through pedagogies that are uncertain and focussed on supercomplexity. Perhaps, a particular relevance of Barnett’s vision could be for individuals who are in professions whereby the nature of what is being studied, is partly the self within the professional and educational context. Barnett argues that:

learning for an unknown future cannot be accomplished by the acquisition of either knowledge or skills [but rather] the pedagogical task is none other than the eliciting of a mode of being that can not just withstand incessant challenge to one’s understandings of the world ... it is the even more demanding task of encouraging forward a form of human being that is not paralysed into inaction but can act purposively and judiciously. (p. 259)

The focus on identity and authentic self noted above, are outcomes of transformative learning that appear to align with Mezirow’s theory of transformation being related to worldview changes and the emancipation from oppression. The use of the term ‘transformative learning’, however, has become broader over time, to the point that some have indicated that almost any learning outcome has been described as transformative (Hoggan, 2016; Taylor & Snyder, 2012). Since articulation of the theory in the late 1970s, the research conducted on transformation learning has evolved from an initial focus on the theory development (1980s and 1990s predominately), to more recently explore contextual and cultural issues involved in transformation as well as explorations into the

catalysts for critical reflection and the various forms it may take (1990s onwards) (Taylor & Snyder, 2012).

### **2.3. Researching transformative learning outcomes**

Over the last two to three decades there has been a rise in research studies that have utilized transformative learning theory as a 'lens' through which to study phenomenon experienced by adult learners. Often evaluating transformative learning from Mezirow's theoretical perspective, the foci of these studies typically revolved around sense making of learners' reported growth and personal and professional accounts of transformation (Taylor & Snyder, 2012). Many of these studies sought insight into the heart of the individuals' experiences in order contextualize transformative learning and inform pedagogy that may facilitate such learning.

To clarify what is acknowledged as transformative learning outcomes, Hoggan undertook a content analysis level review of the education-based research literature from 2003-2014 coding the different types of transformative changes described in 206 articles. This resulted in 28 different codes, which were further categorized into six broader categories of change each with subcategories, that provide a typology of transformative learning outcomes. The aim of this work was to create an analytic metatheory to enable "categorizations of components that are common among all the underlying theories" (p. 63) of transformative learning. This work has resulted in the creation of conceptual and analytic tools that can aid consumers and practitioners of transformative learning to more deeply understand the phenomenon. Hoggan specifies that with "clarity about learning outcomes, we become better able to link learning processes to the specific outcomes they promote" (p. 72). The six broad categories defined by Hoggan (2016) are:

1. **Worldview:** a mental model that incorporates any significant changes in how the learner understands the world and how it works;
2. **Self:** a variety of experiences that result in a significant shift in learners' sense of self;

3. Epistemology: defined by Hoggan for this typology as “the way people construct and evaluate knowledge in their day-to-day living, their ways of knowing, rather than how they explicitly define it” (p. 67);
4. Ontology: how an individual exists in the world—“the deeply established mental and emotional inclinations that affect the overall quality and tone of one’s existence” (p. 67);
5. Behaviour: demonstrations of changes based on new perspectives;
6. Capacity: “developmental outcomes whereby learners experience systematic, qualitative changes in their abilities that allow for greater complexity in the way they see, interpret, and function in the world” (p. 69).

These six categories, and various expressions of learning outcome subcategories are shown in Table 2.3 below. When determining the typology Hoggan (2016) identified three main descriptors for how transformative learning outcomes were described in his review of the research literature. Firstly, the descriptions of lived or felt ‘experiences’. Secondly, the different ways an individual makes sense of, or interprets the world, is considered to be a ‘conceptualizing’ outcome, and the third descriptor, ‘interacts’, refers to the behaviours the individual chooses to engage in that demonstrate a transformative learning outcome.

**Table 2.3. Hoggan’s (2016) typology of transformative learning outcomes**

Worldview
- Assumptions, Beliefs, Attitudes, Expectations
- Ways of Interpreting Experience
- More Comprehensive or Complex Worldview
- New Awareness / New Understandings
Self
- Self-in-Relation
- Empowerment / Responsibility
- Identity / View of Self
- Self-Knowledge
- Personal Narratives
- Meaning / Purpose
- Personality Change
Epistemology
- More Discriminating
- Utilizing Extra-Rational Ways of Knowing
- More Open
Ontology
- Affective Experience of Life

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Ways of Being</li> <li>- Attributes</li> </ul> <p>Behavior</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Actions Consistent with New Perspective</li> <li>- Social Action</li> <li>- Professional Practices</li> <li>- Skills</li> </ul> <p>Capacity</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Cognitive Development</li> <li>- Consciousness</li> <li>- Spirituality</li> </ul>
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Note: Reproduced from Hoggan, 2016, p. 70.

It's important to recognize, however, that a change in a belief or view of self (or any other of the subcategories listed in Table 2.3 above) does not automatically equate to transformative learning. Hoggan (2016) notes that there are many ways that transformative learning has been articulated, but it is commonly understood that it "refers to processes that result in significant and irreversible changes in the way a person experiences, conceptualizes, and interacts with the world" (p. 71). As such, expressions such as "I am a changed person" or "My teaching practice is completely changed" require some level of exploration to determine whether they are representative of transformative learning or not. Hoggan indicates that when evaluating learning outcomes, the typology provides guidance but to determine whether the outcome can be identified as transformative, the depth, breadth, and relative stability of the learning outcome need to be considered. Depth criteria refers to "the impact of a change, or the degree to which it affects any particular type of outcome" (p. 71). Breadth criteria references the need for the change to not be constrained to a single context, but that the change impacts multiple aspects of the individual's life. Relative stability refers to evidence that the change is long term and not situational or time bound. The stability criteria should take into account that such change may be evolving, and that from time-to-time, old habits of thinking or behaviour may be demonstrated, but that overall, the change is recognized by the individual as permanent. In using the typology and criteria for analysis of learning outcomes, Hoggan provides an analytic tool that could support educators and researchers in clarifying whether learning outcomes are transformative and that using an analytic tool may assist in being "able to link learning processes to the specific outcomes they promote"

(p. 71). Utilizing this analytic tool with Hoggan’s typology might look something like Table 2.4 below:

**Table 2.4 Hoggan’s typology and criteria as an analytic tool (sample)**

Transformative Learning Outcome	Depth / Evidence of Deep Impact	Breadth / Evidence of Impact on Multiple Life Contexts	Relative Stability / Evidence that Change is not Temporary
Worldview: Assumptions, beliefs, attitudes, expectations Ways of interpreting experience			
Self: Self-in-relation Empowerment / responsibility			
Epistemology: More discriminating			
Ontology: Ways of being			
Behavior: Actions Consistent with New Perspective			
Capacity: Consciousness			

Note: A possible analytic tool using outline provided in Hoggan’s Figure 3 (2016, p. 73) which integrates his proposed typology of learning outcomes with Mezirow’s transformative learning theory. In this instance, I show the analytic tool using some of Hoggan’s typology categories and subcategories.

In the section below, I move away from theoretical conceptualizations of transformative learning and outline some research findings that are relevant to this thesis regarding considerations for designing educational pathways—what changes for people and how that happens.

### **2.3.1. Researching transformative learning in educational settings**

In conducting this literature review, I encountered a similar situation as that described by Taylor and Laros (2014) when they wrote that there were surprisingly few

published articles that describe a development in the theory of transformative learning. Taylor and Laros raised a concern over the potential overuse of the term 'transformative learning'. They quote Tisdell (2012, p. 22) and cautioned "the term is being used so loosely that it is also a synonym for learning of any kind, rendering the term transformative nearly meaningless" (p. 136). They also contend that rather than extend the theory of transformative learning, as what was hoped for with the second wave of transformative theorists, in recent decades the research has been predominately focussed on the learning experiences and pedagogical design of transformative learning with little focus on in-depth theoretical analysis (Cranton & Taylor, 2012; Taylor & Laros, 2014; Taylor & Snyder, 2012). Taylor and Snyder (2012) in their review of research 2003-2011, noted that although research on transformative learning is growing, it is by-in-large, focussed on the pedagogy that facilitates the processes of critical reflection and self-efficacy. I have found similar in the published research literature over the last decade, noticing too that guidance on creating a safe space, providing prompts for reflection, dialogue, and actions aligned with Mezirow's theory are dominate in the literature. I have also found that there are many secondary research articles, or those that are more theoretical or philosophical critiques proposing expansions of the theory, and not that many reporting primary research in educational settings. I am hopeful that my research study outlined in this thesis document might add to the literature on primary transformative learning research by highlighting, through phenomenological narrative, the breadth of transformative outcomes experienced by a heterogeneous group of alumni of professional practice M.Ed. program.

In this section of the literature review, I focus on a few relevant areas noted in published research literature regarding how transformative learning is being researched. In particular, I focus on research in formal educational settings, and offer a brief review of methods used to research transformative learning, the foci of research studies as well as possible challenges and suggestions for future research which I considered when developing this study.

### ***Research methodologies***

In this literature review I focussed, for the most part, on the last ten years. Research studies reviewed that focussed on transformative learning in educational settings appear to be predominately qualitative in nature. Examples of the most common

approaches reported are; case studies (Beer et al., 2015; Erichsen, 2011; Hassi & Laursen, 2015; Hodge, 2010, 2019; Kitchenham & Chasteauneuf, 2009; Stevens-Long, Schapiro & McClintock, 2012), narrative, arts-based, or autoethnography (Arroyo, Kidd, Burns, Cruz & Lawrence-Lamb, 2015; Brigham, 2011; Coke, Benson, & Hayes, 2015; Tanaka, et al., 2014; Troop, 2017), phenomenology (Haber-Curran & Tillapaugh, 2015; Sohn, et al., 2016), and action research or cooperative inquiry (Napan, et al., 2018; Nicolaides & Dzubinski, 2016; Walton, 2010).

Data gathering tools tend to be interviews, focus groups, reflective journaling, letter writing, autobiographical narratives, surveys or questionnaires as single data sources, and some mixed methods approaches. Methods of analysis often include thematic discourse analysis, interview or open-ended question response coding, critical incident analysis, and narrative techniques. These studies often applied a social-cultural, critical pedagogy, and/or feminist philosophical influence on the analysis. They also often apply Mezirow's theory of transformative learning as one of the lenses through which to make sense of the participants' experiences and narratives.

By conducting a phenomenological study with 20 participants, I was hoping to gain insight into a common essence of the M.Ed. EP experience and identify mechanisms (pedagogical and environmental) that supported (transformative) learning outcomes for the participants. Additionally, by interviewing alumni 16-20 months post-graduation, I hoped to gain an awareness of the personal and professional changes (i.e., multiple contexts) that were sustained in the participants' lives (Hoggan, 2016). In the sections below, I briefly describe some of the research foci that are relevant to my research described in this thesis.

### ***Research studies that utilize transformative learning as an interpretive lens***

Investigating ways to evaluate the phenomenon of transformative learning in higher education settings is the focus of this section of the literature review. I outline a few studies that have used transformative learning theory as a lens through which to evaluate learning environment contexts or curricular contents and activities which I believe are directly relevant for my research study. Considering transformative learning outcomes as measurable evidence of higher education efficacy is something that is still an evolving

research area. Ferrer et al. (2005) propose an integral education that incorporates all human dimensions—body, vital, heart, mind and spirit into learning and inquiry. They note that typically educational institutions fall back into cognicentrism as a means to establish efficacy of learning and research. In their paper they outline six key features of integral education along with three key challenges to implementing such a model. Their paper is essentially a call to action—for educational institutions to have the courage to change. They state that integral education requires participatory pedagogical approaches that enable multi-dimensions of the person to participate in ways that encourage balance between different ways of experiencing and showing both learning and change.

### **Learning environment and pedagogical considerations**

The importance of a safe learning environment where students witness one another and can try out new ideas without fear of censorship or risk of rejection or ridicule has been stressed as important in the facilitation of transformative learning (Brigham, 2011; Galbraith, 1989; Holley & Steiner, 2005; Mezirow, 1991, 1997). On the face of it, this may seem contrary to the idea of discomfort being necessary for transformative learning to occur, however, the reasoning is that when there is a sense of safety in the classroom, the learners' capacities to engage with the processes of transformation (including experiences of disjuncture or disequilibrium) is higher resulting in transformative learning outcomes rather than distress and disengagement (Walton, 2010; Thayer-Bacon, 2010). The following studies were conducted with university students and used transformative learning outcomes as an evaluative lens to explore the role of relationships within a learning community with particular focus on pedagogy (Arroyo et al. 2015; Sohn et al, 2016; Troop, 2017), collaboration around curriculum (Coke, Benson & Hayes, 2015; Haber-Curran & Tillapaugh, 2015; Hassi & Laursen, 2015; Tanaka et al., 2014), and cooperative inquiry (Duenkel, Pratt & Sullivan, 2014; Napan et al., 2018; Nicolaidis & Dzubinski, 2016).

Sohn et al. (2016) found in their study of an upper graduate level seminar on existential phenomenology (mostly psychology and education doctoral students aged 30-55) that the deliberate phenomenological pedagogy enabled a dynamic and emergent curriculum to evolve over the course of the semester, and although the faculty had a structure for the course, the student-centred phenomenological approach resulted in a co-

constructed curriculum. A phenomenological methodology for this study involved interviews with eight of the 19 (self-selecting) students post course analyzed using a hermeneutic phenomenological approach to determine themes related to the students' experiences of the course. Students recognized the atmosphere within the classroom as safe and comfortable, free and open, and connected and collaborative. This environment, along with the pedagogical approach facilitated a sense of the course as being both personally and professionally relevant in ways not previously anticipated by the students. In particular, they noted that their learning transcended the classroom and enabled them to "deal with many of the major issues that were of present concern in the participants' personal lives" (p. 187) as well as resulting in new ways to view and interact with the world. Also exploring pedagogical impacts on transformative learning outcomes, Troop (2017) conducted an autoethnographic study of a doctoral education course that utilized a creative curriculum. She sought to explore the relationship between creative activity and transformative learning. Through field notes, self-reflection, a focus group with four other students, and an interview with the faculty, she identified ways in which experiential activities empowered personal transformative experiences for herself and others in the course. The invitation to think differently, to engage in new and personally meaningful ways with the curriculum and with others in the class were how Troop tied creative acts with transformative learning. Such acts of creativity included "opportunities to develop new tools, new outcomes, new relationships, new rules, new social practices, and new connections, which were forged through interactions with self, other, and the (academic) world" (p. 218). Findings indicate that students, including Troop, experienced a profound, deep sense of personal enrichment as well as intellectual shifts in perspectives.

Through a narrative inquiry involving a tenure-track professor and four undergraduate students Arroyo et al. (2015) investigated the experience of using a pedagogy that aligns with providing affordances for transformative learning experiences within an online environment. They found that the non-hierarchical, student-centred teaching philosophy used in the design of the course provided opportunities for critical self-reflection, perspective challenging and changing, exploration of new roles and actions in the world, as well as opportunities to build a new sense of competence with the new roles and relationships. Within the online environment, the authors note that it is essential to "understand how online students navigate instructor-induced disorientating dilemmas,

and the ideal timing and structure for introducing these dilemmas for maximizing their transformative potential” (p. 363). They suggest that such dilemmas are best introduced at near the beginning of the semester when students are fresher and not yet overburdened with coursework and commitments.

In graduate settings where the relationship between faculty and students is more collegial or considered mentor-mentee, the power dynamic shifts away from ‘teacher-learner’ resulting in empowering students to take risks, engage affectively and creatively with experiential learning activities often resulting in perspective transformations and expressions of holistic growth (Arroyo et al. 2015; Brigham, 2011; Coke et al., 2015; Haber-Curran & Tillapaugh, 2015; Hassi & Laursen, 2015; Tanaka et al., 2014). Similar to the studies that focussed on the learning environment noted above, the idea of providing an invitation to explore educational space differently was also described in Tanaka et al.’s study of mentor-mentee transformative inquiry around educational practice for students learning to be teachers. Results from this narrative study with three pairs of mentor-mentees, indicate that the creation of a safe, humble, and egalitarian space, along with the willingness to be vulnerable, and recognizing emotion as a catalyst, all helped to enable holistic growth for mentees and mentors alike. Participants expressed paradigmatic shifts in their practices as educators that have also deeply impacted their inner lives personally. Along a similar vein, Coke et al. (2015) in an autoethnographic study, used transformative learning theory to help them make sense of their experiences as new tenure-track professors working with students training to be secondary English teachers. They found a commonality in their processes, frustrations, self-doubts, and changing sense of identity from school teacher to graduate student to tenure-track professor. They applied Mezirow’s phases of transformative learning to their experiences and developed a mentoring framework for the students they were working with. Through self-reflection, and mentoring others they found their own understanding and practices of education developed and shifted. They began to recognize their own agency more and the levels of choice they had in terms of conceptualizing and actioning their practices and shifting identities as professors.

The use of collaborative inquiry as a pedagogical approach has also been studied for transformative learning outcomes. Hassi and Laursen (2015) describe a study of

mathematics students engaged in inquiry-based learning (IBL) in four universities in the United States. A total of 68 participants were interviewed about their experiences of IBL as learners. Transcriptions were coded and analyzed for reference to personal learning gains in terms of content area as well as personal empowerment. Findings indicate that inquiry-based learning within a collegial classroom was directly related to increases in self-empowerment (88%), cognitive empowerment (88%), and social empowerment (75%). Other gains in self-regulation (66%), social competence (75%), and communication (83%) were noted too which enhanced the descriptions of depth of personal and professional changes described as transformative, as well as enhanced ways of operating in the world (Hassi & Laursen, 2015). In a phenomenological study Haber-Curran and Tillapaugh (2015) explored 26 students' experiences of a student-centred, inquiry-focussed capstone course within an educational leadership program. Themes that arose through the analysis indicated that the students felt their understanding of formal education was challenged as they were given, and expected to take, agency for their own learning. They also noted a shift in the interactions amongst the students involving an increase in trust, collaboration, and an increased interdependence that led to feelings of competency, freedom and empowerment. The students also expressed an awareness that their understanding of learning and education had shifted, which resulted in a "deepening commitment to learning and ... reframing learning and self" (p. 73). The authors indicate that inquiry-based learning, when adequately supported by faculty and a safe learning environment, provides opportunities for deep, personal and professional growth to occur—descriptions that align with transformative learning outcomes (Hoggan, 2016). Seeking an understanding of how cooperative inquiry pedagogical practices might be linked to transformative learning outcomes, Nicolaidis and Dzubinski (2016) collaborated with key stakeholders in an adult education program, utilizing an action research methodology. They investigated how the levels of inquiry (identified as three progressive loop-learning inquiry cycles) were linked to transformative learning processes. They found participants were able to engage in a transformative process through generative dialogue, behaviour change, and the development of shifts in attention, intention or vision that arose through the action inquiry cycles that challenged pre-existing beliefs and ways of being.

Brigham's (2011) long-term study (5 years) explored the experiences of 24 women who had immigrated to the Maritimes. Each woman had been a teacher in her home

country. This arts-informed research followed women over time in their processes of coming together in small groups to process their experiences using the written word, art, and dialogue. The women engaged in free writing and sharing their written work. This was witnessed by others and a reflective art process followed. The art, as a form of reflection, feedback, and witnessing was discussed amongst the women participants. They processed their experiences of immigration, concepts of personal and professional identity and shared their frustrations as well as their joyful moments. Brigham notes that through the process of writing, art, and dialogue, the women engaged “in the imaginative, experiential, cognitive and affective dimensions of learning. Through the processes the women explored multiple modes of knowledge construction and dimensions of identity” (2011, p. 45). Transformative shifts occurred for these women which were facilitated through the alternative ways of expressing and integrating their new Canadian identity—what being a woman meant in Canada, as well as the identity disjuncture related to what being a ‘good teacher’ meant in Canada compared to their previous professional praxis and identities in their home countries. Brigham introduces the term “braided stories” (p. 46) to express how these separate dialogues came together—the good, the bad, the not previously talked about—to provide a depth of insight into an experience of foreign educated female teachers applying an ecological perspective which included uncovering systemic challenges and discrimination. The reflective art created by the women in response to one another’s narratives provided “bricolaged symbols” (p. 50) or artefacts that brought the affective responses and unconscious emotions into consciousness and open for dialogic exploration. Collective social action was an outcome of these processes for many of the women who looked for ways to highlight their experiences and challenge the status quo in school districts. The collective narrative and arts-informed inquiry into their stories provided a platform for deep and sustained insight into their own immigration experiences and transformed personal and professional identities.

At the faculty level of inquiry, Duenkel, Pratt and Sullivan (2014) articulate a cooperative inquiry process undertaken by seven transformative educators who wished to “explore how they could better walk with the authority inherent in the professional roles so as to avoid unconsciously replicating unhealthy power dynamics” (p. 266). They uncovered what they described as “insidious and cyclical nature of hegemony” (p. 266) which highlighted their deeply ingrained power dynamics. The resulting action and

reflection cycles engaged in allowed for a deepening of challenging self and current practices, becoming vulnerable with others, altering teaching practices, and opening selves up to wholeheartedness and possibilities of change. Duenkel et al. (2014) note that the very act of cooperative inquiry requires an openness to vulnerability and self-study. By working with others in this process, each educator's individual study become witnessed and participants become interdependent in support of each other through their inquiries and change processes until all feel a resolution has been achieved. The authors note that prediction of outcome is not possible in cooperative inquiries, and while "transformation seems likely the form it might take is unknown" (p. 270) and that such ambiguity is not always easy to wrestle with at a personal or institutional level.

Another faculty self-study that investigated how cooperative inquiry would impact their teaching practices was conducted by Napan et al. (2018). They describe how by utilizing an action research cooperative inquiry method, seven cross-disciplinary university professors met monthly over a period of 18 months to explore, critique, and develop their teaching practices as well as to evaluate whether cooperative inquiry was useful for that purpose. Although innovative pedagogies did develop as a result of this collaboration, the key findings of the research were primarily related to "transformation of self and enhanced academic relationships" (p. 246). They noted that authentic collaboration was essential for the success of this project as well as the desire "for supportive relationships, void of competition and embedded in trust" (p. 247). They engaged in cooperative inquiry cycles meeting to help plan their projects, discuss outcomes and debate concepts with each other while engaged in their own teaching projects. They experienced a sense of learning partnership with each other, and noted that as trust developed amongst the members, the depth of conversations increased and the cross-disciplinary nature helped to broaden perspectives and possibilities for their own practices.

### **Measuring what changes in transformative learning**

As noted earlier in this chapter, Illeris (2014a) and Tennant (2005) both theorize the concept of self and identity as being what is transformed through transformative learning when foundational meaning perspectives, worldviews, habits of mind, and social actions (Hoggan, 2016; Mezirow, 1991, 1997) are changed. Such outcomes are alluded to in the research studies noted above, but they were not the identified focus of the

research as many of the methods used were more emergent in structure (i.e., autoethnography, phenomenology, and inquiry-based research). Using transformative learning theory as an analytical lens, the following few studies involved an exploration of what are the catalysts for changes in graduate students' sense of selves, and the pedagogical processes that enabled the transformative changes to occur.

Utilizing a case study approach, Erichsen (2011) investigated transformative learning and identity development in a study that followed seven international mature female graduate students who were studying in the US. The hypothesis was that their experiences of transformation would be compounded by the international experience and issues such as culture shock. Erichsen used Jarvis' Learning Model and Mezirow's transformative learning theory as analytical lenses for the qualitative data sets gathered over a one year period. Erichsen noted that there was a cyclical nature to the deepening of reflective practice and learning for these students. The internal sense of disjuncture was found to be a catalyst for the reflective practice to occur. Learning themes (from Jarvis' model) that emerged included 'Getting Lost', 'Liminality', and 'Redefinition' all of which refer to wrestling with moments of confusion, sense of self, and restructuring of belief systems. Even though Mezirow's theory was used as an analytic lens, and was found to be useful, it was also deemed to be perhaps too cognitive and presumed 'linear' to fully make sense of these learners' experiences as the researcher was not able to adequately account for the concept of 'culture shock' as hypothesized. It is possible that there is a cultural component not accounted for, or that other contextual issues were not taken into account.

Within the higher educational arena, doctoral education, provides another context through which to explore transformative learning. Stevens-Long et al. (2012) desired to explore the general understanding of adult 'development' away from the developmental stages/phases (which focuses on cognitive development) stating that it is necessary to start paying more attention emotional development. An example of the argument put forth for paying attention to the emotional growth or shifting is provided by the authors: "Schoenholz-Read's (2000) research confirms that when students report the "broadening" or "stretching" of their perspective, they feel emotionally affected by their learning. Some report increased patience, empathy, and self-confidence. They describe being less

reactive to the ideas of others, more able to listen, and to appreciate different points of view” (Steven-Long et al., 2012, p. 182). The authors also draw a link between behaviour and the concept of wisdom. They cite research that claims behaviour is a result of both cognitive and emotional growth— changes in behaviour is the observable evidence of emotional growth and that “wise people behave in ways that allow others to remain open rather than respond defensively” (p. 183). They link these ideas to the theory of transformative learning, changes in worldview and ways of operating in the world. The research query attempted to discover the different types of cognitive, personal and behavioural learning outcomes Ph.D. graduates experienced as a result of engaging in their studies in a multi-disciplinary Ph.D. program that focussed on adult education. The authors conclude that in addition to intellectual learning outcomes, students may experience a wide range of other learning outcomes that can be classed as transformative due to their perspective changing nature (advanced cognitive development, deeper and new concepts of self and capacity for emotional experiences, and deeper professional reflective practice). The doctoral context included a range of pedagogical practices such as mentoring relationships (faculty-student), self-organized peer-learning groups, workshop/conference style gatherings of the learning community (including faculty and students), and online seminars and forums. The pedagogy involved is claimed to “provide a supportive context for both the disorientation brought on by new experiences and perspectives, and the dialogue and discourse through which broad and deep learning outcomes occur” (p. 193). Stevens-Long et al. (2012) call for further research across disciplines – noting that the students in their study were predisposed for transformative learning due to the nature of their studies. Whether other disciplines have similar results is of interest. The authors claim success with their study in terms of exploring a conceptual framework but note “a question arises as to the relationship of the changes described above to the content versus the process of the educational experience” (p. 193). Hence the call for further research across disciplines.

### **Summary of related research studies**

The explorations into learning environment and outcomes utilizing transformative learning theory as a lens of interpretation outlined in the studies above, are examples of second wave theorists’ broadening the application of transformative learning theory. In formal education settings, such as a master’s degree cohort, the role of a safe learning

community is recognized as vital to enable learners to engage in deep, critical, self-reflective and dialogue. Utilizing a student-centred approach, and inviting and encouraging learners to be self-directed and try out new ways to engage with curriculum through experiential learning actives—allowing an emergent curriculum to develop—has been shown to promote transformative processes (Arroyo et al, 2015; Sohn et al., 2016; Troop, 2017), altered understanding of higher education, and changes in professional practices and identity formation (Brigham, 2011; Coke et al., 2015; Haber-Curran & Tillapaugh, 2015; Tanaka et al., 2014). Engaging in practiced-based inquiry processes has also been shown to promote critical self-reflections and moments of disjuncture that are likely to facilitate transformative learning outcomes (Duenkel et al., 2017; Napan et al, 2018). Within learning contexts that are outside of learners' comfort zones (culturally and/or cognitively) adjusting to new cultures, expectations, theoretical learnings has been shown to promote emotional responses including moments of feeling lost, confused, dysregulated sense of self and belief systems that may lead to perspective transformation and altered ways of being in the world (Brigham, 2011; Erichsen, 2011; Stevens-Long et al., 2012).

Ways to foster transformative learning in an educational environment, taking into account individual characteristics and readiness to engage in change processes (Prochaska & Norcross, 2018), is arguably different for every person. There are, however, guidelines proposed by educators who haven applied Mezirow's theory of phases of transformative learning, as well as others who propose alternative conceptions of these phases (e.g., different ways to embody learning, or reflection on external environments as opposed to critical self-reflection). Evidence for educational design that can facilitate for transformative learning is outlined in Section 2.3.2 below.

### **2.3.2. Educational design considerations for transformative learning**

The phases of transformative learning as articulated by Mezirow (1990a, 1991, 1997, 2000) and the various processes aligned with the phases have been outlined in the theory section of this chapter above (e.g., Dirkx, 1998; Dix, 2016; Kitchenham, 2008). This theory would indicate that transformative learning occurs in phases that may or may not be linear. Differentiating transformative learning that may occur in the world as part of an

event, process, or self-work compared to formal educational setting where transformative learning is a desired outcome is relevant for this thesis as the scope of transformative learning opportunities is practically infinite when considered outside of formal educational settings. There is some evidence to suggest that transformative learning in formal educational settings has a cyclical nature (Kitchenham, 2008) and/or that it requires opportunities for iteration around critical thinking and dialogue (Brigham, 2011; Brookfield, 2005; Illeris, 2014a; Mandell & Herman, 2007; Taylor & Cranton, 2012) as well as opportunities to action new perspectives through transformation action in the world (Brookfield, 2000; MacKeracher, 2012; Mezirow, 1990a; Taylor & Cranton, 2012; West, 2014). Strategies for the design of learning activities and environments that may act as catalysts for transformative learning experiences is the focus of this section of the literature review. While accepting the theoretical concepts outlined in Sections 2.1 and 2.2 earlier, considerations for design of transformative learning opportunities will focus on curricular processes, in particular, the role of experiential learning activities for sparking critical self-reflection, development of dialogic groups for reflection and critical dialogue, and methods for developing safe learning environments drawing on social learning theory and literature related to communities of practice. Hoggan's (2016) typology of transformative learning outcomes, indicate that changes may happen for people across several different domains (e.g., worldview, self, epistemological, ontological, behaviour in the world, spiritual, or cognitive), but the definition of the learning as being transformative needs to be considered by both breadth, depth, and longevity of the expressed changes. As noted by Taylor and Snyder (2012), that although "basic assumptions for fostering transformative learning have been accepted—for example, learner-centred teaching—there is a lack of a clear understanding of what it looks like in practice" (p. 49). As a result of this lack of clarity, what it looks like in practice is, a key focus of this thesis study. Various curricular and pedagogical considerations are explored in the section below. Following curricular processes, the contextual issue of learning within a community of practice is referenced in relation to developing learning communities but is but not explored in depth theoretically.

### ***Curricular processes***

Kasworm and Bowles (2012) provide guidance for educators who wish to create intentional curricular interventions that may foster transformative learning. Through reviewing over 250 research articles on transformative learning, they identified strategies

that they classified under five domains as outlined below. Within the description of each of these domains, I also refer to Tennant's (2005) description of four categories of educational design for transformative learning, as well as, examples provided by some scholars in the field.

### **Self-reflection, emotional openness, and critical disjunctures**

Specific strategies that invite moments of self-reflection that can cause cognitive and affective disorientation include having students engage with “reflective logs, critical discussions, classroom-documented reports, blogs, reflective essays, media (to include narratives), and experiential activities such as role-playing, simulated games, and cultural immersion” (Kasworm & Bowles, 2012, p. 392). Tennant (2005) refers to such processes as aligning with educational design strategies that lead to deeper levels of knowing oneself that are essential for personal change. Activities that are designed to have students articulate their worldviews, draw out assumptions and hidden thoughts, and discrepancies between actions and beliefs all assist learners to more deeply know themselves (Tennant, 2005). For example, introducing topics that challenge worldviews (e.g., race, culture, ethnicity, power, privilege) and opportunities to experience and witness new practices and perspectives, help students develop self-reflection skills as well as the capacity to open up to new ideas and alternative perspectives (Tennant, 2005).

In Mezirow and Associates' (1990) seminal work, *Fostering Critical Reflection in Adulthood*, Kitchener and King (1990) describe ways to support learners in developing higher levels of reasoning, in particular, having them “differentiate between evidence and opinion ... [and] for learners to use evidence to evaluate their intuitive beliefs about a problem ... [followed by the] need to confront and evaluate the evidence for multiple perspectives on an issue” (p. 169). This points to purposefully developing the skills to broaden thinking and become more open to the opinions and beliefs of others. In the same text, Brookfield (1990) provides guidance on ways to utilize learners' own expressions of critical incidents in their lives to challenge their beliefs, assumptions, and taken for granted understandings of their world. By creating exercises that challenge learners' assumptions around topics such as what makes good practice in education, or larger societal/political topics, educators can provide a group of adult learners (e.g., teachers) with reflective activities to describe critical incidents in their lives along with a description of their beliefs

and assumptions held about those events. This is then shared with others (e.g., classmates) and opened up for analysis. Such activities require learners to become more open to the views of others, as well as be willing to challenge their own assumptions.

### **Critical reflection**

Challenging one's perspectives through critical reflection is noted as essential in transformative processes (Mezirow, 1990b, 2012) and is considered domain two of educational design strategies by Kasworm and Bowles (2012). Beyond self-reflection, this domain refers to learning strategies that encourage an examination of worldview realities, ideas, structures, roles, culture and other topics that provide a means for learners to step outside of their comfort zone. A key component is engaging in critical discourse with others while reflecting upon one's own personal connection with the ideas. Kasworm and Bowles (2012) explain that utilizing strategies that help to develop self-reflection (e.g., journaling, reflective logs and other strategies noted in domain one) have been equated with the development of critical reflection in some of the studies they reviewed. Additionally, the intentional use of "action research projects, collaborative writing projects, engagement in critique, or the use of critical assessments" (p. 393) provide experiential learning opportunities that had learners wrestling with concepts outside of their comfort zones—creating moments of disjuncture and opportunities for critical reflection. Other intentional strategies cited included having students engage in self-analysis of their own metacognitive processes, beliefs, and worldviews followed by requirements to critique those and identify alternatives as part of a learning activity. Tennant (2005) notes that self-awareness is insufficient for transformative change, and that it is imperative that people put their self-work into practice through actions while demonstrating agency and control (his stated domain of controlling oneself/self-efficacy).

Methods that enable people to demonstrate self-efficacy include opportunities to engage in research into one's own practice—often within whole school settings—through modes of inquiry which have been shown to facilitate critical self-reflection (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009). Engaging in such inquiry can also be the basis of graduate level work where teachers share their school-based praxis inquiries with peers within their program (as opposed to within their schools). Such collaborative discourse and has been shown to be an effective way to support critical self-reflection when teachers come together "for a

common moral purpose” (Ponte, 2010, p. 68) or when teachers are provided opportunities to describe and explain their praxis with their classroom peers and faculty (Davies, 2010; Groundwater-Smith & Mockler, 2010; Hill & MacDonald, 2016). Within the discipline of integrated healthcare, Tims (2014) in his explanation of pedagogical practices within clinical disciplines notes that “one of an educator’s main tasks is to develop the intellectual openness of students that is necessary for transformative learning to take place. An initial step in removing the constraint of assumption is to employ the process of *unlearning* in the classroom” (p. 24). This unlearning is accomplished by having students question their beliefs and assumptions as well as discipline knowledge by engaging in research linked to a clinical practice (both within classroom with peers and through independent research). The aim, of embedding a culture of iterative inquiry into the program, Tims notes is to “enhance students’ self-awareness about the constraints of their own a priori thinking and to nurture a deeper trust in their own informed intuition” (p. 24).

### **Supportive social environment**

Transformative experiences in formal educational settings likely increases a learner’s sense of emotional vulnerability due to the nature of the change processes and it is, therefore, essential that educators provide a safe, respectful and supportive learning environment (Kasworm & Bowles, 2012). These strategies make up domain three articulated by Kasworm and Bowles research review. As noted earlier in this chapter, the role of the educator, facilitator, mentor or instructor has been noted to be key in the development of a democratic learning environment to ensure ethical and professional practices that guide learners to grapple with their own individual reflection while engaged in critical discourse with others (Arends, 2014; Bondy et al, 2012; Brookfield, 2005; Illeris, 2014a; Merriam et al., 2007; Taylor & Cranton, 2012). Educators take on a role of facilitator of the process within the environment, providing opportunities for learners to engage in critical knowledge examination and critical discourse, while redirecting the learning processes as appropriate (Kasworm & Bowles, 2012). From their review of research, Kasworm and Bowles noted that strategies that enable supportive and affirmative practices amongst students and instructors “enabled an active dialogue of care through which they sought new understandings and new knowledge through one another” (p. 393). Students learn to listen to others more deeply and explore one another’s perspectives. “Imaginal dialogue, class discussions of educational autobiographies or life histories, or

exploration of conflictual ideas” (p. 394) are all strategies that enabled mutual support. Essential in the supportive environment is the individual space to wrestle with ideas, personal disorientating dilemmas, while providing a safe space to land and explore those issues with others.

To me the development of a safe and supportive learning environment is a context issue in educational design and not really a teaching ‘strategy’ and I will outline the importance of this context further in Section 2.3.2 regarding learning communities below.

### **Use of the arts-based approaches including literature, film, and drama as tools**

The use of cultural media in a range of arts-based strategies has been shown “to enhance context awareness, to engage in visual or written disjunctures from the learner’s sense of life understanding and realities, and to provide experiences suggesting future options and alternatives to current worldviews and life realities” (Kasworm & Bowles, 2012, p. 394). The research reviewed for arts-based learning activities makes up what Kasworm and Bowles termed domain four of the research literature. Tennant (2005) discusses a category of educational design for transformative learning as being “caring for oneself (paying attention to oneself, watch yourself)” (p. 110). Writing activities, theatrical activities (e.g., improv, role playing), critical examination of multi-media, and engaging in artistic endeavours have all been shown to act as catalysts for critical self-reflection leading to transformative learning (Kasworm & Bowles, 2012; Tennant, 2005). As noted by Lawrence (2012) perspective transformation may not occur as a rational process of “interrogating our assumptions and correcting the distortions in our meaning schemes and perspectives” (p. 472). He uses the term “extrarational” (p. 472) to explain that such perspective challenges may not be representative of ‘rational vs. irrational’ but rather may be reflective of ways of knowing that go beyond rationality to describe a process that requires our imagination, intuition, or other subconscious means (e.g., dreams, meditations) enabling “meaning-making expressed through symbol, image, and emotional expression” (p. 472). Experiential learning activities may enable learners to tap into the non-rational elements of self through experiencing the evocative and provocative nature of the arts. “Although art can evoke emotions in others, the artist can sometimes experience unexpected reactions from his or her own work” (p. 474). Lawrence quotes McNiff (2008) noting that “[i]n the creative process, the most meaningful insights often come by surprise

unexpectedly, and even against the will of the creator” (cited in Lawrence, p. 474). Brigham (2011) explicated how an arts-informed process proved insight into the equal importance of “the rational/cognitive and the extrarational/affective dimensions ... in transformative learning” (p. 51). Dirx’s (2008) explorations of the emotional and imaginative capacities in relation to adult learning can also be seen to be supportive of engaging with arts-based approaches when transformative learning is a desired outcome.

### **Holistic, affective, and spiritual processes**

Domain five described by Kasworm and Bowles (2012) refers to the development of “critical consciousness, reflection, and altered worldview” (p. 394) through pedagogical practices associated with contemplative practices, the development of empathic connections with others as well as “forms of culturally responsive teaching strategies” (p. 394). These types of learning design elements allow for engaging with the affective domain as well as expanded consciousness through mindfulness or contemplative practice. The belief is that such work moves away from the rational processes associated with learning and facilitates a more holistic engagement that may impact worldviews and emotion more directly. Similarly, Tennant (2005) found that many designs for transformative learning could be categorized as “(re)creating oneself” (p. 111) through processes not unlike therapeutic catharsis (Tennant cites narrative therapist Michael White, 1991) that may come through deepening insight and externalizing of oppressive thoughts and practices into a social realm as opposed to an internalized one. Narrative therapy is a post-modern therapeutic modality that draws heavily upon feminist theory and Freire’s (1970; 1974) work on challenging concepts of oppression and developing critical consciousness (Prochaska & Norcross, 2018). It is with insight that commitment to change occurs enabling an individual to ‘reauthor’ the story of their lives and develop “personal agency in the pursuit of new narratives about the self” (Tennant, 2005, p. 112).

### **Summary of educational design considerations for transformative learning**

While what may work for some students, may not work for others, there are some useful guidelines outlined in the research literature that support educational design for transformative learning. Critical reflection may be a solitary endeavour, but it may also be supported and facilitated through learning activities that a learner may not otherwise

engage in, if not encouraged (expected) to because of curriculum requirements. Engaging in learning activities such as journaling, self-inquiry, taking stock of beliefs and biases, and sharing insights with others in the learning community may promote feelings of vulnerability and disjuncture which can also support critical reflective practices and the ability to become more open to new perspectives. The use of arts-based, experiential activities has been shown to cause discomfort and disorientation as the acts of demonstrating thinking and learning in alternative formats (e.g., art, poetry, drama) can enable the learner to engage with their processes on affective as well as cognitive domains. This may surprise the learner and provide opportunities for perspective shifting and critical reflection.

In addition to designing learning activities and events that can act as catalysts for self reflection, critical reflection, dialogue, and consciousness raising contemplative practices that may lead to transformative learning, the role of creating a supportive learning environment has been stressed in the literature reviewed above. Without going into great depth on social learning theories and the psychology behind them, in the following section I will explore briefly the relevance of learning communities, and in particular, the concept of a community of practice for professional learning as it is relevant to the study described in this thesis document.

### **2.3.3. Learning in a community**

As indicated earlier in this paper, the importance of interactions with others in transformative learning appears to be undisputed. Critical reflective discourse is espoused by multiple theorists and researchers as being essential in formalized educational settings that aim to facilitate transformative learning (e.g., Brookfield, 2005; Illeris, 2014a; Mezirow, 1990b, 1991; Taylor & Cranton, 2012). Similarly, the need to create a safe environment where learners are enabled and encouraged to take risks and be vulnerable has been outlined by many researchers of transformative learning and highlighted by Kasworm and Bowles (2012) in their review of 250 research studies.

The creation of a learning community is likely driven not only by the type of learners, or the anticipated learning outcomes, but also by the educator's philosophical

perspective on education (e.g., Bai, 2012; Barnett, 2004; Dirkx, 2012; Tennant, 2005). Hill (2012) indicates that theory development around learning communities is diverse ranging from those that explore community types, as well as others that explore theoretical intersections that inform pedagogical practices and offer insight into affordances for learning within different learning community constructs. The theoretical and research foci regarding the development and study of learning within a learning community, has its foundations in the literature on social learning theories, in particular, social constructivist theory (Hill, 2012). Other theories, with a guide to informing alternative modes of delivery, inform interactions such as social presence and social interdependence theories (Holly & Steiner, 2005; Hughes, 2007; Ke et al., 2011; Tsai, 2012; Tu & Mclsaac, 2002; Weidlich & Bastiaens, 2019). Under the social learning umbrella, the theories of situated cognition and situated learning (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998; Wenger, Wilson, 1993) also influence the development of learning communities, with a particular focus on the role of authentic, real-world situated learning within a community of practice (CoP). For transformative learning, the role that others play in enabling critical reflective dialogue and opportunities to witness and be witnessed has been expressed earlier in this review (e.g., Arends, 2014; Brookfield, 2005; Illeris, 2014a; Mezirow, 1990b, 1991; Taylor & Cranton, 2012). Hodge (2014) also noted that it may be during the trajectory of learning within a CoP and the movement from one CoP to another CoP, that transformative learning and identity transformation may occur. In this study, the M.Ed. EP students were engaged in professional inquiry and reflective practice within a community of practice learning environment and for that reason, some relevant literature related to CoP, and situated learning are briefly outlined below.

### **Situated cognition and situated learning**

Wilson and Myers (1999) describe situated cognition as attempting to understand both individual cognitive processes and the social constructions created by people in context with other people (or socially understood circumstances) and that situated cognition is not dependent of actual concrete events and can refer to more generalized and/or internalized understandings (Lave, 1991 cited in Wilson & Myers, 1999). Within situated learning, the concept of 'legitimate peripheral participation' has been defined by Lave and Wenger "as a descriptor of engagement in social practice that entails learning as an integral constituent" (1991, p. 35). They go on to explain that peripheral participation

does not necessarily imply that one can become a 'central participant' but that rather all positions are fluid in a community of practice and that "[p]eripheral participation is about being located in the social world. *Changing* locations and perspectives are part of actors' learning trajectories, developing identities, and forms of membership" (p. 36). What enables the participation to become legitimized is a complex interplay between the various members of the community of practice, which involves social (community) rules, understanding of influence and power as well as demonstrated ability or skill acquisition. It would seem to me, therefore, that becoming legitimized with the CoP involves more than learning the concepts and or skills necessary to be recognized as competent in the field of study/participation, it also involves learning the social and professional rules and that define the community, and developing a sense of belonging, professional identity, and level of professional confidence within the CoP. When CoPs operate from a collaborative and egalitarian perspective, the sense of safety and connection to others within the community may arguably help to develop purpose, a platform for critical reflective discourse, and opportunities to plan and enact new ways of being in the world—all essential phases of transformational learning (Mezirow, 1991).

When utilizing a CoP learning environment within a higher education setting, cohort models of programs that focus on adult and social learning theory exemplified through creating safe environments where learners can engage in shared problem solving, sharing of proficiencies in a practice, and critical discussion and reflection could potentially optimize the conditions of a community of practice (Hill, 2012; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998). The range of experiences in the cohort potentially affords exploration of practice through activities such as theory investigations, discussion, collaboration and critical reflection of individual practices within the context of the learning community. These activities, within the social structure of a learning community, may act as catalysts for shifts in individuals' perspectives, resulting in transformative learning as explored earlier in this chapter (e.g., Arends, 2014; Illeris, 2014a, 2014b; Mezirow, 1990a).

In pondering future areas of research to add to learning community theory base, Hill (2012) notes that a recent trend that requires further research is to attempt to answer the question: "Is it possible to enable transformative learning experiences for members of the learning community?" (p. 280). This is an area of active research as noted by Kasworm

and Bowles (2012) in their description of transformative learning research studies focus on three reviews of supportive social environments as necessary for transformative learning. Wenger (1998) supports the concept that designing for learning within a community of practice requires attention to a multiple of needs and perspectives from a position of flexibility. He argues that “[*Learning cannot be designed: it can only be designed for* – that is, facilitated or frustrated” (p. 122) and that when designing a CoP for optimal learning it is important to consider ways and means for students to democratically interact as well as ways to reify their knowledge through creation of artefacts and/or actions in the world.

### **How CoP informs transformative learning theories**

There are some potential commonalities between transformative learning and learning communities as paradigms for learning. Commonalities may be seen in how both conceptualize learning as resulting in learners’ growing/changing in their self-conceptualizations through group processes highlighting the role of critical discourse, and reflective practices enabling recognition of personal subjective dilemmas in relation to the discourse and/or positioning within the professional community. For example, Hill (2012) noted that the theoretical foundations for learning communities are influenced by theories including social cultural theory, social presence theory, social interdependence theory, and situated learning theory. These theories relate to individuals learning within groups and adjusting their understanding of concepts through interactions with others, as well as adjusting their sense of self via processes associated with identity and presence within the group. Learning communities, according to Hill (2012), are also influenced by learners’ individual relationship to self-regulation and self-directedness regarding their learning. Stahl (2004) emphasized that from a social constructivist perspective, learning occurs through shared meaning making through group discourse processes.

Similarly, with regards to transformational learning theory, Mezirow (2000) emphasized the need for emotional maturity in learning and the ability to be self-directed and open to reflective practices which is arguably directed related to what Hill (2012) referred to as self-regulation and self-directedness. Central to transformative learning is the concept of meaning structures and meaning perspectives becoming transformed through critical, reflective discourse. Mezirow (2000) notes that learning happens in one

of four ways: elaborating existing frames of reference, learning new frames of reference, transforming habits of mind, and/or transforming points of view (p. 19). Others, such as Illeris (2014a; 2014b) and Tennant (2005) explore how the concept of identity is transformed through learning processes. From my understanding of these theories, what may be identified as a differences or disconnections between theories of transformative learning and learning communities, lie within core influences on the theory development which resulted in different foci for articulating learning.

Mezirow's early theory development drew upon theories related to social structure, power and identity (e.g., feminism, social justice, oppression). He stated; "Transformation refers to a movement through time of reformulation of reified structures of meaning by reconstructing dominant narratives" (2000, p. 19). It is through such reformulation that individuals' meaning structures and perspectives are adjusted resulting in individuals' identity shifting (Illeris, 2014a; Tennant, 2005). The earlier formulations of this theory were explicitly linked to individual transformation in relation to their relationship with social structures and power (Kitchenham, 2008; Baumgartner, 2012). The theory of transformative learning, however, as explained earlier in this chapter, has expanded over time to consider learning within a broader landscape. The core articulation of learning is seen through a process of critical dialogue and individual reflection. Mezirow (1998) stated; "learning to think for oneself involves becoming critically reflective of assumptions and participating in discourse to validate beliefs, intentions, values and feelings" (p. 197). Transformative learning occurs when an individual encounters a dilemma or conflict that "cannot be resolved through present meaning schemes or through learning new meaning schemes; the resolution comes through a redefinition of the problem" (Kitchenham, 2008, p. 112). Transformation thus arises through critical self-reflection on the assumptions underlying existing meaning schemes or perspectives. Learning is, therefore, articulated through concepts and the individual articulating those through discourse and, perhaps, through actions.

Learning community as a theory draws significantly upon context related theories such as theories of practice and situated experience, and the relationships that support individual's learning trajectories within those communities (Hill, 2012; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998). An underlying principle of learning communities is the role of peers

and community members in the facilitation of learning by doing. Within communities of practice literature this is related to legitimate peripheral participation (Lave & Wenger, 1991) and the concept of neophytes learning from masters, or those with more experience, other alternative viewpoints, within the practice community and adjusting their sense of (professional) identity over time through practice, feedback and reflection and/or through transferring of practice to a new community (Hodge, 2014). Wenger (1998) notes that social learning must integrate a sense of belonging in the community, identity as 'becoming', and being able to ground learning in experience and practice. Although not all learning communities are communities of practice, and therefore do not necessarily measure individuals' sense of belonging within a practice community, the articulation of learning is nonetheless often focussed on demonstrated action, a strengthening of practices and participation within the community, as well as an individual ability to appropriately engage in discourse in relation to the practice (Greeno, Collins & Resnick, 1996). Such activities arguably align with Mezirow's phases 5-10 (Table 2.1) where individuals explore new roles, plan action, take action, and integrate new perspectives into their ways of being in the world (Mezirow, 1991).

In addition to comparing the theoretical foundations and the demonstration of learning that are common and/or unique to both transformative learning and learning communities, there is, I believe, an area of key intersection where these theories may be used to inform one another. Depending upon the structure and practices of a learning community, it may or may not provide an environment through which transformative learning can occur. Mezirow (2000) notes that in order to foster transformative learning, adult educators need to create safe, protected environments "in which the conditions of social democracy" deemed necessary for transformative learning are supported (p. 31). The idea of creating a safe, socially democratic learning space is also common with the concept of learning community and communities of practice theory (Greeno et al., 1996; Hill, 2012; Wenger, 1998). A challenge is that not all learning communities may operate from such a democratic position, or with the will to enable 'becoming' of the learners. Amongst possible barriers are logistical issues, individual learner and faculty readiness, as well as the interplay between personalities that may hinder the development of a democratic learning community. The intersection between these theories may potentially be seen, therefore, to lie within the pedagogy employed within the learning community.

Allowing the environmental factors to occur and time for the individuals to engage in the process of dialogue and critical reflection requires trusting learning community theory to result in transformative learning.

It is possible that as an environment for learning, a Community of Practice can be optimized for transformative learning outcomes when the design of the learning activities and the CoP allows for emergent experience. Ensuring space for dialogue and engagement—to participate within the community—to explore and action new ideas and roles—as well as, the creation of artefacts, and time for critical reflection while negotiating emerging recognition of self in practice is essential for a CoP learning environment which aims to facilitate transformative learning (Wenger, 1998). As Wenger noted, learning outcomes are not guaranteed, but careful learning design can help to facilitate the possibilities.

### **Relevance to this study**

As outlined in Chapter 1, the learning community for the M.Ed. EP program has been designed to function as a community of practice (Hill et al., 2019; Hill & MacDonald, 2016; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998). Although all the student members of the cohorts were practicing K-12 teachers, they came together with a wide range of teaching disciplines, teaching levels in K-12, years of experience, as well as a variety of teaching contexts—for example, ranging from special education in rural elementary settings through to high school math and English in urban settings. These heterogeneous mixture of educators, combined with the SFU faculty, created communities of practice whereby there were experts in some aspects (e.g., SFU faculty and research scholars, K-12 teachers with a decade plus of classroom teaching experience) learning together with educators who were fairly new teachers with only a few years in a permanent position (two years or so in permanent position with around five years as a 'teacher on call'), or those who had very different specialized practices who may work across age groups and school settings (e.g., special education, music teachers, physical education teachers). While the pedagogy employed by the faculty of the M.Ed. EP is not under any scrutiny in this thesis study, the faculty did(do) intentionally facilitate curricular approaches that may facilitate transformative learning as outlined by the participants of this research (Chapter 4 Findings). Participants offered narratives of transformative change—personal and

professional—that were expressed as arising from specific learning activities as well as the learning community environment. The M.Ed. EP faculty do employ a deliberate relational pedagogy (Noddings, 2012; Hill & MacDonald, 2016) and the participants in this study (Chapter 4 Findings), as well as results from another study that focussed on the graduate diploma (Hill & MacDonald, 2016), spoke highly of the role of the community in their experiences.

## **2.4. Summary**

Transformative learning as an articulated theory has been evolving for over 40 years. It has grown in breadth from Mezirow's initial description of individual rational and cognitive processes associated with perspective transformation. While core processes are recognized as essential for transformative learning to occur (see Table 2.1), these phases align generally under core categories of engaging in critical reflection, reflective discourse, and transformative action in the world. The nature of what transforms for individuals experiencing transformative learning was understood by Mezirow (1978, 1991) to primarily be cognitive meaning perspectives. Through a second wave of theory development over the last two decades in particular (Arends, 2014; Cranton & Taylor, 2012; Dix, 2016; Gunnlaugson, 2005, 2007, 2008), the theory has evolved to include awareness of contextual influences (Jordi, 2011; Lawrence, 2012; Taylor & Snyder, 2012) that support transformative learning processes as well as broader descriptions of what transforms for people including sense of self and identity structures (Illeris, 2014a; Tennant, 2005; West, 2014) and ways of thinking about, and being in the world (Barnett, 2004; Brigham, 2011; Ferrer et al., 2005; Morgan, 2012; Su, 2011).

As an active research area in education, there have been numerous studies that have explored descriptions of transformative learning over the last several decades. In my review, however, I have found that these do not often clarify the depth, nor the longevity of the transformative outcomes. Additionally, these published studies are often missing a clear description of the curricular and/or environmental processes involved in facilitating transformative learning. Therefore, while transformative learning is an active research area, there remains some gaps in the literature. This includes studies that focus on evidence of sustained transformative learning outcomes for those who have studied in

profession-based formal graduate level education. Another area that may be under represented in the published literature are studies that include descriptions on the learning context as well as curricular processes, along with professed breadth of transformative learning outcomes (Hoggan, 2016). This research study aims to add to the second wave literature on transformative learning and provide a contextualized description of how sustained personal and professional changes have occurred for the participants—exploring impactful student experiences, as well as an exploration of long term transformative learning outcomes that include sustained changes in professional praxis and professional identity (Illeris, 2014a), as well as descriptions of change to knowledge, belief, and worldviews ( Mezirow, 1991).

In Chapter 3 Methodological Approach, I outline the methodology employed in this study. This is followed by the phenomenological presentation of the findings in Chapter 4, an interpretation of the findings in Chapter 5 Discussion. In Chapter 6, I provide a discussion of the limits of this research, recommendations for further research, and overall conclusions of this study.

## Chapter 3. Methodological Approach

The methodology of phenomenology is such that it posits an approach toward research that aims at being presuppositionless; in other words, this is a methodology that tries to ward off any tendency towards constructing a predetermined set of fixed procedures, techniques and concepts that would rule-govern the research project. (van Manen, 1990, p. 29)

In this chapter, I present the methodology undertaken in this phenomenological study. I start with a brief description of my understanding of phenomenology as a philosophy and methodology in order to provide a framework for the deeper description of the research project. The research questions and context are described below, as are the specific procedures I utilized to establish trustworthiness in this study. Ethical considerations are acknowledged, and I also provide a description of the steps enacted to ensure ethical interactions with participants and M.Ed. faculty, starting with participant recruitment, the interview process, as well as appropriate follow-up. Phenomenological reduction, which is the data analysis procedure utilized, is described in detail in this chapter and is also further illuminated through the data presentation in Chapter 4 Findings.

### 3.1. Introduction

Over the last four or five years I have been engaged in an exploration of phenomenology as both a philosophy and a research method. For the purposes of this project, there are four key texts that have informed my understanding: Clark Moustakas' (1994) book, *Phenomenological Research Methods*; Amedeo Giorgi's (2009) book, *The Descriptive Phenomenological Method in Psychology*; and Max van Manen's books *Phenomenology of Practice* (2014) and *Researching Lived Experiences* (1990). The latter two texts are the ones that most deeply influenced the phenomenological methodology used in this study for both data gathering and analysis. I have also read commentaries on

phenomenological approaches to research that are outlined on different university websites (e.g., Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy) and a variety of published research studies in order to gain a 'big picture' understanding of the varieties of approaches. John Creswell's (2013) book *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design* has also informed my overall understanding of how phenomenology compares with other qualitative methodological approaches, and Guba's (1981) article on assessing trustworthiness of naturalistic inquiries has been beneficial in the design and analysis phases of this study.

As outlined in sections below, I went through a form of 'methodological crisis' when I first started the phenomenological reduction process. I became tangled up with the concept of re-authoring the participants' narratives and caught up in a vortex of discomfort regarding what felt like supposition required in subscribing meanings to the words of others. This was a real dilemma for me, and I found myself questioning both the ethics of the phenomenological reduction process as well as the legitimacy of the methodology as a whole. I halted the analysis process and turned to other methods of analysis—for instance, I queried whether this study would be better presented as a case study. I read Yin (1994), Stake (1995) and Gomm, Hammersley and Foster's (2000) descriptions of case study methodology, as well as Saldaña's (2013) coding manual and concluded that the form of interviews that had been conducted did not match case study methodologies nor did the transcripts lend themselves to coding strategies as described. As a Registered Clinical Counsellor, I turned my attention to exploring narrative methods due to the natural fit such approaches have with therapeutic processes. The work of Riessman (2008), and Holstein and Gubrium's (2012), as well as Clandinin's (2007) and Clandinin and Connelly's (2000) comprehensive texts helped me to shed light on how narrative explorations could have been beneficial for exploring the research questions posed for this study. While I contemplated changing my analysis approach to a narrative format I felt might offer a faster process, I was also determined to engage with phenomenology as a new methodology for me to learn. I, therefore, circled back to the reading of van Manen (1990, 2014) and did some self-work regarding my own discomfort. I came back to my original intentions for this project which were to develop my skills and understandings as a researcher, and to provide an opportunity to reflect and honour the depth of experiences shared by the M.Ed. alumni which I believe can be best understood through a phenomenological lens. This crisis, and subsequent self-work, provided an opportunity for

me to go through my own journey of transformative learning as a researcher. The result has been an embracing of phenomenology as a methodology as well as a deeper appreciation of the depth and breadth of a variety of qualitative research methods.

### **3.1.1. Making sense of phenomenology as a philosophy and as a research method**

Much of the literature I've read describes phenomenology as a branch of philosophy that has evolved over time, and in particular throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Phenomenology is defined as a study of "first-person reports of life experiences" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 84) and "conscious experience as experienced from the subjective or first person point of view" (Smith, 2016, ¶. 3), with an understanding that the reality of these experiences (objects and events) is based on a perception of the phenomena that is held in human consciousness and is not independent of consciousness (Mastin, 2008; van Manen, 1990). It is argued by some that phenomenology has a relational place amongst the other four main branches of philosophy: "ontology (the study of being or what is), epistemology (the study of knowledge), logic (the study of valid reasoning), and ethics (the study of right and wrong action)" (Smith, 2016, ¶. 3). The concepts of what determines a phenomenon and how it is experienced (e.g., through senses, emotions, actions, cognition – in the moment of the action/experience or via reflection after the fact) have resulted in different approaches to how phenomenology is described and explored.

The accepted founder of modern phenomenology is Edmund Husserl (noted by all authors I've read, e.g., Giorgi, 2009; Creswell, 2013; Tuohy, Cooney, Dowling et al., 2013). His initial articulation of phenomenology was in his book *Logical Investigations* (1901) and drew some key components (i.e., concept of intentionality) from his colleagues Franz Brentano (philosopher and psychologist) and Carl Stumpf (Smith, 2016; Mastin, 2008). During this time period, psychology was also gaining ground as a discipline and the field of individual psychology (and psychoanalysis) began to be studied empirically. It is not surprising, therefore, that Husserl's initial work which focussed on individuals' descriptions of their experiences was perceived as a form of 'descriptive psychology' and has also been referred to as 'Realist Phenomenology' (Mastin, 2008). In writing *Ideas* (1913), Husserl further developed his theory, introducing the concepts of 'noesis' (the act of

consciousness) and 'noemata' (phenomena at which consciousness is directed), and this later work has been referred to as Transcendental Phenomenology (Moustakas, 1994; Mastin, 2008). According to Moustakas, Husserl focussed "on pure consciousness and pure ego" (p. 48) and that "transcendental phenomenology is a scientific study of the appearance of things, of phenomena just as we see them and as they appear to us in consciousness" (p. 49). With Husserlian phenomenology, the practitioner is required to set aside all assumptions and preconceptions through a process of 'bracketing' the experience (outlined later in this chapter)—and this, in effect, decontextualizes the experience and puts the focus on the conscious awareness of the experience. The intended result is a description of the lived experiences of others without influence of the researcher's own lived experienced or bias (Lopez & Willis, 2004).

Others, such as Heidegger (who was also a student and subsequent colleague of Husserl), believed that we should not bracket the world of the experience, but "rather we interpret our activities and the meaning things have for us by looking to our contextual relations to things in the world" (Smith, 2016, ¶. 44). The shift for Heidegger was from a focus on the intentionality (how we direct our attention to phenomena, i.e., consciousness) to a focus on the way in which we operate in the world within the context of experiences. In his work *Being and Time*, (original 1953, English translation in 2010) Heidegger describes phenomenology as a "*fundamental ontology*, from which alone all other ontologies can originate" (2010, p. 14). He defined the concept of 'Dasein' as meaning 'being there' in reference to human beings, and the idea that Dasein is 'there' within the world (the human being is being there—embedded in the world) and therefore is experienced within a context amongst other objects, people, and spaces. According to Smith: "One of Heidegger's most innovative ideas was his conception of the "ground" of being, looking to modes of being more fundamental than the things around us" (2016, ¶. 46). It is contended that Heideggerian phenomenology is a form of existential phenomenology, which "studies concrete human existence, including our experience of free choice or action in concrete situations" (Smith, 2016, ¶. 39). According to Smith (¶. 17), Heidegger stressed that we are often not conscious of everyday actions that we engage in. And that

as psychoanalysts have stressed, much of our intentional mental activity is not conscious at all, but may become conscious in the process of therapy

or interrogation, as we come to realize how we feel or think about something. We should allow, then, that the domain of phenomenology—our own experience—spreads out from conscious experience into semi-conscious and even unconscious mental activity, along with relevant background conditions implicitly invoked in our experience. (2016, ¶. 17)

To me the above quote and discussion indicates that Heidegger's definition of phenomenology suggests that we operate in the world often at a subconscious level in our actions and therefore Husserl's idea of 'intentionality' is perhaps not inclusive of many of our experiences, which may occur without conscious intention. Through questioning and/or reflection, our awareness may be invoked regarding intentions (conscious or not) that may have directed our experiences. In Heidegger's approach, there is intention behind awareness of context for the individuals being researched as well as for the researcher and while this interpretative approach "does not negate the use of theoretical orientation or conceptual framework as a component of the inquiry ... [it is used] to focus the inquiry where research is needed and used to make decisions about sample, subjects, and research questions to be addressed" (Lopez & Willis, 2004, p. 730).

van Manen (2014) outlines the growing breadth of phenomenology as a philosophy providing an outline of a number of different concepts (e.g., ethical phenomenology, existential phenomenology, gender phenomenology, and sociological phenomenology—to name just a few), as well as new and evolving phenomenological methodologies. What struck me, as a good fit for this study, is the 'Phenomenology of Practice' as outlined by van Manen. Drawing upon the work of seminal phenomenological philosophers and scholars, Phenomenology of Practice differentiates from the more "purely philosophical phenomenologies that deal with theoretical and technical philosophical issues" (p. 213) by instead focussing intentionally on the practices of professionals in their disciplinary fields including developing research "contributions to professional practices in education, pedagogy, psychology, nursing, medicine, and so forth" (p. 213).

My review of the phenomenological methodological literature suggests that there are fairly consistent steps employed when conducting a phenomenological research study (e.g., phenomenological interview, the epoché and the steps of phenomenological reduction and bracketing). The processes involved in the analysis (phenomenological reduction) are presented differently depending on the philosophical bent of the researcher.

For example, Husserlian approaches aim to describe phenomenon whereas Heideggerian methods endeavour to interpret experience (van Manen, 2014). Giorgi (2009) offers a step-by-step three-phase reduction process that he considers to be a modified Husserlian approach, but is still, nonetheless, focussed on description. van Manen's (2014) text, with the broader descriptions of phenomenological philosophies and methodologies, provided guidance on a number of considerations for both framing of the study from a philosophical viewpoint, (i.e., Heideggerian or interpretative approach) as well as offering more options for the reduction process. I gravitated towards the more interpretative strategies outlined in the van Manen text based on the open process, and the emphasis on open curiosity when working with the data (described in more detail later in this chapter). Despite variations in approaches, it appears to me that ultimately, phenomenological research seeks to illuminate the essence of lived experience as expressed by different individuals (van Manen, 1990; Yüksel & Yildirim, 2015). Tuohy et al. (2013) note that the word 'phenomenology' relates both to a philosophy and a research method and that "[t]he aim of 'interpretative phenomenology', also referred to as 'hermeneutics', is to describe, understand and interpret participants' experiences" (p. 18).

Phenomenology, is therefore, a methodology that enables researchers to gain a deeper appreciation of a contextualized lived experience. As Yüksel and Yildirim (2015) note when conducting research in educational settings, phenomenological studies "generally embody lived experience, perception, and feelings of participants about a phenomenon" (p. 1). It was such an understanding that I wished to explore with the master's students for this study and for that reason, I embarked on a phenomenological approach would best allow for depth of exploration of the lived experience. In the words of van Manen (1990); "Phenomenology aims at gaining a deeper understanding of the nature or meaning of our everyday experiences" (p. 9) and "the essence of a phenomenon is a universal which can be described through a study of the structure that governs the instance or particular manifestations of the essence of that phenomenon" (p. 10). Through interview, I explored with participants reflections of their lived experience as well as aspects of the structure and context of that experience (i.e., curricular aspects and learning environment) that facilitated their lived experience. While attempting to bracket my preconceptions and adopt an open stance (i.e., a Husserlian descriptive stance) in order to not specifically lead the participants, I tend to agree with the Heidegger's

contention that it is not really possible to remove all conscious awareness of the experience one is researching, and it is important to remain open to the participants' descriptions of their lived experience (Lopez & Willis, 2004). Additionally, my interest in transformative learning within educational contexts provided a framework for this research. I wanted to take precautions, however, to ensure that I did not lead the participants during the interview but rather that at times, I redirected them and encouraged them to expand on their narratives. Such techniques are in alignment with van Manen's (2014) descriptions of an interpretive phenomenological method. In engaging in the phenomenological reduction process, I followed the general guidance proposed by van Manen (2014), but due to the lack of specific step-by-step exemplars in his text, I referred to Giorgi's (2009) and Moustakas' (1994) texts for the specifics of conducting a reduction, which is a common expectation in phenomenological writing processes.

In the rest of this chapter I outline the specific focus and purpose of this study, as well as the methods employed and considerations for ethical conduct throughout the actioning of the research, analysis and dissemination of the results.

### **3.2. Research Problem Statement**

As much as I am committed to the belief that education is a relational endeavour and that social-cultural pedagogies are established methods for the facilitation of meaningful learning—a potential reality in today's climate is that post-secondary institutions often experience pressures related to efficiency, cost-benefit analyses, and other business related pressures (Tuchman, 2009, 2011). Post-secondary institutions may not be able to rely on their reputations for research or teaching excellence to attract funding or students. Fewer public-funded dollars and more degree granting institutions equates to a competitive marketplace, which in turn results in innovation of programs, aggressive marketing and accessibility strategies. Both undergraduate and graduate programming is influenced by the perception of shifting operational dynamics and priorities (Tuchman, 2009, 2011). In British Columbia, with the concentration of the population primarily held in the Lower Mainland area of the Greater Vancouver Regional District, there is pressure on public institutions, including universities, to demonstrate accountability (BC Government, 2018a), optimize outreach to the population of the

province, as well as closely align with government initiatives related to workplace skills and training (BC Government, 2018b).

As an Instructional Development Consultant at a public funded institution, I experience the pressure for public accountability noted above, and wrestle with my desire to design educational experiences that are relational focussed and offer situated learning opportunities. Beyond my own professional dilemma, for programs and their disciplines that value holistic processes and outcomes in educational practice—such as expressions of personal or professional growth that are not easily quantifiable but are rather more intrinsic, or expressed through a more positive outlook or comprehensive way of being in the world—a resistance, or conflict, may arise when faced with the increasing movement to streamline delivery process, and/or adopt business concepts such as a ‘lean’ model of supply and demand for educational programming (see for example, Ziskovsky & Ziskovsky, 2007). Within our current educational environment, I hope to add to the conversation regarding quality of programming by uncovering and shedding light on the lasting professional and personal impacts of the M.ED. EP context rich, professional educational experience. For faculty and others that are engaged in curriculum development and/or program design, specifically for programs that aim to enrich professional practices and identities, the meaningful learning moments and supportive environment descriptions provided by the participants in this study may contribute to design considerations for other programs.

### **3.3. Research Purpose Statement**

In conducting this research, I am attempting to add to the second wave of transformative learning educational research literature. Specifically, I recognized potential gaps in the published literature regarding evidence of sustained transformative outcomes in formal graduate level education, as well as a lack of clarity on specific learning activities and environmental considerations that help to facilitate meaningful learning processes and outcomes. I was also curious about the form that personal and professional changes took for people and how they articulated those changes. The purpose of this phenomenological study was to reflectively explore the experiences of learning within a professional cohort community with alumni of a M.Ed. program in Educational Practice 16-20 months post-

graduation. In particular, I queried what significant and meaningful learning experiences occurred for them, how that came about for them as individuals, and any subsequent, continued influence on their professional practices and personal lives.

### **3.4. Research Questions and Data Collection Instrument**

When I began this Ph.D. journey, I was employed as an M.Ed. in School Counselling program director and faculty member at City University of Seattle (Vancouver, BC campus). After my first semester in the Ph.D. program, I changed my employment and joined BCIT as an Instructional Development Consultant. In my new role I was no longer a subject matter expert designing educational opportunities for my own teaching and practice discipline, but rather a consultant offering advice and direction on educational design for specified outcomes in other disciplines. As outlined in Chapter 1 Introduction, my varied work and personal interests were considerations for me when exploring opportunities to research. I was curious to explore learning contexts (cohort and learning communities) as well as educational design for transformative learning. By way of consulting with faculty at SFU, an opportunity to research the lived experiences of the M.Ed. EP alumni arose. My aim in developing this study was to gain insight into the meaningful learning activities, environment considerations, and outcomes expressed by the alumni in order to assist with future educational design considerations, enhance current praxis, and to provide data to the SFU Field Program department that may be valuable to them for ongoing program development considerations.

The questions that guided my scholarship when conducting the study and writing up this thesis document are noted below.

#### **3.4.1. Central Question**

What are the essences of the experience of being a master's student in the M.Ed. Educational Practice degree program?

### **3.4.2. Sub- Questions**

What are the learning design influences (environmental and activities) that impacted the alumni's experiences as a learner?

In what ways, if any, do alumni report fundamental, or transformative, changes in their professional practices?

In what ways, if any, do alumni report fundamental, or transformative, changes in their personal lives?

### **3.4.3. Data collection procedures and instrument**

The big picture research questions noted above lend themselves to an idiographic approach "which attempts to understand phenomena in the particular context in which they arise and which is not oriented to the discovery of causal laws" (Haslam & McGarty, 2003, p. 361). In the case of this study, I conducted an unstructured phenomenological interview to explore alumni's experiences during the M.Ed. EP three-year process, as well as taking note of personal and professional changes that have developed as a result of their learning and the learning processes they were engaged in.

Following contact from willing alumni of the M.Ed. program, I arranged a mutually convenient time and place for an hour-long interview to take place. Half of the participants invited me to their homes and the other half I met at their schools at the end of a school day. Interviews took place in the following communities: Vancouver, Burnaby, Coquitlam, Port Coquitlam, Port Moody, Maple Ridge, Langley, Surrey, South Surrey/White Rock, Mission and Chilliwack. In each instance, I brought along a beverage of their choosing, such as a latte, tea, soft drink (arranged via email) and the first approximately 15 minutes of the time together was spent in 'getting to know you' conversation to build comfort and trust between us. For example, I asked them about their schools, positively commented on their classrooms, homes, and/or neighbourhoods and we identified commonalities between us that helped to build the level of interpersonal comfort needed for the phenomenological interview that, by its very nature, asks individuals to open up and share deep personal insights. My experience as a Registered Clinical Counsellor was, I believe,

beneficial in this regard. During this initial conversation, I also reviewed the informed consent document that had previously been emailed to each participant and offered them the opportunity to ask questions and/or identify any concerns they may have about the interview process, purpose, and use of the information they shared. I also informed each participant of their right to withdraw from the research at any point, even post-interview, and to skip any question they didn't want to answer. I demonstrated how they may pause the recording device, or ask for details shared to be "off the record". At the end of this pre-interview time, each of the participants identified a pseudonym and signed the informed consent document before the hour-long interview commenced.

I have created the interview protocol based on guidance from phenomenological research methods texts (Moustakas, 1994; Giorgi, 2009; van Manen, 2014). Some questions in my first few drafts of the interview protocol were adaptations of a protocol shared by Judith Stevens-Long based on her work with colleagues Schapiro and McClintock (2011). Her agreement to use and/or adapt the protocol is documented within email correspondence. I also received input from three SFU faculty members; Dr. Cheryl Amundsen, Dr. Cher Hill, and Dr. David Kaufman. Over the course of the iterations of the development of the interview protocol, much of what was adapted from the Stevens-Long, Schapiro and McClintock (2011) protocol has been removed. Nonetheless, due to its initial influence, I retain the permission correspondence.

The full interview protocol is supplied as Appendix A of this document. In it I outline the information I supplied via email to participants in advance of the interview as well as the short demographic/background survey that I asked them to complete after the interview. Following a phenomenological approach, I created three questions that offered an invitation to participants to describe their experiences throughout their M.Ed. program. The interview protocol also has three possible sets of 'probing' questions that provided guidance to me during the interview when asking participants to explore their experiences deeper—to get past the empirical 'telling' to identify the essences of the experiences (van Manen, 2014). It is noted, however, that a phenomenological interview is dynamic (or spontaneous) in nature (van Manen, 2014; Giorgi, 2009; Moustakas, 1994) and I did, therefore, ask additional or probing questions that arose in the moment based on what the participant described. For example, when someone stated something like: "I noticed a

huge shift happened in my practice”, I would prompt them by asking “Can you tell me more about that shift?” as well as “How did it come about?”

The three main questions posed were as follows:

1. Please describe what taking your Master’s degree meant to you personally and professionally.
2. What would you say were the most memorable, deeply impactful, or otherwise significant learning experiences during your Master’s program?
3. Learning is often the result of many different factors such as curriculum, past experiences, ideas of others, mediums of instruction, forms of representation, community expectations etc. coming together sometimes in complex and unexpected ways. If you think about your significant learning experience you've described in this program, how did they come about?

### **3.5. Context of the study**

In this section I describe the Master of Education in Educational Practice (M.Ed. EP) program as well as my relationship to the program.

#### **3.5.1. Description of the research context**

The Master of Education in Education Practice (M.Ed. EP) is a field program within the Faculty of Education at Simon Fraser University (SFU). It is offered in a cohort format over a period of one year (three semesters) as a ‘top up’ to a two-year Graduate Diploma in Education (GDE). Students enrolling in the M.Ed. EP program need to be practicing teachers in the K-12 system, and all have completed the two-year graduate diploma, making the M.Ed. a three-year learning journey. The graduate diploma offerings are multi-themed and offered in school district settings. Themes of the graduate diplomas currently include: Arts Education, Early Learning, French Education, Inclusive Education, Indigenous Education Leadership and Mentoring, Learning Theory, Language and Literacy, Maker Pedagogy, Nature-Based, Restorative Justice, and Technology (SFU website, 2019). The program is designed to facilitate a teacher-inquiry approach whereby the students engage in a sustained self-study into their own practice (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993, 2009; Shagoury & Miller-Power, 2012). The community of practice learning

environment and the signature emergent, relational-focussed pedagogy (Hill & MacDonald, 2016; Noddings, 2012) affords opportunities for critical self-reflection (Brookfield, 1995; Mezirow, 1991), critical dialogue and opportunities to be witnessed, mentored, and supported in praxis evolution (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998).

Graduate diploma students can apply to ladder into a third year to complete an M.Ed. EP. The Masters year is not suited to all graduate diploma students and many are content to exit at that point. Approximately 15% continue in their studies to complete the final year of the program for the M.Ed. For those that continue, cohort sizes are restricted to approximately 20 students. The three M.Ed. semesters equate to an intense year of academic research, scholarly discourse and writing as well as the conducting of an inquiry project within their K-12 classrooms. The year of work culminates in the writing of a comprehensive research report and presentation to a panel of faculty and cohort peers.

Both the graduate diploma programs and the Master of Education in Educational Practice program aim to develop the capacities of the practitioner. The graduate diplomas have been offered since 2000, and the M.Ed. EP program since 2006. As outlined on the field studies' website, the program aims to develop teachers-learners' capacity to:

- *Deepen and extend* a disposition of inquiry, ethical practice, critical and creative reflection and responsiveness to learners as well as communities
- *Develop and theorize* their own inquiry practice through the investigation of multiple educational theories, philosophies, paradigms, and methodologies
- *Inform and articulate* their scholarly understanding of various world views and orientations in relation to their educational perspectives
- *Critically and creatively engage* in learning communities to situate, further develop, and align their inquiry practice within personally relevant and related paradigms
- *Collaborate* with multiple communities to extend and augment their relationships and enable an active voice and presence within and beyond the classroom

The capacities the program faculty seek to cultivate in their students are interrelated and present themselves as holistic ways of knowing, doing, and being in the world and are enacted in ways that are specific to the student, the nature of their inquiry, and their educational context.

Many masters programs utilize a cohort model for a number of educationally sound reasons including: ease of community building, natural fit for collaborative learning, progression of learning can be supported for the group as a whole, a consistent peer group builds in a supportive structure for the students, as well as administrative processes are streamlined. Going beyond cohort learning to develop a truer reflection of a Community of Practice (Wenger, 1998), however, requires a purposeful commitment to decentralizing the power in the classroom and honouring the knowledge that is brought into the space by all the participants. The learning context within the M.Ed. EP is purposefully designed to embody a Community of Practice where wrestling with ideas both privately and publicly, sharing with and witnessing the explorations of others, enable the development and deepening of professional practices and identity (Hill, et al., 2019). The classroom experience is focussed highly on sharing with peers through discussion and open exploration of practices in relation to scholarly literature. The faculty actively and purposefully employ strategies to develop an emotionally safe and supportive space for the students to engage with each other as well as the faculty. Amongst the roles played by the faculty are that of community of practice context developer, facilitator for discussions and practice sharing, challenger of ideas and theories, mentor of the inquiry approach, and modeller of pedagogies. 'Rescuing and telling' does not form the agenda in the M.Ed. EP classroom. Rather, digging deep into discomfort, a willingness to be vulnerable and transparent, and openness to witness others is the norm. Utilizing an inquiry stance challenges the teacher-learners to recognize tensions between their beliefs and their practice, which may create moments of crisis, disorientation, as per alignment with Mezirow's transformative learning theory (Hill & MacDonald, 2016).

### **3.5.2. Timing of the study**

The research context is based on a reflection of experiences held by alumni of the M.Ed. EP program. The participants were representatives of three cohorts that had all completed the program between March and July 2013 and were interviewed between October and December 2014. There were two reasons for interviewing alumni 16-20 months after completion. Firstly, I anticipated that they would be removed from the euphoria of completion yet still close enough to the program to recall specific instances of their learning. The hope was that their reflections would be a balanced view of their

experience and not skewed by completion relief. Secondly, I was hoping to discover what were lasting effects of the M.Ed. program in terms of professional practices as well as long-term personal growth descriptions. Any descriptions of this nature could contribute to understandings of the impact of the M.Ed. program. Interviews were conducted in mutually agreed spaces. Typically, this was either in the participant's home in an evening or weekend morning, or their school (after hours). In one instance, the interview took place in a private space at a public library.

### **3.5.3. Relationship to M.Ed. EP Program**

I have no affiliation with the M.Ed. EP program. At the time of conducting the research, and at the time of writing this research study report, my only connection to the program was with Dr. Cher Hill who is a faculty member of the program. Dr. Hill supervised one of my directed reading semesters and during that time we discussed pedagogy related to transformative learning and communities of practice. Because of my own professional background and my research interests, I approached her and the faculty of the M.Ed. EP program for permission to invite alumni of the program to take part in this study.

## **3.6. Procedures to establish trustworthiness**

In this study's design, I drew from general guidelines from qualitative research, as well as criteria specific to phenomenological methods, to enhance trustworthiness in this research study. These criteria are described below and further discussed within the context of this research methodology description and data presentation.

The concept of 'trustworthiness' in research is typically addressed in the language of validation as it pertains to qualitative research (Guba, 1981). According to Guba (p. 79-80), there are four major concerns when evaluating trustworthiness for naturalistic research inquiries: (1) truth value, (2) applicability, (3) consistency, and (4) neutrality. According to Guba, naturalist researchers can enhance credibility (truth value) by engaging in techniques such as triangulation, persistent observations, member checks, gathering other artefacts as data points, peer debriefing, and establishing techniques for structural coherence of the data (comparing datum to each other). Transferability

(applicability) can be enhanced through the collection of 'thick' descriptive data and the development of thick descriptions that take into account the research context. Dependability (consistency) in the data Guba explains can be enhanced by utilizing overlapping methods and/or establishing an audit trail whereby an external auditor can examine the methods used to determine their dependability for the research process. Confirmability (neutrality) in the research process refers to taking steps to counter researcher bias (Guba). Techniques for this can include triangulation of data, the use of an external auditor, and specific strategies taken by the researcher to reflect upon bias and assumptions.

In the following sections I outline specific trustworthiness and ethical considerations specific to my research project.

### **3.6.1. Trustworthiness in phenomenological research**

Phenomenological research is a human science as opposed to a natural science (van Manen, 1990) and as such seeks to illuminate the essence of a lived experience as experienced by between different individuals and is not, therefore, as easily quantified, controlled or observed as subjects being studied through empirical techniques, or more contained qualitative methods. As such, some of the strategies for trustworthiness mentioned above would not fit with the processes engaged in for phenomenological research. Criteria for evaluating phenomenological research is helpfully outlined a series of process steps by theorists such as Giorgi (2009) and Moustakas (1994). van Manen (2014) notes that:

It should also be clear that phenomenology differs from concept analysis, grounded theory method, and similar qualitative methodologies that make use of coding, labeling, and classifying types of procedures. (p. 347)

van Manen (2014) contends that a problem with phenomenological research arises when the researcher attempts to apply concepts of validation that belong to other qualitative methods such as "sample size, sampling selection criteria, members' checking, and empirical generalization" (p. 347). He proposes that the criterion of validity, or 'strength', of a phenomenological research study is more readily seen in the processes

and how those are applied—for example, the epoché (suspending of bias and belief), the originality of the study and the insight described, as well as the “scholarly treatment of sources” (p. 347). This aligns with what Guba (1981) wrote regarding the four major concerns for trustworthiness that researchers face when conducting naturalistic inquiries such as phenomenological research. For example, the process of epoché aligns with Guba’s concern of ‘neutrality’ and the deliberate stance taken by researchers to reflect on, and suspend bias throughout the research process. Additionally, engaging in the steps of the phenomenological reduction process—which by its nature considers the context of the experience—results in deliberate development of a structural coherence of the data resulting in rich descriptions of the experience (Guba, 1981). The methods to enhance trustworthiness in this research study are described in detail below.

### **3.6.2. Trustworthiness specific to this project**

The processes for preparing for the phenomenological interview and conducting the interview itself appear to be informed by similar guidelines based on phenomenological methods reviewed earlier in this chapter (Giorgi, 2009; Moustakas, 1994; van Manen, 2014). Guidelines differ among phenomenological approaches primarily concerned with the strategies employed with the data once gathered (e.g., analysis method and the use of the interviewees as ‘co-researchers’). In the sub-sections below, I outline some of the trustworthiness strategies as described by Moustakas (1994), Guba (1981) and van Manen (2014) that inform this study.

#### ***Neutrality: Clarifying researcher bias – the processes of epoché and bracketing***

Moustakas (1994) defined the process of ‘epoché’ as “[s]etting aside prejudgments and opening the research interview with an unbiased, receptive presence” (p. 180). Guba (1981) defines this as ‘neutrality’ and notes that there are inherent challenges with achieving such neutrality. Through techniques such as practicing reflexivity, a researcher can “reveal to his [or her] audience the underlying epistemological assumptions which cause him [or her] to formulate a set of questions in a particular way, and finally to present his [or her] findings in a particular way” (p. 87).

Establishing a technique for self-awareness was a good first step. I utilized a similar method to what I use when counselling (meditation, reflection on my expectations, hypothesis, and biases). In addition to the characteristics of the interviewee, I performed this task with regards to my own history of the type of experience under investigation (e.g., cohort learning, moments of personal and professional transformation or identity formation) in order to attempt to limit how my worldview impacted the relational space between myself and the other and allowed space for new knowing to occur. This process is explained in greater detail in Sections 3.6.4 and 3.6.5 where I explain the steps I undertook in preparing for interviews.

As part of what Moustakas (1994, p. 180) describes as 'phenomenological reduction' I engaged in the process of bracketing the topic or question. This is essentially a process of 'containment' whereby the researcher sets the question or experience to one side along with all preconceptions, beliefs and ideas about the question or experience to enable a sense of 'objectivity' to be dominant when interviewing or reviewing transcripts of the interviews. My understanding of bracketing is to be aware of what one currently 'holds' regarding the question or experience and then deliberately set it aside to be open to hearing/seeing/experiencing differently. I attempted to do this by documenting my expectations and preconceptions prior to, and in-between the interviews conducted. It has been argued, however, that the process of bracketing is near impossible to achieve (Chan, Fung & Chien, 2013; Tuohy et al., 2013) as it is unclear whether anyone would truly be able to set aside all preconceptions and biases as they would have already impacted upon the research through the choice of what to study, whom to study, and what questions to ask. Van Manen (2014) and others do recommended researchers engage in a 'phenomenological attitude' which "involves the researcher engaging in a certain sense of wonder and openness to the world while at the same time reflexively restraining pre-understandings" (Finlay, 2008, as cited in Tuohy et al., 2013, p. 18). For this to occur, researchers must acknowledge and document their preconceptions, expectations and biases and make attempts to counteract those throughout the research process. As outlined in Sections 3.6.4 and 3.6.5 below, I engaged in the process of phenomenological epoché and bracketing of my expectations and biases. This was an evolving process that included more preconceptions as the research process evolved. I took time to check in

with myself and open myself to neutrality prior to interviews and when engaging with the transcript data.

### ***Transferability: Using rich, thick description***

Within qualitative methodology, the use of rich, thick description is a way to enable readers to make recognize the possible transferability of results from the context under study to other contexts (Guba, 1981). "If transferability depends upon a match of characteristics it is incumbent on investigators to provide the information necessary to test the degree of fittingness" (p. 86). This can include supplying supplementary reports, appendices, or within report depth descriptions that would aid readers to determine the goodness of fit for transferability. The context of the M.Ed. EP cohort experience is described above in Section 3.5 as well as in detail in chapter four in the descriptions of the experiences provided by the participants in this study.

### ***Dependability: Accuracy check of transcripts***

While keeping in mind van Manen's (2014) warning regarding 'member checking' of interpretations with participants not being a method compatible with phenomenology, I wish to clarify here that I engaged in the process of sharing the original transcript of the interview with the relevant participant to ensure that it was an accurate transcription and to provide an opportunity for the individual to make a correction or edit to the written record. This is not member checking as defined by other qualitative researchers but is rather, a step taken to ensure the narrative provided by the participant is complete and accurate from their perspectives. When evaluating the trustworthiness of phenomenological research Polkinghorne (1989, as cited in Creswell, 2013) recommends asking: "Is the transcription accurate, and does it convey the meaning of the oral presentation in the interview?" (p. 259). This was the question I posed with the interviewees in order to feel secure that I had engaged a strategy for ensuring trustworthiness of the data. The process of phenomenological reduction, as described in section 3.8 below, further allows for engaging with the accuracy of the transcripts as multiple layers of review, coding and reauthoring take place through that process.

### ***Credibility: Peer debriefing***

Credibility, according to Guba (1981) is aligned with what McInnes, Peters, Bonney and Halcomb (2017) describe as 'confirmability' and refers to the data presented in the study being an accurate reflection of that data supplied by participants. This can be achieved through a number of techniques, including triangulation of data, journaling of thoughts and assumptions, as well as having more than one researcher review the data and analysis approach for consistency and accuracy (McInnes, et al., 2017).

Prior to the interview process, I engaged in the process of epoché and bracketing as noted earlier. The 20 interviews took approximately seven weeks to complete. Throughout that time, I did liaise with Dr. Cher Hill regarding my growing sense of understanding about the M.Ed. EP program and the participants' experiences. After the transcripts were transcribed and affirmed by participants, Dr. Cher Hill and I engaged in a collaborative review process of the transcripts utilizing a narrative strategy and presented initial findings of this study in two papers presented at the Canadian Society of the Study of Education (CSSE) conference in Ottawa in June 2015 (Beveridge & Hill, 2015; Hill & Beveridge, 2015). This is outlined in detail in chapter four. Additionally, I attended an alumni conference in the autumn of 2015 which was a day long professional development opportunity whereby the alumni from multiple years came together to take part in workshops, share with one another, and learn from keynote speakers. I was able to speak with alumni (other than those I had interviewed) during this day and gained a sense that what had emerged through my research, aligned with the essence of the experiences described by others. In December of 2016, I attended a faculty meeting where I shared what had emerged as an experience held by M.Ed. alumni. Feedback from the faculty was that the description felt authentic based on their experience with the teacher learners, and feedback they had received from them as students and as alumni.

In addition to the strategies for establishing trustworthiness noted above, there are a number of ethical considerations when engaging in research with human participants, including ensuring the comfort, safety, and anonymity of the participants, as well as providing them opportunities to opt out of the study or decline to answer questions at any point. I additionally struggled with the concept of whether phenomenological reduction was a form of falsifying the participants' account of their experience. Coming from a counselling

perspective, I found that a personal ethical challenge that I had to come to terms with, as in counselling, we hold a stance of curiosity and deliberating refrain from assumption of experience of others.

### **3.6.3. Phenomenological reduction—is this an ethical issue?**

When I began my reading about how phenomenological research utilizes participant data, I found myself struggling with my own preconceptions about what validity and ethical conduct means in terms of qualitative research. My previous research projects and education regarding methods have tended to require participants' narratives, stories or responses to questions remain in their own words—as a 'true' reflective account of individuals' lived experiences. According to van Manen (2014), one criticism of phenomenological research involves the process of editing the descriptions provided by participants. He notes that "the question could be raised whether 'editing' and 'rewriting' a transcript or raw text is really changing someone's words and therefore falsifying the account, making it less true" (p. 256). He goes on to explain that in some types of qualitative research where the specific words of the participants represent a form of factual relevance or ethnographic significance, the editing of the transcriptions could be viewed as contrary to establishing factual relevance. For phenomenological researchers, however, he claims that the goal is the "*fictionalizing* a factual, empirical, or an already fictional account in order to arrive at a more *plausible* description of a *possible* human experience" (p. 256) and that it is not the aim of phenomenology to provide empirical generalizations. The way that the editing or rewriting of transcripts and raw data happens in phenomenological research is, therefore, a form of consolidating multiple instances in order to arrive at the essence of an experience—possibly by utilizing techniques such as partially eliminating extraneous material, or by rewriting using words that illuminate the experience for the readers.

As outlined earlier, I found myself reflecting on whether I could assimilate this new way of researching with my previous understanding of ethical and valid research. Investigating numerous research methods, and speaking with others who have conducted phenomenological research, assisted me in setting aside my own preconceptions and lived experienced regarding research in such a way as to broaden my view and deepen

my practice. I had to wrestle with two core internalized beliefs and discomforts: 1) that there is a quantifiable ‘truth’ and that somehow my research would need to be justified in an empirical manner to be trustworthy, and 2) that I could be missing a nuance in the participants’ telling of their experiences and that by reauthoring their narratives, I could, inadvertently, be mispresenting them. Through reading, discussion, and going through the data analysis process, I came to a deeper understanding of how the Western understanding of truth is based on the foundation of the word ‘veritas’, with its roots in law and reason, and I recognized that did not align directly with phenomenological inquiry. I began to embrace the concept of ‘aletheia’ as truth as expressed by van Manen (2014) as being “a heedful attunement to the things that present themselves to us in order to let them reveal themselves in their self-showing... Thus the truth of something is not an all-or-nothing affair, but rather a complex and constant interplay between showing and hiding” (p. 343).

#### **3.6.4. Beginning the epoché and bracketing process – regarding my learning about phenomenological methods**

My academic and professional background does influence how I read about phenomenology research. Over the last 14 years and in my current employment, I have worked with approximately 80 masters-level students who have conducted research projects (mostly mixed method, action research, or case studies). Research strategies that I have worked with in the past have typically included pre-post testing of interventions, semi-structured interviews, surveys, standardized testing (e.g., depression, anxiety, self-esteem measures), triangulation of multiple data sets, and analysis using correlation, and t-tests. These rather structured approaches are very different from the phenomenological methods and the result was that my sense of competency as a researcher was a little shaken up. I find that this is a good thing. I started this Ph.D. to push my boundaries and learn new ways of teaching, learning and researching. Engaging with a method such as phenomenology allowed me to do just that. While my previous research has predominately utilized mixed methods or quantitative in approaches, an additional desire for engaging in phenomenology, was that I often found in previous research I was involved in, there was insufficient ‘voice’ of the participants. What I mean by that is that often participants were constrained by the questions asked—whether a ‘quantifiable’ questionnaire or other

restrictions imposed by Likert scales or response options. Even allowing for expansions or explanations of answer choices, I felt the methodology was often leading the participants on what to focus on. I imagined the number of untold nuances of experiences that may have been missed by such methods. I was hopeful that a phenomenological interview—unstructured and open to being led by the participants—would facilitate the individual storytelling that would illuminate a richer expression of the lived experience of the M.Ed. alumni. Integrating a phenomenological approach with my history of the use of mixed methods facilitated a stance of becoming a methodological “bricoleur-theorist” working “between and within competing and overlapping perspectives and paradigms” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2006, p. 6).

Another influence on my reading of phenomenology was my professional work and training as a Registered Clinical Counsellor. Since 2006, I have to date some 4.5 years of coursework (MA plus specialization courses), and approximately 2300 clinical hours with clients (which I realize is limited) and a further 150 + hours with a clinical supervisor who has listened to recorded sessions I’ve had with clients and provided me feedback on my interviewing/counselling technique and helped me work through my own biases and countertransference issues that have arisen. For me, preparing for clinical work is not unlike the concepts of epoché and bracketing described by phenomenological philosophers and researchers. It is vital for me to prepare myself—to become grounded—before meeting with clients. At times this means reflecting on my preconceptions held about a client (whether yet to be met or in subsequent sessions)—age, gender, ethnicity, religion, marital status, presenting ‘issue’—all represent possible inroads where my bias can emerge in presence with the other. I have a process of pre-session meditation where I seek to ground myself and open to the other. Post session, I write my clinical notes and, in a sense, contain it in its place and pack it away. If necessary, I debrief in my peer supervision group (or seek other individual clinical supervision). Remaining free of assumptions or hypotheses about a client’s situation is not expected in clinical practice; however, being open to new directions is essential as typically such assumptions, or hypotheses are inaccurate or incomplete. This is where the use of Socratic questioning and active listening is essential—open-ended curiosity about the other’s experience (conscious and, ultimately, unconscious intentions).

As I have explored the processes involved in the phenomenological interview, I have drawn many parallels with clinical counselling practice in terms of the way of being with the other. In this regard, I feel that phenomenology was a good fit for me in a general philosophical sense and also in terms of the way the conversations (interviews) were conducted. I was aware of the need to be vigilant about setting aside my obvious bias and predisposition that arose from my previous life experiences, study and current work when I employed a phenomenological approach to my research.

### **3.6.5. Engaging the epoché and bracketing process – preparing for interviewing**

Identifying my preconceptions and expectations regarding the interviews followed a format that I termed ‘Who did I think they were?’ and ‘What do I think I know about their experience?’ I used two large pieces of paper and started a mind map exercise where I initially noted down key words about my own experience as a mature student learning in cohort settings. My own educational journey had me return to university at the age of 32 when I had two young children to complete a BSc in Education. Following that degree, while working full time, I then went onto complete a MA in Education and three years later enrolled in a MA in Counselling Psychology. Three years after completing that program, I began my Ph.D. journey.

My BSc in Education was a cohort program (approximately 20 people) and we all took most courses together over a period of three years. Similarly, my MA in Counselling Psychology was a cohort program (blended) that started with 14 people and 11 of us graduated together. The depth of collaboration, sharing and personal growth that I experienced in those two cohort programs compared to the MA in Education, that was a modular program, was one of the core reasons why I wanted to explore the experiences of people learning in cohort settings. Because of my challenging, yet rewarding experiences, I felt that I had a lot of awareness of what the M.Ed. EP alumni may have experienced in terms of juggling life-work-family commitments while studying for their master’s degree. This was a good thing, but it also could have resulted in me colouring the narrative, selecting what to focus on, or follow up on, during the interviews. While

recognizing my preconceptions may be totally wrong or false, some of the key words and concepts that formed my preconceptions included:

### ***Who did I think they were?***

- Motivated
- Over worked
- Dedicated / caring
- Privileged
- Women – nurturers
- Ethical
- Metropolitan: biased focus on socio-cultural
- Professional
- Emotionally stressed
- Guilty (especially parents)
- Financially stressed
- Adjusting view of self
- Curious
- Small town: isolated / lack of peer group or support
- Intelligent
- Juggling too much
- Neglecting self-care
- Willing to share ideas
- Open and inquiring
- Motivated by pay increase
- Experiencing some self-doubt

### ***What did I think I knew about their experience?***

- Intense
- Empowering
- Personal growth
- Sense of achievement
- Uncomfortable
- Collaborative
- Influenced by others
- Frustrating
- Disempowering
- Professional growth
- New positive concepts of self
- Disorientated at times
- Collegial
- Feeling witnessed
- Liberating
- A 'journey'
- Rewarding
- Transformative
- Fun and enlightening
- Stressful

Being aware of these preconceptions or “preunderstandings” (van Manen, 2014, p. 224) resulted in me taking time before each interview to check in with myself. As I progressed through the first four or five interviews, further preconceptions about who the alumni were and what their experiences were became added to my self-reflection prior to meeting for the interview. This process of reflection and opening myself to neutrality was something I also engage in throughout the data analysis phase.

## **3.7. Recruitment and description of participants**

### **3.7.1. Ethical considerations: set up and procedures**

Simon Fraser University adheres to the Tri-Council Policy Statement (TCPS 2) revised in 2018 for *Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans* (Government of Canada, 2018). The institution’s Ethical Review Board approve research proposals including strategies for recruitment, data gathering (methods and tools used), methods of

maintaining confidentiality for participants, voluntary participation, potential distress or harm to participants, as well as how the research data may be used in reports, presentations and other forms of dissemination. As a Ph.D. student researcher, my research proposal, processes and reporting align with the universities' policies, which in term align with the TCPS 2.

### **3.7.2. Invitation to participate**

The participants of this study were all adults and were not considered a vulnerable population. It was, therefore, assumed that they could make an informed decision regarding participation in the project. In addition to adherence to Universities' Ethical Review Board approval, the recruitment of participants for this study was conducted in line with British Columbia Government's *Freedom of Information and Privacy Act* (2019) and the Government of Canada's *Canadian Anti-Spam Legislation* (2019). Note both legislations were the 2014 versions when the study was designed, and I have checked compliance against updated 2019 versions in both cases. In order to maintain alumni privacy, I did not have access to email mailing lists or names of potential participants. The initial invitation to take part in the study was emailed to the alumni list through the M.Ed. EP program's administration. I was not copied on the initial invitation. See Appendix B for email invitation script. This process maintained confidentiality of the alumni databases and email solicitation for participation through this format is not in breach of anti-spam legislation because the request is related directly to the alumni's experiences of being a student of the institution and their registration with the alumni mailing list provides implied consent to be contacted about such projects (Government of Canada, 2019). Those interested in taking part were required to email me directly to indicate their willingness to be contacted by me about the project. After such contact was made, I engaged in further email correspondence directly with the participant without copying the program administration. By following this procedure, the program administration knew who was invited, but did not know the identity of the individuals who had contacted me to take part in the research study. The email exchange between me, and the potential participants, was used to arrange the interview (Appendix C) and forward the informed consent document and a brief description of the interview process (Appendix D). The total time commitment for participants was approximately 2.5 hours. The interviews lasted one hour

with an additional 30 minutes for completing forms, initial conversation and email corresponding. After the interview, participants were invited to review the typed transcript and for that a further 1 hour was allocated. In appreciation for their time, all participants were offered a \$25 gift card of their choice (either Starbucks, Tim Hortons, or Chapters). All participants accepted this token of appreciation. The gift cards were paid for by the M.Ed. EP program and given to the participants by me after the interview was conducted.

At the end of the interview process, all participants chose a pseudonym that has been used in the transcripts, the reporting of participants in this thesis document, and any communication with the program's administration.

It is worthwhile to note here that I did not expect to have a response rate of close to 38% from busy working professionals. By inviting 58 alumni, I had anticipated interviewing between 10-12 people (approximately 18-20% response rate). Instead, 22 people expressed interest (38%), and 20 people (34.5%) were able to schedule an interview over the three-month period of time that interviews were conducted. The interest exceeded the expectations of myself and the M.Ed. program administration. I felt it was imperative to interview all that came forward in order to have as full range of expressions of experience as possible. It is also worthwhile to note that close to 65% of alumni from the three cohorts were not interviewed. It is very possible that they had different experiences than those expressed by the participants in this study.

### **3.7.3. Informed consent, right to withdraw, and voluntary participation**

The informed consent is a document that outlines the purpose of the research, expectations for the participants, use of data, and rights of the participants both during and post participation. The informed consent document also provides participants with contact names and details for the principal researcher, supervisors, and university personnel where questions or complaints can be made in a confidential manner. In addition to being stated in writing within the informed consent document, participants were told in person prior to the interview starting that they may skip any question that they do not wish to answer, and that they may quit the interview and their participation in the study

at any time during the interview or post participation without any negative consequences. Participation in the study was strictly voluntary.

#### **3.7.4. Personal and professional ethics**

From a personal standpoint, it was imperative for me to maintain a neutral, yet curious stance with the participants. I did not want the participants to feel judged in any way with regards to their M.Ed. EP experience, nor did I want them to feel they had to answer in any particular way to 'please' me. On two occasions, participants expressed a desire to go 'off the record' at which point I paused the recording of the interview while they told me something they did not want included in their transcript. In both instances, this 'off the record' time was spent debriefing a sensitive issue, which took upwards of 30 minutes (a mini therapy session of sorts). After those moments, I enquired whether they wished to continue and, in both instances, the participants did. Other participants had moments of high affect while speaking of their M.Ed. EP experiences. This sometimes caught them off guard, and I simply sat with them, in their telling, and witnessed their emotions. Occasionally their telling was interrupted for a few minutes while they regrouped and felt able to continue. These were powerful moments, and I let them be led by the participants. On other occasions, after the interviews were over, I sat with the participants to check in with them on how they were feeling (when high affect arose or when feelings of being disconnected or regret were expressed) and conducted a strengths-based discussion with them, or debriefed a current situation that had arisen in their workplace that they wished to have a sounding board for. In my opinion, those moments for me and the participants, were beyond a typical educational research interview. In keeping with my professional ethics as a Registered Clinical Counsellor, my first and foremost concern was with the wellbeing of the participants. I did not wish to be someone who 'stirred up emotions' and then left the scene. As much as I was not conducting a counselling therapy session with these participants, the nature of the phenomenological interview is that it is open and dynamic and led by the participants and as a result there were moments of disclosure and insight that were reflective of a counselling session. I, therefore, applied both SFU's ethical principles for research with human subjects and made sure that I aligned with the British Columbia Association of Clinical Counsellors' (BCACC, 2018) code

of ethics throughout my interactions with the participants, including following up with two of them a few days after their interviews to check on the resolution of issues disclosed.

### 3.7.5. Description of the participants

In total 20 graduates of the M.Ed. in Educational Practice took part in this study. Three Lower Mainland of British Columbia cohorts of alumni were invited to participate by the program’s administration (58 invites) of which 22 people expressed an interest to take part and 20 were able to find time to participate in the interview. No filtering of the potential participants took place other than the year of completion, which was March through July of 2013. All who expressed a willingness to participate, within the time frame allocated, were interviewed.

All of the 20 participants identified as cis-gendered, with 19 female and one male. This number is representative of the typical ratio of female to male teachers who enrol in the M.Ed. EP program. The average number of years of teaching experience prior to the M.Ed. EP year was 13.8 (range: 7-24 years) and the average age at graduation was 39 (range: 30-49 years) The majority of the alumni enrolled in the M.Ed. EP the academic year after completing the Graduate Diploma with three taking gaps of one, two, or four years due to personal circumstances. Twelve participants described their living/work setting as urban, five as suburban and two as rural. The majority, 15, of alumni were elementary grades or special education teachers and five were high school teachers. No middle school teachers took part in the study. The table below provides a brief outline of demographic information of each of the participants that was gathered using a brief questionnaire at the end of the interview. The interviews took place between 16-20 months after the participants had finished their M.Ed. EP program in the autumn of 2014.

**Table 3.1. Participants’ demographics**

Name	Gender (M / F)	Age	Years Teaching	School Setting	Specialization	Gap Grad Dip to M.Ed.
Angela	F	47	18	Elem	none	none
Anne	F	44	18	High	Math	none
Cali Ann	F	36	11	High	Metal work	none
Claire	F	40	12	Elem	Music	none

Name	Gender (M / F)	Age	Years Teaching	School Setting	Specialization	Gap Grad Dip to M.Ed.
Cornina	F	34	11	Elem	none	1 year
Emily	F	41	11	Elem	Early years	none
Enigma	F	45	22	Elem	Special Ed	none
Erin	F	38	10	Elem	Special Ed	none
Felex	M	39	10	High	English	none
Georgia	F	34	8	Elem	none	4 years
Jeanne	F	35	11	Elem	Prof Dev	none
Kelli	F	35	11	High	Math	none
Laura	F	49	24	Elem	Special Ed	none
Loredana	F	43	17	High	Socials	none
Lynne	F	42	19	Elem	Early years	none
Manzi	F	37	13	Elem	Early years	none
Renee	F	39	14	Elem	none	none
Sally Sue	F	38	15	Elem	none	2 years
Skye	F	30	7	Elem	none	none
Vanessa	F	42	14	Elem	Music	none

Note. Additional information was gathered regarding self-identity in terms of cultural identity and race (Appendix A Interview Protocol). 10 identified as mixed European heritage Canadian; 3 as Chinese Canadian; 2 as Scottish; 1 as French Canadian; 1 as Ismaili Muslim, 1 as Italian, 1 as South African Canadian; and 1 as Ukrainian and Irish.

While participants did self-identify in terms of cultural identity and race, I did not explore in depth with them ways that their cultural identity or race may have impacted their experiences other than to explore with them during the interview any ways they may have experienced barriers and their sense of belonging within the cohorts as such topics arose in their own narratives. This lack of deliberate attention to ways that race may have impacted participants experiences may be considered an oversight in this study.

## **3.8. Data analysis approach**

Phenomenological reduction was the primary method employed in data analysis. This is a very time intensive methodology and I outline below my wrestling with the ideas as well as how I ultimately engaged with the process.

### **3.8.1. Transcription**

The first step in working with the data involved transcription of all 20 interviews. This I did myself using a foot pedal transcription aid that allowed me to slow down the verbal playback to a speed that aligned with my touch-typing ability. This was, needless to say, several times slower than the actual speech speed! I did improve over time, but the average time of each hour-long interview for transcription was between 5-6 hours resulting in some 100-120 hours of transcribing time. I could have off loaded this task but I deliberately chose to do the transcribing myself as I felt it enabled me to relive the interviews and also be a witness to them at the same time. The process of transcribing enabled me to engage with the text in a multi-sensory format; through auditory sense by listening to the interview, tactile sense of typing the words spoken, and the visual sense engaged while reading the transcripts. Typed at 12pt text and single spaced, the total number of typed pages was 400 with the average length being 20 pages per interview. The transcribing took place during December 2014 and the individual transcriptions were emailed, as Word.docx, to 18 participants for accuracy checks at that time. Two participants declined to review the transcripts. In addition to providing an accuracy check, the sharing of the transcripts provided an opportunity for the participant to clarify, add to, delete, or correct elements transcribed. Only two participants made any request for changes to the transcripts. One, who had originally asked for details provided in the interview to be 'off the record' upon reflection noted she was happy for the suggestions for improvement to be given to the program area and another corrected a typo in reference to an arts-based learning activity. Five others confirmed the transcript as a whole.

### 3.8.2. Procedures for phenomenological data analysis

When it comes to the actual working with the transcripts, different phenomenological theorists propose alternate guidance for methods of data analysis. For example, Giorgi (2009) provides an outline based on a modified Husserlian approach, which he terms *descriptive phenomenology* that begins with the process of ‘bracketing’ which starts with the step of ‘epoché’ (setting aside of preconceptions/ judgments/biases). For the phenomenological reduction, Giorgi outlines three distinct steps for distilling the descriptions of the phenomenon provided by the participant. These steps are: 1) “Read for the sense of the whole” (p. 128)—this reading of the whole transcript is done within the attitude of “phenomenological scientific reduction, within an overall psychologically sensitive perspective” (p. 129) requiring the reviewer to attune to the interviewee’s lived experiences to seek a sense of the intentions of the descriptions provided; 2) “Determination of the meaning units” (p. 129)—rereading the description from the beginning and marking it at points where the meaning shifts, enables the whole description to be broken down into smaller meaning units; and 3) “Transformation of participant’s natural attitude expressions into phenomenologically psychologically sensitive expressions” (p. 130) is a process that aims to rewrite the original description into a more generalized description to determine “higher-level categories that retain the same psychological meaning but are not embedded within the same contingent facts” (p. 132). The purpose here is to incorporate the description of the individual’s experience within a linguistic structure that reflects meanings that have arose out of multiple individuals’ descriptions.

Another analysis method is proposed by Moustakas (1994) in his outlining of Husserl’s *transcendental phenomenology* research methods. This approach to phenomenological research also begins with the step ‘epoché’ and bracketing of the experience. The method of phenomenological reduction described by Moustakas (1994) is “not only a way of seeing but a way of listening with a conscious and deliberate intention of opening ourselves to phenomena as phenomena, in their own right, with their own textures and meanings” (p. 92). The next step of the reduction process is that of ‘imaginative variation’ which has the task “to seek possible meanings through utilization of imagination, varying the frames of reference, employing polarities and reversals, and

approaching the phenomenon from divergent perspectives, different roles or functions” (p. 97). Through imaginative variation, the aim is to uncover the different factors that make sense of what is being experienced—to establish the “essential structures of a phenomenon” (p. 98). These structures are derived from textural description through imaginative variation. The structures represent “the conditions that must exist for something to appear” (p. 98). The final step in the transcendental phenomenological reduction process is the synthesis of meanings and essences. It is understood that the essences that may emerge from the synthesis of the textural and structural descriptions are likely non-exhaustive; and limited to a specific time, place and viewpoint of the researcher but that these essences, should, nonetheless, provide a description of “the condition or quality without which a thing would not be what it is” (p. 100).

van Manen (2014) notes that although other phenomenological philosophers such as Heidegger, Levinas and Merleau-Ponty have adjusted Husserlian methods of reduction to have “increasingly gained interpretive, linguistic, and material complexity and significance, it [reduction] is still considered the principle “method” of phenomenology” (van Manen, 2014, p. 219). van Manen, in his book, explores alternative reduction methods and after many hours of reading and wrestling with potential processes, I felt that the description of “Hermeneutic Epoché-Reduction: Openness” (p. 224) offered the best fit for my project and for me as a researcher. Although van Manen does not provide a clearly outlined step-by-step approach as noted by Giorgi (2009) and Moustakas (1994), he does speak to the need “to be aware of one’s own constant inclination to be led by preunderstandings, frameworks, and theories regarding the ... motivation and the nature of the question” (p. 224). He stresses that it is vital to stay vigilant and in touch with one’s own subjectivity when working with texts while recognizing “that forgetting one’s preunderstandings is not really possible” (p. 224) and that the practical application of hermeneutic reduction lies in the awareness of suppositions and the conscious effort to reflectively examine one’s own reflective gaze when engaging in the reduction process. He goes on to note that it is likely the reduction process will result in an exploration of multiple layers of meaning regarding a lived experience and that a singular frame of reference of meaning may not be appropriate. What I resonate with in terms of process and outcome is the expectation for the researcher to check in with self and remain open and reflective, along with the understanding that the process may identify multiple

experiential layers. This, I felt, was appropriate for the large numbers of participants in my study.

In further chapters of his book, van Manen (2014) goes on to describe different methods for working with texts. Starting with alternative modes of reading the text, he provides three possible methods. It is his second example that felt like the best fit for me. He termed it this method “the selective reading approach” (p. 320) whereby researchers read the entire text several times to identify the phrases or statements that provide revealing or essential descriptions of the phenomenon being studied. The next step is to re-author those phrases or statements into “thematic expressions or through longer reflective descriptive-interpretive paragraphs” (p. 320). He goes on to state that some phrases or statements may be captured in their original format to aid in the writing of the phenomenological text—as a sort of anchoring or essential point. The writing of narrative anecdotes from the lived experience descriptions offered by participants, is a form of storytelling, that van Manen notes can be useful as examples in phenomenological writing. He goes on to expose the contradiction in the use of an example in phenomenology, however, noting that “[s]trictly speaking, phenomenology does not reflect on the factuallities of examples—facts or actualities. Phenomenology reflects on examples in order to discover what is exemplary or singular about a phenomenon or event” (p. 258). Although examples in phenomenology should not, according to van Manen, be used to provide empirical datum or to illustrate an argument, examples can be useful in a collective sense to provide illustration of a phenomenon so that it can be more universally recognized.

A conundrum that I encountered was regarding how to deal with 400 pages of transcript. I felt ‘frozen’ by the enormity of the task at hand (hence my varied attempts to find another analysis approach described earlier). van Manen’s (2014) approach does not align with the use of qualitative research software that facilitates development of coding structures, he states “[i]t should be clear that codifications, conceptual abstractions, or empirical generalizations can never adequately produce phenomenological understandings and insights as have been described in this book” (p. 319). Adding that procedural approaches involving coding and the development of taxonomies, the search for recurring themes and concepts are not commensurate with phenomenological

tradition. And here I flag my confusion. van Manen, describes thematic analysis in his book—yet states that a search for recurring themes is not in alignment with phenomenology. Having struggled with such, on the surface, conflicting statements, I believe I am resigned to an understanding that when presenting a phenomenological study, one would not speak to specific codes or numerical instances of utterances of specific words or phrases. Rather, the phenomenological writing should be more holistic and reflective in the process of theme identification and interpretation in the reduction process presenting the essential essences of the collective experience and not case-by-case descriptions.

### **3.8.3. Data analysis approach for this study: Phenomenological reduction**

Following the transcribing and member checking the accuracy of the transcripts with the participants, I engaged in the process of reading each transcript multiple times to get a sense of the collective experiences expressed. I then participated in the phenomenological reduction steps that are described in the following sections.

#### ***Stage 1: Reading for the whole – a first collaborative review***

In collaboration with Dr. Cher Hill (committee member and academic coordinator of the M.Ed. EP program), we prepared two papers to present at the June 2015 Canadian Society for the Study of Education (CSSE) conference in Ottawa. For our papers and presentations we both read the transcripts again, and then engaged in a process of re-authoring the narratives in a first person voice. This reduced the transcripts from approximately 20 pages of questions and answers to a two-page telling of the M.Ed. EP experience as expressed by the individual participants. We did this for nine of the 20 participants at that time (randomly selected) and found that there were two main types of experiences that were expressed by the participants, which was consistent with previous research conducted in the Graduate Diploma program and subsequently published in 2016 (Hill & MacDonald, 2016). One was that of a transformative learning experience whereby the participants described deep, long lasting personal and professional changes, as well as altered (or expanded) worldviews. The second type of experience included descriptions of empowerment, feeling more grounded and confident in practice, of finding

a professional 'voice' and establishing a network both through the program and afterwards.

This initial review of the data and sharing with CSSE conference participants enabled me to delve deeper into all 20 transcripts and, while not being deductive in the analysis, I was aware that moments of transformative learning had been captured in the narratives. Additionally, the sense of being 'affirmed' or 'validated' in practice was an empowering and confidence boosting benefit noted by many participants. I recognized the need to articulate these expressions as a potentially separate or nuanced description of the experiences. This helped to confirm my way forward for conducting a Hermeneutic Epoché-Reduction described by van Manen (2014) recognizing that there may be layers, or nuances, expressed regarding an experience that emerge through the phenomenological reduction process.

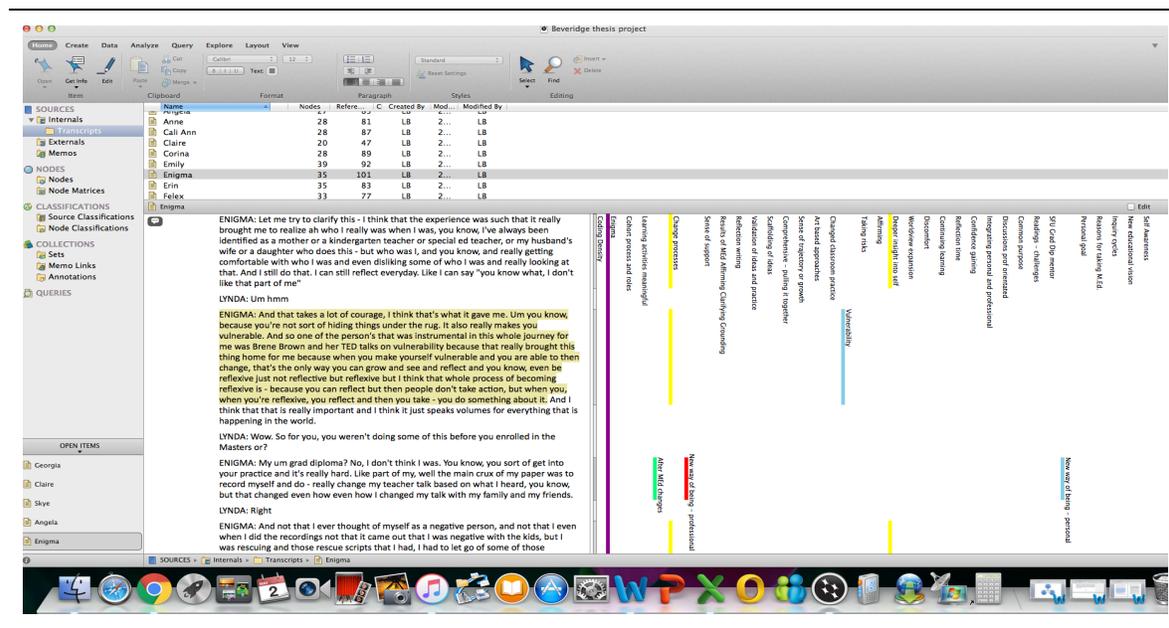
### ***Stage 2: Revisiting the data and starting afresh: Technical support***

Following the initial reading for the whole described above, I was cognizant of the need to engage in a more structured phenomenological reduction process. I began the task of starting with the data afresh and because I began to feel overwhelmed with the amount of data, I explored the use of NVivo, a qualitative software tool, as a support for holding all the transcripts in one place, in order to make notes and allow for emergent theme identification. Based on what van Manen (2014) noted regarding being mindful of utilizing techniques that were incompatible with phenomenology (which includes coding of narratives) I used the software to highlight what appeared to me to be meaning units or themes in the narratives but did not drill down to the level of individual phrases for the most part. I identified meaning units using an emergent process, akin to "holistic coding" (Saldaña, 2013) capturing larger sections of text that encapsulated concepts or demonstrated an expression of experience that could be articulated more generally. As I went through this process, new meaning units would emerge in subsequent transcripts. When that happened, I would revisit earlier transcripts, previously highlighted meaning units and double check whether a fresh reading of a previously reviewed transcript might bring forth a similar meaning unit and/or if a title given to a previous meaning unit, might better be described with new terminology. This process resulted in me reading and re-

reading the transcripts several times. Approximately 250 hours was spent in the iterative process of identifying meaning units across the 20 transcripts.

The use of NVivo was very helpful for this first round of holistic theme identification as it enabled me to find similar meaning units across the 400 pages of transcript and to identify nuances “to capture a sense of the overall contents” (Saldaña, 2013, p. 264) and gain a big picture, holistic, view of the emergent themes, or essential essences, of the M.Ed. EP experiences described by the alumni participants. Figure 3.1 below shows an example of how the meaning units were represented in NVivo.

**Figure 3.1 Example of meaning unit identification (Enigma's transcript)**



### Stage 3: Gaining a sense of the experiences

While numeric accounting of the lived experiences is not a traditional phenomenological outcome, having identified a broad range of themes from the participants, I sought clarification on what was the emphasis of their narratives. I found it hard to ‘hold in my head’ a holistic impression for the amount of content in the transcripts, and I was concerned that my own bias may influence my attention/memory without some way to anchor what I was uncovering. Gaining a sense of the emphasis of the narratives and the preferences for focus from the participants enabled me to conceptualize the

overall experience as well as keep an awareness of minority voices. After merging and distilling of meaning units, a total of 56 discrete meaning units arose from the 20 transcripts. Keeping in mind the three core questions that were posed to the participants, I attempted to interpret the essence of the experiences by aligning the meaning units under essential structures that illuminate the multidimensional descriptions of their experiences provided by the M.Ed. alumni. Errasti-Ibarrondo, Jordán, Díez-Del-Corral and Arantzamendi (2018) provide guidance regarding the concept of themes in phenomenology when they drew from van Manen's work noting:

Rather than being based on rules, understanding and formulating the thematic meaning of a lived experience are a process based on an act of 'seeing' the meaning through phenomenological reduction, epoché and reduction. In short, a theme has phenomenological power when it allows for the development of genuinely phenomenological description. (p. 3)

The 'themes' I interpreted from the meaning units that allowed the for development of the phenomenological descriptions presented in Chapter 4 Findings are as follows:

- Sustained changes after the M.Ed. (10 meaning units)
- Being validated, affirmed, gaining confidence outcomes (6 meaning units)
- Transformative change processes and outcomes (8 meaning units)
- Cohort environment as meaningful (18 meaning units)
- Learning activities as meaningful (14 meaning units)

I then compared the meaning units and grouping of meaning units with my notes of the nine, two-page summaries of the participants developed earlier in the data analysis process. It became clear to me at this point of the process that the two descriptions of outcomes of the experiences noted earlier (i.e., that of transformative learning experience, and that of confidence building and validation or affirmation of practice) did represent the expressed experiences the 20 participants interviewed. Sustained personal and professional changes as a result of the M.Ed. EP program were also expressed, as were ways that the learning and changes came about for participants through the influence of specific learning activities and/or the cohort learning community.

#### ***Stage 4: Distilling the meaning units to create descriptive summaries***

From this big picture view of the two described types of outcomes of the M.Ed. EP experience, I gathered the transcript data for the different participants and began a holistic process of comparing across the smaller groups for what the M.Ed. EP experience meant to them. The groups were:

- The seven who expressed predominately a transformative learning experience (akin to Mezirow's theory of transformative processes); and
- The thirteen who expressed an experience of professional grounding, validation, or affirmation who also expressed professional and/or personal shifts and changes.

In determining how to engage in the phase of creating rich descriptions of the experiences expresses, I drew from van Manen's (2014) guidance:

Too many transcripts may ironically encourage shallow reflection. ..[t]he general aim should be to gather enough experientially rich accounts that make possible the figuration of powerful experiential examples or anecdotes that help to make contact with life as it is lived ... [to enable an outcome] that creates a scholarly and reflective phenomenological text. (p. 353)

Working with 20 transcripts was unwieldy in terms of the amount of text and time and I was cognizant that the result may be a 'shallow' account as indicated by van Manen. To overcome that possibility, I chose a total of nine of the 20 transcripts to review in more depth, re-authoring the meaning units for each transcript to create, initially, paragraphs of description, and ultimately full phenomenological reductions. The transcripts selected were initially randomly identified from the two identified subgroups and I then double-checked that the transcripts were representative of the different experiences, with the participants offering clear and descriptive responses to the interview questions. Based on the emphasis of meaning units identified for the transcripts, three of those are participants who described primarily transformative learning experiences reflective of Mezirow's theory (1978, 1991)—offering descriptions of crisis, disorientation, critical reflection and world view transformation— and six were those who described primarily an experience of professional grounding, validation, affirmation that resulted in changes to their

professional practices and sense of professional competence and/or identity. Eight of the descriptive summaries were from participants for whom the cohort was described as central in their learning process, and one was a descriptive summary for a participant who expressed a more autonomous learning journey.

Although it sounds similar to the collaborative creation of the two-page narratives described earlier, it was, a very different process that followed phenomenological reduction technique. Following the meaning unit identification, I transferred the transcripts and the meaning unit codes into a MS Word document in a table format. This resulted in approximately 35-38 pages of text for each transcript as shown in the sample provided Table 3.2 below. In the third column I re-authored the first-person transcript responses into a third person narrative based on the meaning units, and the overall essences of the experiences being described. This is in keeping with phenomenological reduction process for reauthoring as described by both Giorgi (2009) and van Manen (2014). I then copied these third person narrative statements into a separate document and reworked it to a fluid, descriptive summary of the participant’s individual experience, samples of which are presented in Chapter 4 Findings.

**Table 3.2 Example of a partial phenomenological reduction table (Enigma’s transcript approximately half-way through)**

Transcript – verbatim	Meaning Unit / Sense of Experience	Re-authoring / Reduction
<p>LYNDA: What would you say were the most um - well obviously writing the paper and the work that you did, but what other things would you say were the most deeply impactful, or meaningful or otherwise significant learning experiences during the Masters?</p> <p>ENIGMA: So um, definitely the readings. I think the readings were huge.</p> <p>LYNDA: Right?</p> <p>ENIGMA: Because it brought new vocabulary into my repertoire - very deep. And it's not just about vocabulary but that vocabulary was meaningful vocabulary. And so, the idea of being able to choose from the readings and seeing which one actually, you know, connects to you. I think those choices and the ability to you know, um you know, sort of self-pace yourself. You know, you don't have to have X number of things done by X time. But</p>	<p><i>Meaningful learning activities</i></p> <p>Readings - new vocabulary – new insights</p> <p>Having choice – autonomy to choose what to focus on</p>	<p>When asked to reflect upon her most memorable or meaningful learning experiences on the M.Ed., Enigma stated that the readings were hugely beneficial to her. From them she gained a new vocabulary and new insights into education. She appreciated the choice of what to focus on too. The others in the cohort were all present with a similar purpose – to improve their own practice and more deeply understand education. Being then able to dialogue with like-minded professional colleagues about the readings allowed for an affirmation of her own practice.</p>

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some deadlines were good. The dialogue was just so rich. Every day to be able to dialogue with like-minded people and they didn't have to be like-minded it was to dialogue with people who were somehow there for some of the same reasons I was there. And that we had been teaching for so many years and now, when you've read something, you - it was an affirmation of what you were doing.

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Rich professional dialogue

Literature and feedback from others – helped to affirm practice

This part of the phenomenological reduction process was very time consuming as taking the narrative statements directly from segments of the transcripts, there was a lot of repetition, and at times the participant's telling of his/her experience was disjointed or interspersed with peripheral issues. The spoken interview did not follow a 'beginning, middle and end' narrative. Approximately 8-10 hours per transcript was spent at this stage, adding an additional 80-90 hours to the data analysis. This was because, the process was not simply a cut and paste exercise with a little bit of writing—it required a revisiting, again, of the whole transcript to ensure that the reduction captured the essences in a way that was representative of the individual's experience.

### ***Stage 5: Phenomenological writing***

The final phase of the reduction process involved the writing of the essences of the experiences. Firstly, composing a description of the collective. Starting from a view of all the 20 participants' stories, I sought to find the common essences amongst them all. Secondly, I used the descriptive summaries of each of the two nuanced experiences, read those in relation to the other transcripts that fit into that experience category and drafted a description of the two distinct, yet inter-related, essences of experience of being a M.Ed. EP student as told from the alumni perspective. Sitting with this data—both the completed reductions and descriptive summaries as well as the other transcripts that had been coded for meaning units—wrestling with what form the phenomenological writing would take was an exercise in patience (and not a naturally comfortable place for me to be). I felt an internal pressure to push forward, and simply “get it done” and at the same time, I felt the need to just sit with the data, re-read it from a place of neutrality and curiosity—to ponder and wonder. Sensing what was authentic to the participants, becoming comfortable with the concept of supposition based on the sharing of their stories—becoming increasingly aware of my own shifting perspectives regarding research methodologies—this process

became a transformative learning experience for me as I navigated my own discomfort, setting aside my prior preference to quantify experience, and began to embrace a sense of vulnerability. I have truly stepped outside my (research) comfort zone in conducting a phenomenological study. In this sense, I feel an empathic connection with many of the M.Ed. EP alumni that I interviewed. Their expressions of disorientation and becoming vulnerable along their growth journeys resonate with my own experience of discomfort regarding being witnessed as a neophyte phenomenologist in this very public and high stakes forum. I present the phenomenological experiences of the alumni in Chapter 4 Findings.

### **3.9. Disclosure of funding**

As a Ph.D. study, this research was largely funded by my time and energy over a period of 48 months. The financial funding that I received was from the M.Ed. EP program for two terms at half appointment as Research Assistant stipend (\$3,000 per semester Summer and Fall 2014) for developing the research methodology, ethical review documents, conducting the interviews and transcribing. Additionally, the cost of the \$25 gift cards for the participants was provided by SFU M.Ed. Field Programs. In May-June 2015, I travelled to Ottawa, Ontario with Dr. Cher Hill, Program Coordinator for the M.Ed. EP program. We attended the Canadian Society for the Study of Education conference and presented two papers based on the initial review of the data conducted in March-May of 2015 (Beveridge & Hill, 2015; Hill & Beveridge, 2015). The costs of travel and the conference registration were supported by SFU's Faculty of Education Graduate Studies office (\$800) and the bulk of the balance of the cost of attending the conference (accommodation and per diem) was supported by the M.Ed. Field Programs research and conference fund. Following the completion of the phenomenological reduction and development of data analysis, I presented a paper at the CSSE conference in Vancouver in June of 2019 (Beveridge, 2019). Attendance at that conference was funded by my employer, British Columbia Institute of Technology (BCIT). The funding I received to engage with the research and to present the research did not impact my impartial view of the results.

My employer, BCIT, also provided me with paid leaves to work on my thesis through their Super Professional Development Fund (Faculty and Staff Association) in 2015 (20 weeks) and a further six-week leave in the Spring of 2019 to work on this research thesis. I am grateful for the support and wish to acknowledge that without such funding opportunities, engaging in graduate level education, and taking part in scholarly activities such as attending and presenting at conferences, would not be possible for many adult learners juggling work and family commitments.

## **Chapter 4. Findings**

The phenomenologist does not present the reader with a conclusive argument or with a determinate set of ideas, essences, or insights. Instead, he or she aims to be allusive by orientating the reader reflectively to that region of lived experiences where the phenomenon dwells in recognizable form. (van Manen, 2002, p. 238)

In this chapter, I present the phenomenological findings of this study in relation to the central research question, “What are the essences of the experience of being a Masters student in the M.Ed. Educational Practice degree program?” and sub-questions, “What are the learning design influences (environmental and activities) that impacted the alumni’s experiences as a learner?”, “In what ways, if any, do alumni report fundamental, or transformative, changes in their professional practices?” and, “In what ways, if any, do alumni report fundamental, or transformative, changes in their personal lives?”

### **4.1. Process of phenomenological reduction**

As outlined in the previous chapter, the elucidation of the essence of the experience of being an M.Ed. EP student occurred through the process of phenomenological reduction that involved many hours of working with the data to distil the transcripts to descriptive summaries. To support this process, I used software (NVivo) that assisted me in identifying meaning units and the different foci that were expressed by the participants. This initial holistic coding enabled me to see some consistencies described by participants, and from that point, the meaning units were grouped into emergent themes. The process of phenomenological reduction was conducted for all 20 participants, and descriptive summaries created for nine of the participants as representatives of the group. Four of the descriptive summaries are embedded in this chapter as examples of the experiences. These were constructed through the lenses of socio-cultural learning perspectives and theory related to personal growth and transformative experience.

The descriptions of the experiences, as outlined in this chapter, were checked against the meaning unit identification of other transcripts that were similarly categorized even though descriptive summaries were not created for all the participants. What follows is a description of the essences of experiences of 20 alumni of the M.Ed. EP program. These experiences are presented in a phenomenological format—that is, as a description of the collective experiences without specific quotes from participants (Giorgi, 2009; van Manen, 2014). The four phenomenological descriptive summaries of alumni embedded as examples are illustrative of the common experience yet also show how participants ranged in the ways they emphasized their experiences in the M.Ed. program, as well as the meaningful learning processes and outcomes. A description of each step in the phenomenological reduction process (van Manen, 2014) is outlined below.

#### **4.1.1. Reading for a Sense of the Whole**

Following the transcribing of the 20 interviews, I engaged in the process of reading the transcripts multiple times to gain a sense of the whole. Nine transcripts were then randomly selected to form the basis of two research papers presented to the Canadian Society of the Study of Education (CSSE) conference in Ottawa in June 2015 (Beveridge & Hill, 2015; Hill & Beveridge, 2015). These were papers produced in collaboration with research supervisor, Dr. Cher Hill. Based on the nine transcripts reviewed in depth, we felt that there were two main types of experiences described. One being more aligned with transformative learning experience and the other that described a more validating, grounding or affirming of practice as a result of the M.Ed. EP experience, which was consistent with earlier research which was published in 2016 (Hill & MacDonald, 2016). In these nine instances, the role of the cohort was described as central to the students' learning processes. In particular, being in relationship with others in the cohort acted as a catalyst for personal and professional reflection. The cohort also allowed for students to share their learning as well as moments of discomfort or disorientation, provided opportunities for modelling of practice with each other, as well as emotional and practical support (Hill & Beveridge, 2015). It was also evident from the responses to queries regarding meaningful learning environments and activities, that the deliberate design of the learning environment to be a community of practice, was greatly valued by the participants interviewed. The cohorts were composed of teachers across disciplines,

grade levels, and with a range of years of teaching experience (from near neophytes through to 20 plus years of experience). Two to three faculty were also consistently part of the community. In order to enable meaningful learning to occur, it was essential that the faculty provided a safe, respectful and supportive learning environment. This is due to the predominance of emotional vulnerability encountered when engaging in change processes. The M.Ed. EP program, is strategically designed to enable learners to develop both their listening and sharing skills. Collegial, professional and critical dialogue is encouraged throughout the program. Sharing and demonstration of professional practice, as well as seeking input from others, is a core component of the weekly in-class seminars (Hill et al., 2019).

The process involved in this initial round of transcript review was more in line with narrative approaches to data analysis—creating first person narratives of individual experiences. Excerpts shown in the shadowed text box below are from one of the CSSE conference papers (Hill & Beveridge, 2015) and show findings from our initial data analysis.

All participants spoke of experiencing ongoing shifts associated with their experiences in the Master of Educational Practice Program, and many spoke of missing the program, particularly the conversations. The depth and nature of these changes differed, however, as did the conditions that catalyzed them. Teachers described major and minor disruptions of worldviews, practices, and/or sense of self, as well as other changes that remained stable over a year after completing their graduate studies. For example, adopting an inquiry stance as a practitioner, becoming more flexible and accepting of uncertainty in teaching and learning, developing a greater self-awareness and acceptance of diverse perspectives, increased capacity as leaders and collaborators within schools, becoming more vulnerable, courageous and confident as a practitioner, increasing capacity to name, situate, and justify practice, and aligning practice with educational philosophies (p. 6). ....

Asking students to critically examine professional values, beliefs and/or perspectives and consistency with actions is a common pedagogical activity in our programs. Inquiry projects in which teachers examine alignment between their values and their actions, or critically scrutinize other tensions in their practice, can create a productive disorientation that can lead to transformative change. An important piece in creating readiness for the discomfort that often accompanies such a personal and critical exploration involves embracing vulnerability and valuing courage. ...

Not all significant learning experiences, however, involved a transformative shift. Another point of convergence involved 'affirmative learning,' in which current beliefs, values, 'hunches,' tensions, and/or practices were validated or explicated. ... Through dialogue, critical reflection, and engagement with theory teachers were better able to understand, articulate, explain, name, justify, and/or defend their educational philosophies and practices (p. 9-10). ...

Different mediums provided opportunities for engaging in critical reflection, disorientation, developing ideas, and situating and affirming practice. As exemplified in the narratives, the structure, philosophies and

pedagogies of the M.Ed. EP program, particularly the inquiry approach, which encourages curiosity, self-directed questioning, an emergent, uncertain outcome, and the development of context specific knowledge, were aspects of the learning context that supported deep and meaningful learning experiences. These aspects of the program created a series of disorienting events which lead to transformative change for some (e.g., Erin), or a powerful educational experience which could be emulated in one's own practice (e.g., Cali Ann), which moved teachers from more of a structured, transmission oriented approach to a more emergent transactive curriculum (Miller & Seller, 1990). For others (e.g., Enigma) the process of inquiring into a tension in one's practice created a crisis that resulted in transformative change.

The aspect of the learning environment that was most commonly discussed by teacher learners as a powerful aspect of their experience was the opportunity to dialogue with supportive 'like-minded' individuals. By 'like-minded,' participants did not mean that their cohort lacked diversity, quite the contrary. Rather they were referring to being part of a group with shared goals, process, values, and vision. Through dialogue, teachers felt affirmed, stretched, and supported (p. 11-12).

### ***Revisiting the transcripts—emergent non-community of practice central experiences***

I was aware that the narrative approach undertaken in the preliminary review of the data would be a 'first review' and that it did not follow phenomenological reduction techniques so, following the conference presentations, I re-engaged with the data and began an inductive process of using NVivo to support the identification of meaning units across all 20 transcripts based on the participants' descriptions of their experiences. Following the process of phenomenological reduction, I compared the narratives we authored for the CSSE paper to descriptive summaries created from the phenomenological reduction process I did and found that our initial review was aligned for those nine participants, as well as nine others, all of whom described the community of practice as being central in their learning and growth process. By creating a meaning unit analysis on all 20 transcripts in depth, however, there emerged discrete descriptions of experience held by two of the participants. Although these teachers still described professional grounding, affirmative, and validating or transformative outcomes, the learning community was a less dominant aspect of their learning experience. For the majority of the participants (18/20) the relationships developed within the cohort, and the professional dialogue, held a central place in the descriptions of what was meaningful to them. For two others, the structure of the program was noted as beneficial, but they described a more individual learning experience whereby the cohort members played a part in validation and encouragement, but meaningful learning outcomes and processes were described specifically as personal work.

#### **4.1.2. Summary of emergent meaning units**

The next phase undertaken in the phenomenological reduction was the creation of a summary of emergent meaning units. From the identification of meaning units using NVivo (as described in chapter 3), I created an MS Excel spreadsheet and populated that with percentages of the transcripts that were coded in different meaning units (calculated by NVivo). This was not undertaken to reduce the richness of the interviews to numerical data but rather to allow me to get a sense of what the participants focussed on during their interviews. I then grouped these meaning units into categories that again, allowed me to sense the emergent essences of the experiences. Working with 400 pages of transcript, this process was useful to assist with visualizing the 'big picture' to provide an overall 'sense of the whole' for all 20 participants.

I have created figures below that show how individuals focussed their narratives during the interviews. Each interview was an hour in length and they were unstructured, in that only three core questions were asked. Additional probing questions were asked as the interview unfolded. The ways that individuals chose to focus their responses to the questions resulted in some aspects of their experiences being highlighted more than others. I recognize that should the interview have been more structured, or taken place at a different time, the participants may have focussed their responses differently. As such, the NVivo theme identification helped to create visual representations of how time was focussed in the interviews by the participants. Segments of the interviews related to introductions, off the record requests, and off topic speech (e.g., showing me samples of their work or their students' work), were not considered in the meaning themes identified and make up the remainder of the percent of time. While there is, arguably, an incongruence with providing these figures that show the emphasis of the interviews in terms of a numerical representation of interview focus and phenomenological writing, I offer these images simply to support the phenomenological expressions as these visualizing tools provided assisted me in writing about the context and preferences of what the participants expressed. These figures should not be viewed as a form of quantifying the experiences but rather as a way of assisting visualizing the emphasis expressed by the participants and adding clarity to the written expressions if needed.

Figures 4.1 and 4.2 below indicate what the participants chose to emphasize

during their interviews. In answering the three core questions, participants had freedom to describe and expand on topics in ways that were meaningful to them. Their narratives included describing what the M.Ed. EP program meant to them professionally and personally, feelings of growth or change during the program and sustained changes after the program, providing specific instances of meaningful learning activities and the relevance of the learning community on their processes, as well as instances where the program activities or processes were not deemed helpful and suggestions for program improvement. Figure 4.1 shows the average percent of the interviews spent speaking about these different topics for the whole participant group. Figure 4.2 shows the percent of the interview spent on these topics by the individual participants.

**Figure 4.1 Percent of interviews spent describing outcomes of M.Ed. and meaningful learning activities and processes overall average**

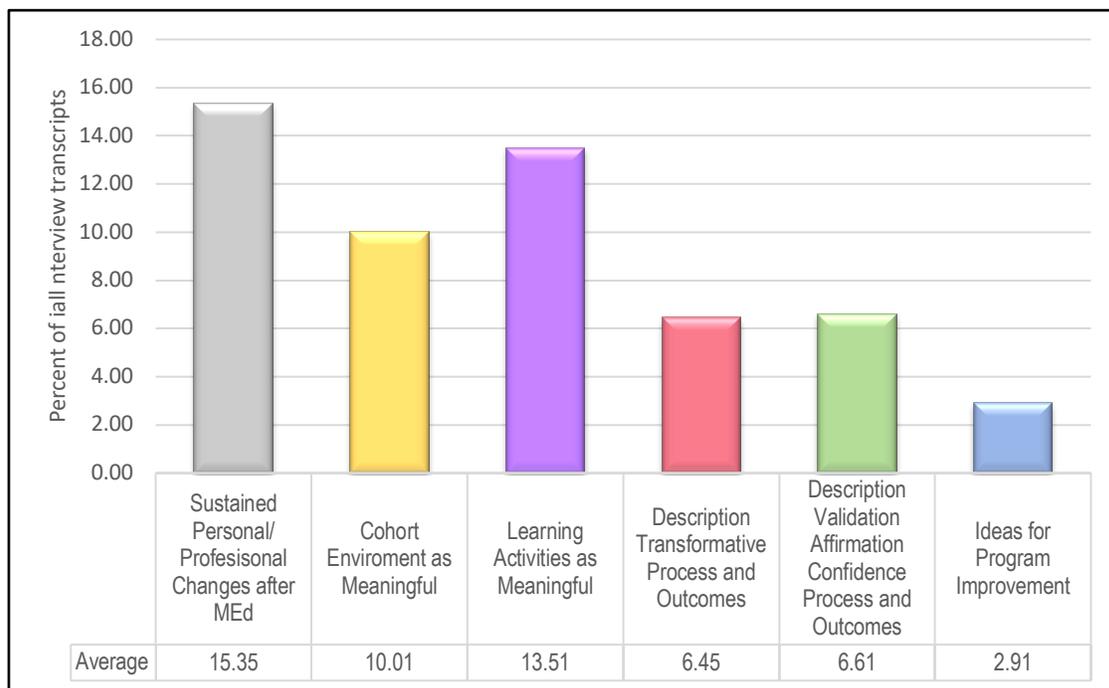


Figure 4.1 above shows that participants offered insight into how the M.Ed. EP has impacted them professionally, noting how their practice changed during the program and how those changes have been sustained. Such discussions accounted for 15.35% of the time spent in the interviews. Another area that participants described in depth were the various learning activities that were meaningful to them and this accounted for a collective 13.51% of the interview transcript. Various environmental considerations related to

learning within a cohort community of practice accounted for 10.01% of the interviews. The perceived process and outcomes were often described as either being transformative (6.45%) in nature or related more to feelings of validation, affirmation and increased professional confidence (6.61%). Half of the participations offering ideas for possible improvements to the program accounting for 2.91% of interview transcripts. As noted earlier, some interview time was allotted for introductions, or other off topic discussions and those sections of the transcripts were not coded for meaning units but did take up a percent of the overall interview time. Each of these areas of discussion are presented separately later in this chapter. Below in Figure 4.2, the interview focus for each individual participant is presented as a bar graph.

**Figure 4.2 Percent of interviews spent describing outcomes of M.Ed. and meaningful learning activities and processes by individuals**

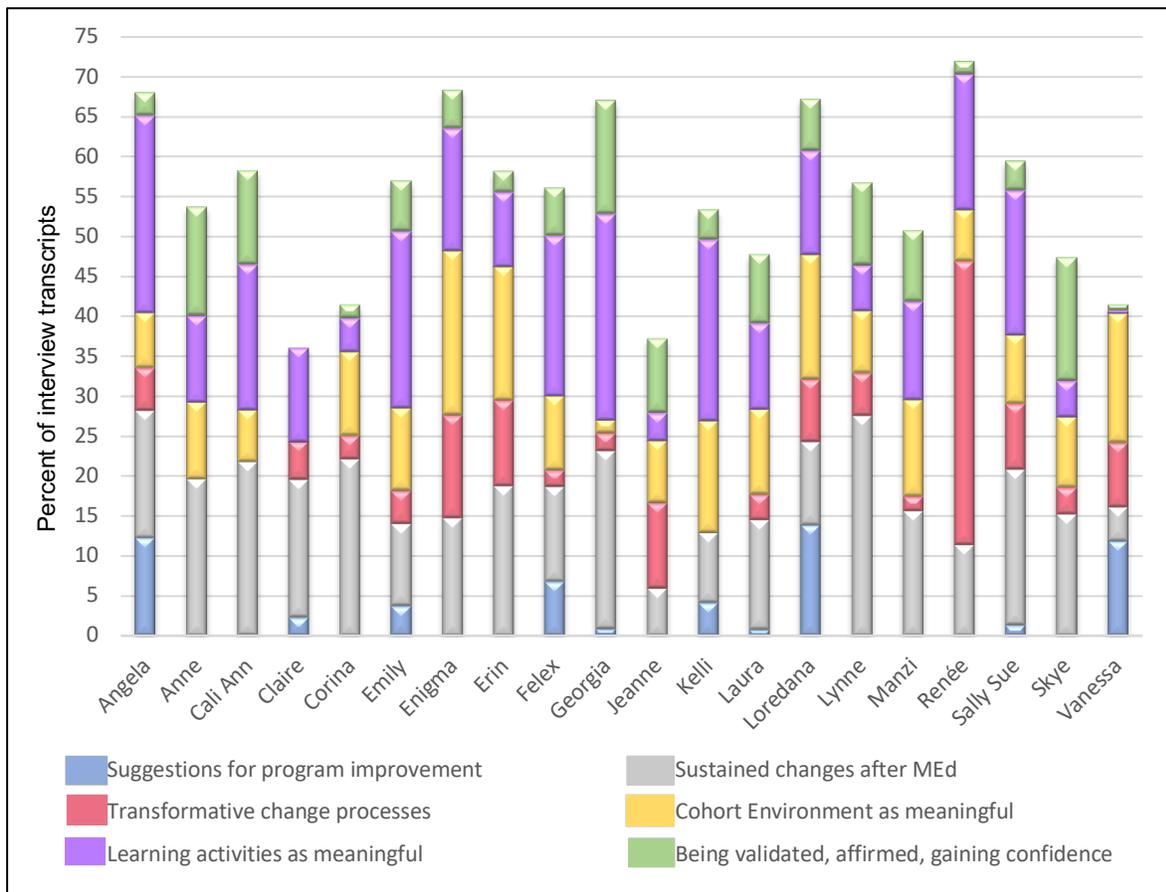


Figure 4.2 above indicates that all participants described, at various lengths, the “Sustained changes after M.Ed.” These revelations related to the various ways that their

learning during the M.Ed. EP continues to influence them professionally and/or personally indicating sustained change. For some, their descriptions focussed primarily on feeling transformed through the M.Ed. with examples of transformative learning processes, such as moments of disorientation, crisis, disjuncture, and wrestling with core sense of self, being central to their narratives (e.g., Enigma, Erin, Jeanne, and Renée). Others focussed their descriptions more on feelings of professional confidence, validation and affirmation that arose through their learning (e.g., Anne, Cali Ann, Georgia, Lynne, and Skye). All described specific learning activities that were meaningful to them, and all but one (Claire) described some elements of the community of practice learning environment that were meaningful and/or supportive in their process. In the figures below, I present detail of the meaning units identified for these different elements of the expressions of experience in the M.Ed. EP program. Half (10/20) of the participants also noted suggestions for program change or improvement and this is also outlined below.

### ***Expressions of how the M.Ed. EP program has impacted participants personally and professionally***

Participants were asked to describe what the M.Ed. EP program meant to them personally and professionally. Many spoke at length about ways that their learning and development during the program has continued to impact their personal and professional lives 16-20 months post-graduation. Below, Figure 4.3 shows the specific meaning units related to the impact, or changes following the M.Ed. program as well as how much emphasis individuals put on such description during their individual interviews.

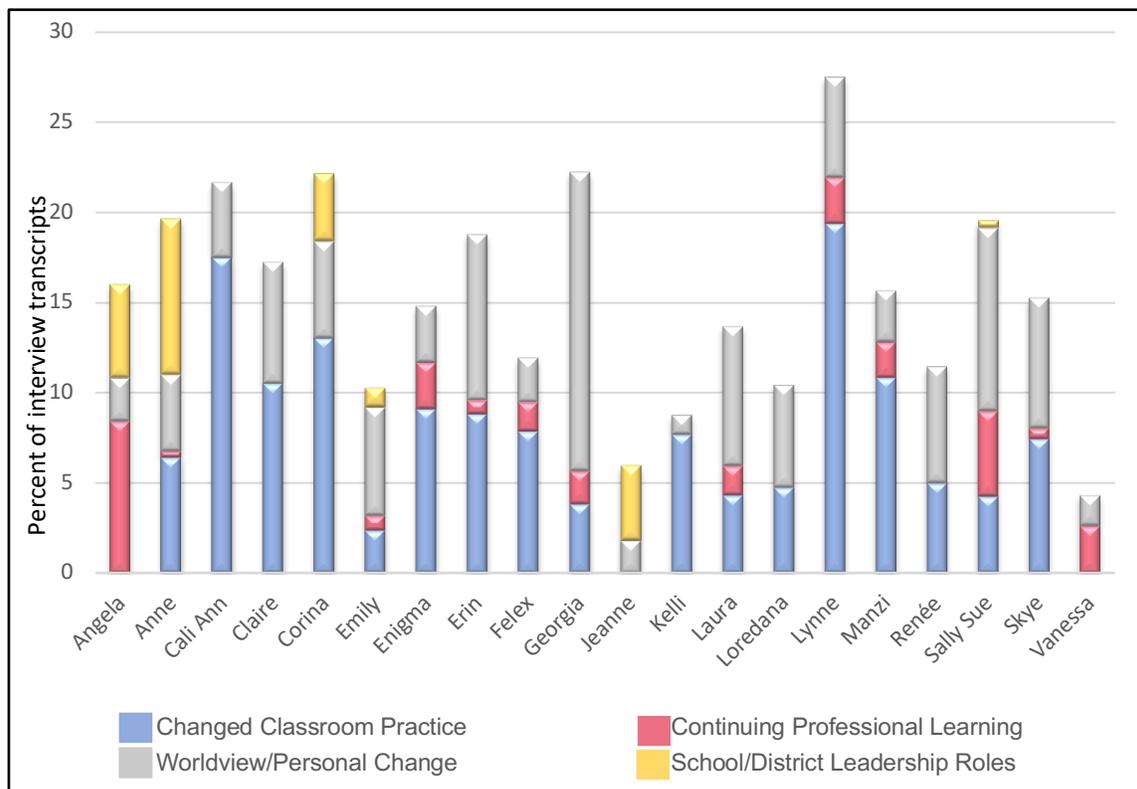
When using NVivo for holistic coding, I identified ten discrete meaning units under the umbrella category of “Changes after the M.Ed.”. Using an Excel spreadsheet, I have consolidated these ten meaning units into the four categories shown in Figure 4.3 above. The meaning unit categories are comprised as follows:

- Changed classroom practice:
  - Meaning units: Changed classroom practice; New education vision; New way of being—professional
- Continuing professional learning:
  - Meaning units: Changed learning; Desire for Ed.D./Ph.D.; Became/desire to be SFU grad mentor
- Worldview changes:
  - Meaning units: New ways of being—personal; Worldview changes

- School/district leadership roles:
  - Meaning units: School leadership; School district leadership roles

Participants described what the program meant to them personally and professionally, and this discussion was central in most of the interviews, with a primary focus being on their changed professional practice and personal ways of being in the world. This included descriptions of new ways of listening to others, having greater curiosity and less judgement, and an overall improved understanding of themselves both personally and professionally. Surprising to some was their increased confidence and ability to take on leadership roles within their school and/or school district (e.g. Angela, Anne, Emily, Jeanne). A desire to seek out opportunities for professional development was highlighted by some (e.g., Enigma, Erin, Felex, Georgia, Manzi, Sally Sue, Sky, and Vanessa), and some who had never previously identified as being a scholar started to see themselves as potential mentors for others and have considered pursuing further graduate level or other study (e.g., Angela, Emily, Enigma, Laura, Lynne, and Manzi).

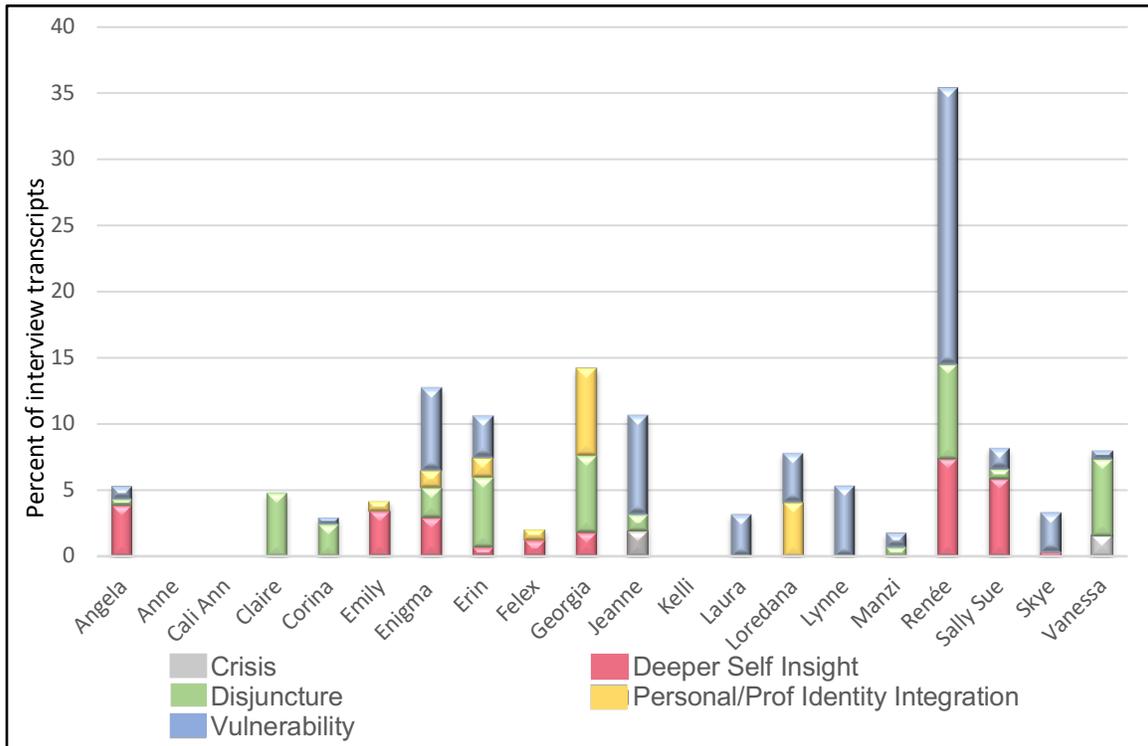
**Figure 4.3 Percent of interview focussing on sustained changes after the M.Ed. Educational Practice Program**



### ***Expressions of personal and professional change and/or development***

Expressions of personal and professional changes included both transformative change descriptions as well as descriptions of increased professional confidence, validation and affirmation. In Figure 4.4, below, the meaning units related to expressions of transformative learning processes by the 20 participants are presented.

**Figure 4.4 Percent of interview time focussed on description of transformative processes and outcomes**



When using NVivo for holistic coding, I identified eight discrete meaning units under the umbrella category of “Transformative change processes.” Using an Excel spreadsheet, I have consolidated these eight meaning units into the five categories shown in Figure 4.3 above. Based on Mezirow’s (1991) theory descriptions of transformative learning outlined in Chapter 2 Literature Review, I merged some meaning units that fit together as being very similar, processes. The meaning unit categories are comprised as follows:

- Crisis:
  - Meaning units: Crisis (on its own as a discrete process)

- Disjuncture:
  - Meaning units: Discomfort; Disorientation (internal/individual experience)
- Vulnerability:
  - Meaning units: Vulnerability; Out of comfort zone; Taking risks (witnessed by others)
- Deeper self insight:
  - Meaning units: Deeper self-insight (on its own as a discrete reflective process)
- Personal/professional identity integration:
  - Meaning units: Integration personal and professional (expressed as no longer having a 'teacher' self apart from personal identity awareness)

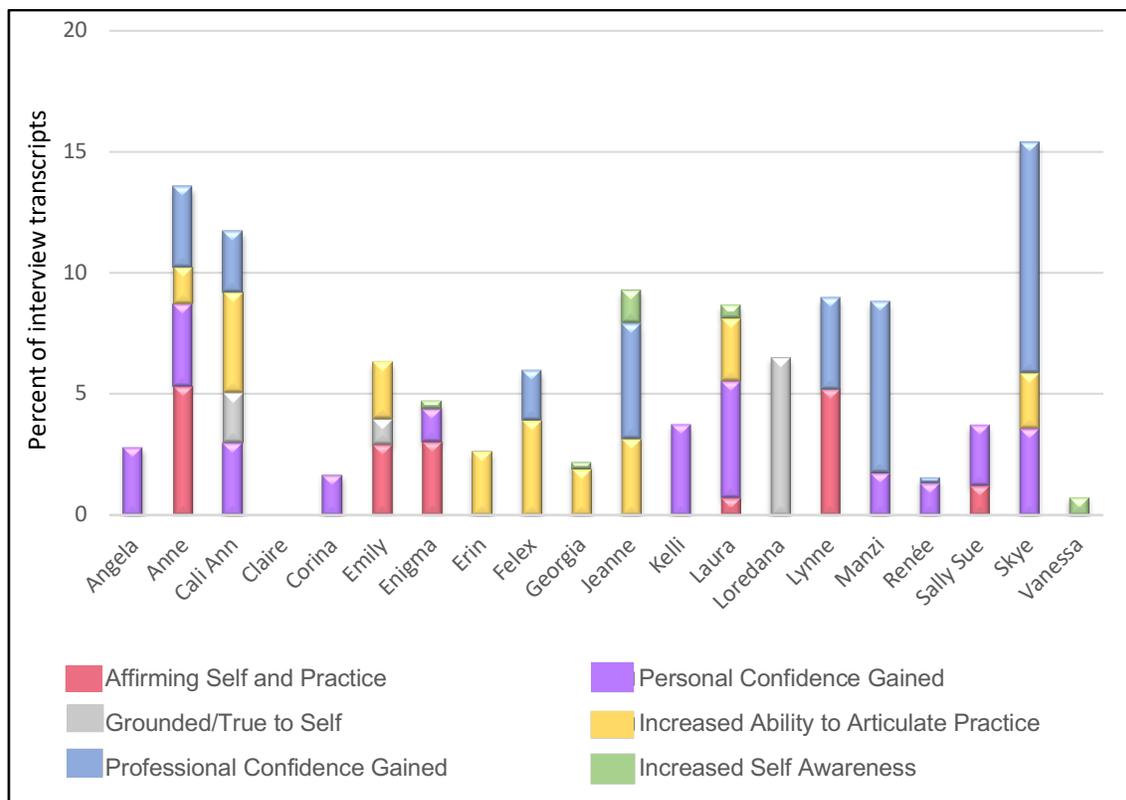
Participants were also asked to describe the process involved in their transformative or substantive changes. Some participants (e.g., Enigma, Erin, Jeanne, Renée, and Vanessa) provided details about moments of crisis, disjuncture (i.e., discomfort and disorientation felt internally) and vulnerability (i.e., feelings of vulnerability, being outside of their comfort zone, and taking risks as witnessed by peers) when engaged in the learning activities and self-reflection, which are typical processes involved in transformative learning (Mezirow, 1991). They spoke of feeling they were taking risks and becoming vulnerable and how that enabled them to make transformative changes to themselves personally and/or professionally. Some also spoke more about outcomes of the program that are directly related to their expressed sense of personal growth and professional identity changes. They described a sense of integration between their personal and professional selves (e.g., Emily, Enigma, Erin, Felex, Georgia, and Loredana), and eight also provided details about gaining deeper self-insight through personal awareness of bias and triggers, as well as mindful recognition of behaviour in-the-moment.

Participants did not only describe their experiences as resulting in transformative outcomes as described by Mezirow (1991). Many also focussed their descriptions of experience more on the outcomes related to their practice changes that resulted in feelings of increased professional validation, affirmation, confidence and competence. The main categories for these meaning units are shown in Figure 4.5 below.

Participants made statements regarding how they felt more empowered to participate in professional dialogue within their work settings as result of the M.Ed. EP experience. The ability to articulate, and justify, their practices resulted in feeling more

professionally confident (e.g., Anne, Cali Ann, Emily, Erin, Felex, Georgia, Jeanne, Laura, Lynne, Mazi, Renée, and Skye). Expressions of feeling more grounded and acting in ways that felt ‘true to self’ were noted by several too (e.g., Cali Ann, Emily, Loredana). Some also spoke of becoming more confident in their personal lives (e.g., Angela, Anne, Cali Ann, Corina, Enigma, Kelli, Laura, Manzi, Renée, Sally Sue, and Skye). Many participants made this a substantial focus for what the M.Ed. program meant to them in terms of meaningfulness—the outcomes for their practice.

**Figure 4.5** Percent of interview time focussed on description of feeling more professionally grounded, validated, and affirmed



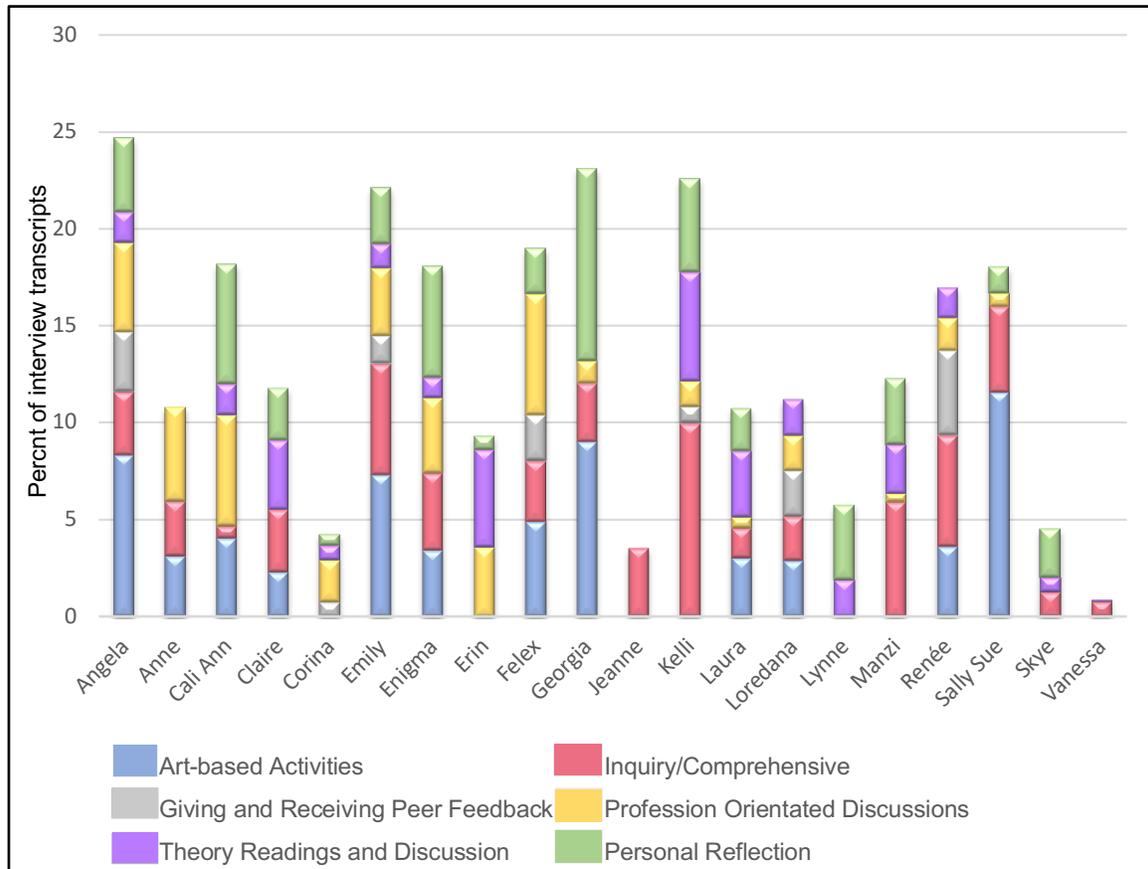
The personal and professional changes noted in the sections above, came about through active engagement in the M.Ed. EP’s learning environment and specific learning activities which are described in the following sections.

***Expressions of how changes and/or growth occurred***

When asked if there were any meaningful learning activities and/or processes that contributed to their described changes, participants provided both specific learning

activities, as well as learning processes, that enabled them to experience the deep and sustained changes to their selves and/or professional practice. Figure 4.6 below shows an overview of how the participants emphasized different learning activities they found meaningful.

**Figure 4.6 Percent of interview time focussing on learning activities meaningful for participants' expressed changes and outcomes**



When using NVivo for holistic coding, I identified 14 discrete meaning units under the umbrella category of “Meaningful learning activities.”. Using an Excel spreadsheet, I have consolidated these 14 meaning units into the six categories shown in Figure 4.6 above. This was partly because 14 different categories on a bar chart is very challenging to view, and partly to align more directly with literature covered in Chapter 2 Literature Review. The meaning unit categories are comprised as follows:

- Art-based Activities:

- Meaning units: Art-based activities (on its own included descriptions of a number of discrete activities engaged in during the second semester)
- Giving and Receiving Peer Feedback:
  - Meaning units: Receiving critical friend feedback; Providing feedback on other's writing; Giving and witnessing presentations
- Theory Readings and Discussions:
  - Meaning units: Readings (experiencing challenges with readings); Research methods learning
- Inquiry/Comprehensive:
  - Meaning units: Inquiry cycles; Comprehensive paper writing
- Profession Orientated Discussions:
  - Meaning units: Walk and talks; Profession orientated discussions in seminars; Guest speakers
- Personal Reflection:
  - Meaning units: Reflective writing; Reflection time in class

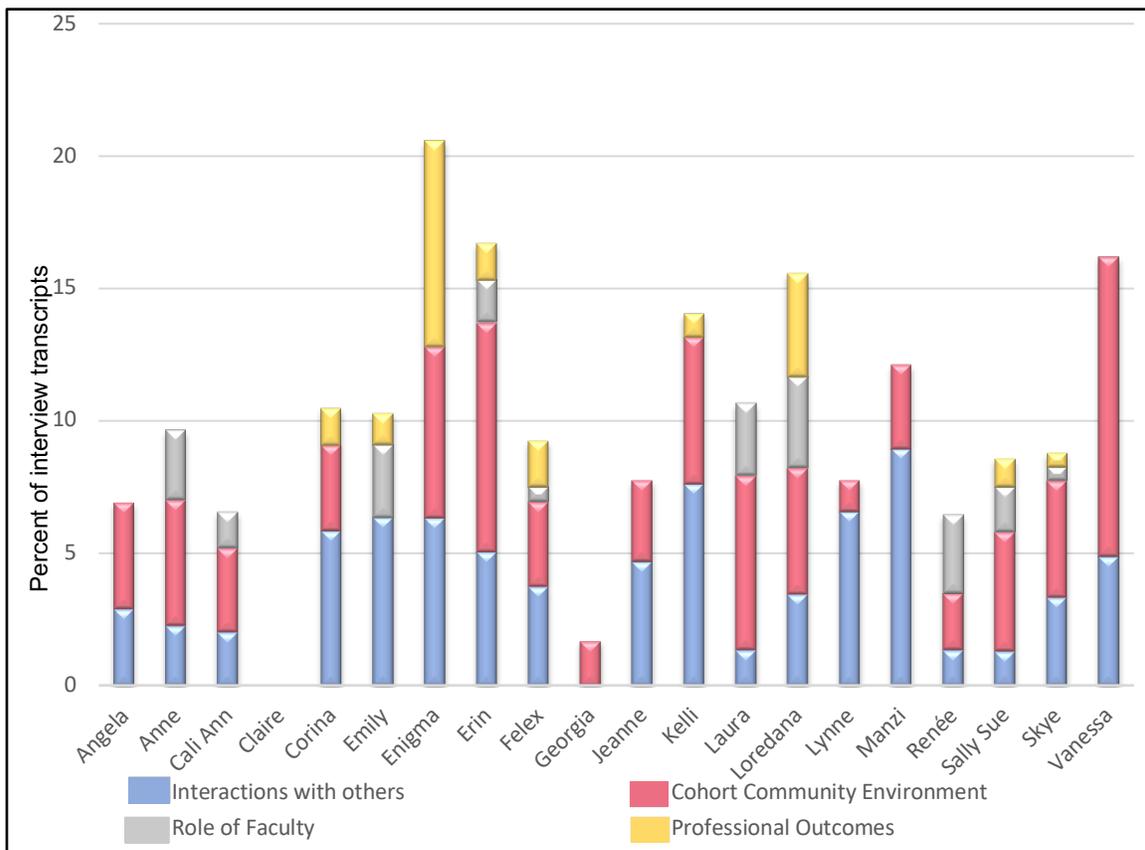
The participants described their personal engagement with the various learning activities that they took part in during the class times, as well as their homework and inquiry projects. Many (12/20) spoke of the importance of the various arts-based activities as well as the various methods for personal reflection (15/20) for helping them to see things from different perspectives and open up to new ideas. Wrestling with incongruence between their stated educational beliefs and practices, with what they were reading about or reflecting on, and sharing those moments with others in the community enabled them to question their practice and beliefs in a safe and supportive way. For all but three, the profession orientated dialogue was highlighted as meaningful in their learning journeys, and this included the moments of struggle with new professional language and challenging academic articles on their reading list. For 18/20, engaging in the iterative nature of the inquiry project, and the culminating comprehensive paper and presentation, were also expressed as important learning activity catalysts for their expressed personal and professional change and development.

The various roles played by the cohort members such as community building, scaffolding, mentoring, bearing witness to one another were described in multiple ways by all the participants. When using NVivo for holistic coding, I identified 18 discrete meaning units under the umbrella category of "Environmental influences". Using an Excel spreadsheet, I have consolidated these 18 meaning units into the four categories shown in Figure 4.7 below. The meaning unit categories are comprised as follows:

- Cohort Community Environment:

- Meaning units: Community development; Likeminded collegiality; Collegiality with differences; Common purpose; Sense of safety; Sense of belonging/connection; Sense of support
- Interactions with Others:
  - Meaning units: CoP learning activities (in-class collaboration); Dialogue; Mentorship by peers; Scaffolding of ideas; Scaffolding of practice
- Role of Faculty:
  - Meaning units: Mentorship of faculty; Modelling of faculty
- Professional Outcomes:
  - Meaning units: Sense of trajectory or growth; validation of ideas/practice

**Figure 4.7** Percent of interview time focussed on description of meaningful cohort learning community environment attributes



The development of the learning community as a community of practice was a deliberate design strategy and required faculty and the teacher-learners to create a safe learning space where mutual sharing and support could be offered (Hill & MacDonald, 2016). The phase of community development was noted as meaningful by 18/20

participants. Engaging in learning activities that highlighted their common purpose to grow as educators, share practice, and explore new ideas was also expressed as highly valuable by the majority of the participants (18/20). The faculty were also recognized as playing an important role in the community—by initially taking the lead in forming a sense of community, and also through their modelling of scholarship, mentorship of students' ideas and practices (10/20). The participants noted that as a result of engaging in the learning activities within their cohort community of practice—especially critical professional dialogue—they experienced a sense of professional validation and growth—a learning trajectory that resulted in the outcomes shown in Figures 4.3, 4.4, and 4.5 earlier in this chapter. The essential role that others in the cohort played in providing a safe space for dialogue and critical reflection is aligned closely with learning community theory as well as transformative learning theory discussed in Chapter 2 Literature Review.

#### **4.1.3. Identification of essences of experiences**

I recognize that phenomenological studies are not concerned with quantitative measures. I have not utilized the breakdown of percentage of interview focus in any decontextualized way in the overall analysis, rather, it allowed me to revisit the transcripts throughout the reduction process from a place of curiosity—to check whether the overall sense of the descriptions align with the meaning units identified. I believe that there are nuances in narratives that cannot necessarily be captured by crude percentage calculations and I was aware of that belief when I sat with the data to gain a sense of the essences of the experiences. Often Ph.D. candidate-led phenomenological studies have smaller data sets (SFU examples: Almarza, 2017; Boelryk, 2014; Dharamsi, 2014) and, working with the volume of data in this study, as a lone researcher, I found it helpful to use the percentage of transcript foci to identify commonalities and differences and then revisit transcripts to confirm those conclusions.

In the following sections of this chapter, I provide phenomenological expressions of the essences of the experience of being a M.Ed. student in the Educational Practice program as revealed within the context of the interview process with approximately 35% of alumni from across three cohorts. I start with a description of the overall whole group experience in section 4.2. I then offer a description of nuanced, discrete, yet inter-related,

experiences that emerged through the phenomenological reduction process. In section 4.3, the description of the personal and professional transformative experiences is presented as described by seven of the participants. In section 4.4., the description of the experience outlined by 13 participants as being more focussed on professional confidence, affirmation, grounding and validating is presented.

## **4.2. Phenomenological Expression of the Essences of the Experience for the Whole Group**

The experience of being a student in the M.Ed. in Educational Practice program has been described by 20 discrete voices, within the context of a phenomenological interview. They provided insight into the essential, common essences of the professional and personal processes that resulted in growth and change through the M.Ed. program. With the two-year Graduate Diploma acting as a foundation from which to continue a pathway of professional development, the participants of this study all enrolled in the M.Ed. EP year with a desire to enhance and refine their professional practice as teachers. This common purpose brought together diverse groups of educators, from classroom environments ranging from Kindergarten to Grade 12, as well as some working across age groups with specialist disciplines (e.g., music or special educational needs).

### ***Value of community***

The participants described how, from the outset, it was evident that a central pillar of the program was in the creation of a community of professionals coming together for joint investigation of practice. By utilizing strategies to develop cohesiveness within the cohort groups, the participants remarked how the faculty provided opportunities for mutual sharing and relationship building amongst the students. For example, a common initial sensation of being confused and unsure of oneself was experienced during the first semester due to the initiation into scholarly reading and theoretical concepts. The participants reported a feeling of being out of one's depth—not understanding the readings and being somewhat reticent to admit it—concerned that they were not smart enough, or that others were more capable than they were. However, the professional dialogue times, and the encouragement to embrace vulnerability and discuss their perspectives in small

groups created a sense of safety to share and enabled a cohesiveness to develop within the cohorts – “we’re in this together”.

The participants recognized and appreciated the role of community builder played by each other too. Additionally, the value of bearing witness to others—learning through observing the challenges expressed and learning narratives of others— was an extremely valuable part of the community process that was supported and facilitated by faculty. The participants were encouraged to become critical friends for one another, reading and challenging one another’s written work as well as purposefully questioning one another’s ideas and conclusions during discussions. The resulting scaffolding of ideas that occurred due to the range of experiences in the group (including the faculty) was a valuable process noted by the participants. Many reported becoming ‘inspired’ by the modelling of the faculty and their peers throughout the M.Ed. EP year. For example, many cited instances of witnessing inquiry processes in action, exemplary teaching techniques, scaffolding of learning, as well as a range of ways to balance work-life and family commitments. With all students being novice researchers, the joint efforts to support one another’s individual inquiries was deemed to be essential to the growth and developing confidence of the participants’ research capabilities.

### ***Meaningful learning experiences***

The range of experience, both years of teaching and grade levels, provided a community of professionals that included near neophytes and those with more senior positions in the education sector. The time given in class to have professional dialogue with one another, whether related to readings or their inquiry projects was highly valued by all the participants. They reported that the professional conversations with ‘like-minded’ individuals who were passionate about engaging in dialogue about their teaching practice was a key aspect of the M.Ed. EP experience that ‘enlivened’ and transformed their practice. Gaining confidence in being able to articulate practice—relating it to theory—and feeling validated in current practice and new practices was a common experience for the participants. This came about largely as a result of the sharing with, and witnessing of, each other’s ideas and disclosed learning moments. For most of the participants, the concept of becoming vulnerable—of sharing with others and being willing to admit their

doubts and insecurities was a catalyst for getting the most out of the discussions as well as the practices that encouraged self-awareness.

The development of self-reflective practices was also common element for the participants. Some did this grudgingly at the beginning of, and possibly throughout, the M.Ed. EP year—engaging in journaling or other forms of structured reflection. A number of participants shared that if SFU hadn't made them do it, they probably wouldn't have engaged in the journaling practice and although some resisted this, they all noted the value of the practice and how that helped them to make sense of what they were learning along the way, as well as how it applied to their classroom practice and to their personal lives.

What surprised many of the participants was how much the various arts-based approaches influenced their learning and ability to reflect. The opening of perspectives—seeing and expressing their learning and core beliefs through a variety of different mediums allowed for a recognition and respect for multiple intelligences and alternative worldviews. For many, the depth of the experience of using alternative ways of presenting their learning was simply that—a broadening of understanding and increased valuing in alternative representations. But for some, noted in sections below, these activities resulted in very deep self-work connected to their reflective practices that provided a platform for transformative shifts to occur.

For all, discomfort became comfort. Disorientation became self-awareness. Vulnerability became confidence. The processes for these changes varied and will be discussed in more depth in the following sections of this chapter. Common to all were the times spent in deep, professional dialogue, the arts-based approaches to broaden their understanding of learning through representation, and the individual reflective practices that resulted in shared insights with colleagues and faculty.

### ***Emergent sense of autonomy and confidence***

The autonomy afforded throughout the M.Ed. EP to pursue an inquiry project that was relevant to their own teaching and developmental needs was highly valued by the participants. Being able to choose the focus of their inquiry, and what to read and reflect

upon provided a sense of ownership not previously experienced in academic work. This ability to make their learning relevant to their own practice, allowed for a depth of professional growth as they witnessed each other's reflections and struggles with their inquiries—helping to make broader links between theory and practice and strengthening the lived experience of open, discovery influenced pedagogy. This was described through repeated statements that expressed the sense of relevancy that their inquiry projects had to their professional development as well as how much more empowered they felt to articulate the theoretical relevance of their practice in their school or district settings.

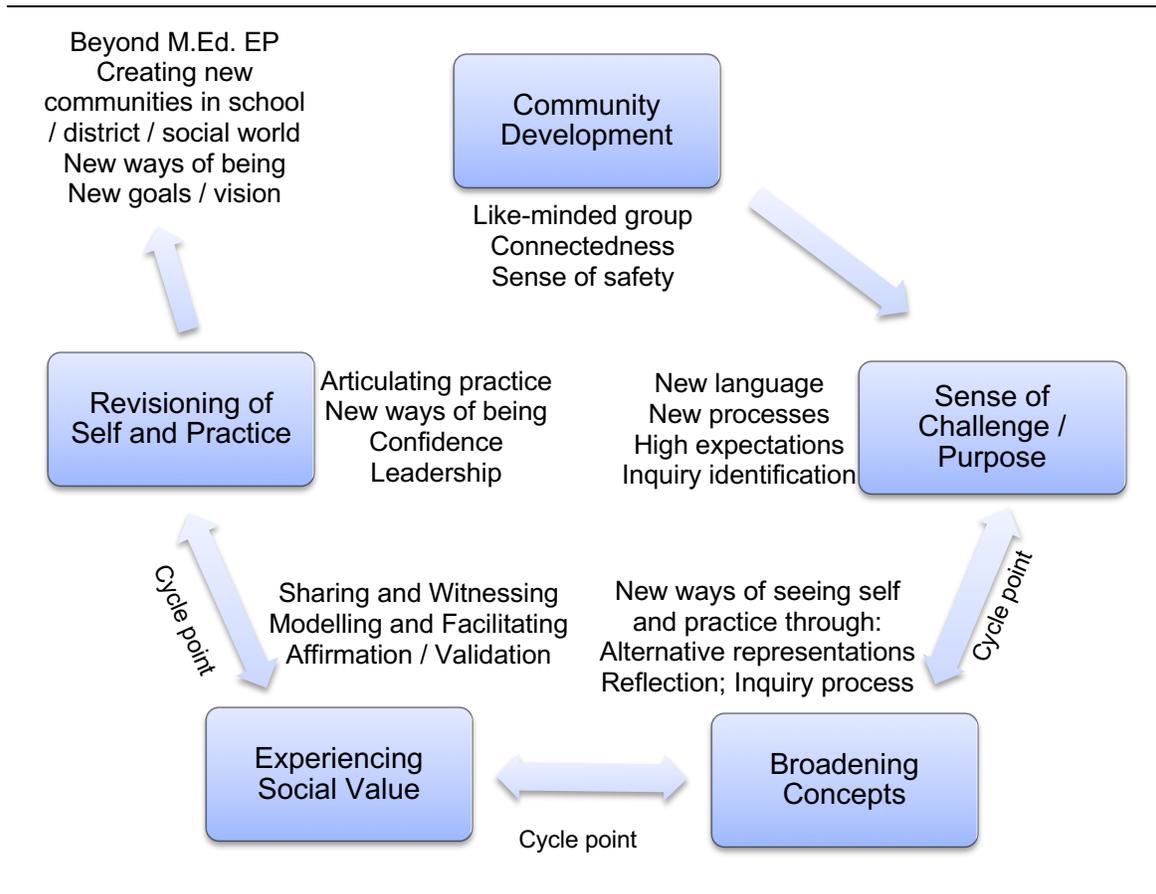
For all the participants, the sentiment of 'once changed, never to return to previous practices' was articulated in some form. With the interviews occurring between 16-20 months post-graduation, such sentiments do provide evidence of the sustained nature of the change experiences. The common experience of change in professional practice is the outcome most anticipated by the program faculty too—hence the name of the program 'Educational Practice'—graduating from the program are practitioners who are more informed about the 'big picture' of education generally, more willing to share ideas and practice, more empowered to articulate practice in scholarly formats, and more willing to take risks—allowing for discovery, spontaneity, and inquiry based approaches in their classrooms. The participants spoke of how they have sought out professional communities in their own schools or districts, and in some cases, created them. Many have taken on new or further evolved leadership roles. For others, they have begun to imagine what could be next for them to enhance and further their careers. For all, the seeking of community with colleagues, having a more open-door policy for their classroom and/or collaborating across district settings, has become common practices that were not present before the M.Ed. EP experience despite many of the participants being in practice for over a decade. For many, there were deep, lasting personal growth experiences too. Worldview shifts led to merging of personal and professional identities and resulted in transference of new ways of being in the professional arena to their personal lives too.

#### **4.2.1. A Graphic Representation of the Common Experience**

In Figure 4.8 below I offer a visual representation of the common M.Ed. EP experience of the participants in this study that contributed to re-envisioning their practice

and their sense of self as practitioners. Starting with the building of the sense of community in the first semester, the cohort engaged in practices to develop a sense of cohesiveness and safety. Participants were exposed to new ideas, new language, and opportunities to articulate their personal connection with educational philosophy. They were encouraged to consider where there were tensions between their beliefs, worldviews, and ways of operating in the world. This provided a sense of challenge and purpose for the M.Ed. EP year, helping to hone inquiry focus, strategies and personal goals. Engaging in a range of activities including professional dialogue, arts-based activities, and critical reflection resulted in a broadening of concepts and possibilities for action. At this point, many participants spoke of how being introduced to new ideas and new readings resulted in a cycling back to consider the impacts on their inquiry approaches and sense of direction. This iteration occurred as a result of the development of deeper connections in the cohort, the willingness to share and be witnessed as well as the hearing of others. Participants expressed feelings of validation, having their practices affirmed through these social processes. This often resulted in making deeper connections through learning activities and sharing further. The willingness to engage in articulating practice and learning from others, created another iteration point where witnessing and sharing lead to participants being able to articulate new or broader professional and personal ways of being—of practice and perceptions. A new sense of confidence to engage in continued dialogue, growth and learning beyond the M.Ed. EP cohort was commonly expressed by participants. Many have sought out or created new communities and are taking a leadership role in community development in those settings. The cycle continues.

**Figure 4.8** Essence of the participants' expressed experiences



***A shadow side to the experience***

The depth of the sense of belonging to the cohort did vary as there were two participants who expressed a sense of peripheral belonging within the cohort. These participants stated they valued the cohort and the community but did not feel particularly attached to individuals within the group for a variety of reasons such as, because they took gap year(s) between the Grad Diploma and the M.Ed. year, or because they joined a M.Ed. cohort without any colleagues from the Grad Diploma, it took longer to develop relationships, and at times there appeared to be established relationship groups within the cohorts. A few others noted that because their teaching disciplines were so different from others, they felt they couldn't contribute to discussions as readily and others didn't necessarily understand their teaching contexts. These participants did not offer statements regarding any meaningful influence of the cohort learning community on their processes as the other participants did. For these participants, their learning was

expressed as developing more as a result of the activities engaged in (e.g., arts-based activities, journaling, and inquiry projects) and the personal depth work they carried out on their own. While no one expressed negative experiences, I termed these expressions as showing a 'shadow side to the M.Ed. experience'. This is because of the nature of the relational pedagogy of the program, any feelings of being peripheral or not connected to the cohort had the potential to negatively impact those students. A few additional statements made by participants were related to potential areas of program or process improvement that may support faculty in the program with their own teaching praxis. Those comments have been passed onto the program area for their consideration.

### **4.3. Description of Transformative Experiences**

Seven of the 20 participants described a combination of major or minor disruptions of worldviews, as well as enduring changes to their professional practices and sense of self. The catalysts for these changes varied, yet a common result of acknowledging substantial personal growth, as well as professional development, are the essences of the transformative experiences described in this section.

These participants all described movement from a feeling of discomfort or disorientation to a sense of self-awareness and empowerment. The feeling of discomfort or disorientation was not event driven for these participants. Rather, they described becoming aware of processes of cognitive and emotional safeguarding (whether conscious or unconscious) that they had developed over time to cope with past personal traumas or role/performance expectations. Descriptions of how encouragement from faculty to embrace vulnerability, along with the learning activities that allowed them to dig deeper into the 'here and now' M.Ed. EP experiences, were initially resisted due to the visceral sense of discomfort or cognitive dissonance experienced. The cohort processes including faculty encouragement, modelling and witnessing of others did eventually provide a catalyst for the participants to explore altered ways of being. The courage to become emotionally open to work through the discomfort from cognitive and affective domains facilitated deep, personal insight and/or healing as well as enduring, altered ways of being in the world both personally and professionally.

### ***Value of community***

Although the transformative changes described occurred within individuals, the processes through which these came about were, at least in part, facilitated by the supportive learning environments created and sustained by the three cohort communities of professionals that were studied for this project. In particular, the sense of process – the weekly coming together for a purpose – provided the safe space and the conduit for the self-work. For example, being one another’s sounding boards through professional discussions, debriefing and challenging of ideas helped to model how to question others empathically. That, in turn, provided a platform from which self-reflection could move beyond a ‘telling process’ to one that integrated the cognitive and the affective domains to enable transformative processes to occur. Participants described faculty as providing positive encouragement to dig deep into self-work cemented the sense of safety and purpose – modelling and scaffolding practices were essential to enable the participants to engage with the different learning activities from a place of curiosity and exploration.

### ***Meaningful learning experiences***

The moments of wrestling with self-reflection—not being afraid of what will be seen, but rather starting the process, and experiencing a discomfort that was not quantifiable—resulted in resistance. The resistance took a number of forms; disbelief which was demonstrated at times as belittling the activities, avoidance, procrastination, hyper-focus on other issues—were all successful strategies for keeping self-reflection at a reporting style, and superficial level. This did not go unobserved by the faculty, however, and by encouragement and mentoring, the participants began to engage in deeper levels of self-reflection.

Being encouraged to look for places where there was disconnect between educational philosophy and practices meant that the self-reflection required ownership of an action plan—a way to ensure authenticity in one’s practice. Journaling this reflection and sharing this with others in the cohorts helped to provide purpose and identify strategies for change. This required really being willing to witness oneself. For some, this was accomplished through the inquiry project (e.g., recording self and analyzing practice), for others, it was through arts-based activities that allowed a platform for alternative

representations of learning, and of recognizing one's own journey (e.g., learning metaphor articulation). What was important through these activities was the willingness to reflect upon what one was learning about oneself.

### ***Emergent sense of autonomy and confidence***

Finding one's voice within the community was empowering for these participants. Recognizing their own courage to become vulnerable as being a catalyst for their growth resulted in increased levels of confidence and a newly found calmness in handling unknown or unpredictable situations. Whether overcoming negative self-beliefs and/or freeing oneself from the chains of role expectation and perfectionism, for these participants, worldview shifts were not necessarily profound—although many stated that they felt calmer and less judgemental—it was more in the ways they operationalized their beliefs that substantive and lasting classroom and/or personal practices changes were evident.

#### **4.3.1. Phenomenological Reductions**

In this section I provide two phenomenological reductions. The first is a reduction that describes a personally transformative experience, and the second is a reduction of an experience described as primarily professionally transformative.

#### ***Phenomenological reduction: A descriptive summary of a primarily personal transformative experience that led to professional change: Erin***

The phenomenological reduction of Erin's experience provides an example of a transformative process through which she experienced substantial, enduring changes in her way of being in the world, her worldview, and subsequently, her professional practice. In her description, Erin focussed on how she changed personally, and by extension, how those changes impacted her practice as an educator. She has become more open and curious, and less judgmental. Becoming comfortable with discomfort, and opening up to the value of different forms of evidence-based methods, were big growth areas for Erin. Her self-work as well as the support roles played by her cohort colleagues were vital in her process of becoming vulnerable and ultimately more confident. Professional changes

resulted through her learning, but Erin stressed in interview that the biggest impact was on her personal way of being in the world.

### **Introduction to Erin**

Erin is an elementary school special education teacher with 10 years of experience. Erin's personal and professional worldview and value associated with professional dialogue was influenced by her family, many of whom are educators. During the graduate diploma years, she greatly valued time for her own educational philosophy reflections as well as the many meaningful professional conversations. Knowing those conversations could continue at the Masters level was one of the core drivers for enrolling in the M.Ed. EP.

### **Expressions of Transformation**

#### ***Transformation of self***

Erin spoke of broadening her worldview and developing new awareness of her actions in the world. She has always considered herself a fair and open-minded person, but she also acknowledged that she was quick to react to little things that did not go according to plan – resulting in negative interactions with others at times and increasing her stress levels. She finds that now, she is more mindful, viewing situations from a place of curiosity and attempting to see the other person's point of view, rather than judging situations or people. Additionally, Erin has become more aware of what her role is in different situations, as well as how she wants others to experience her. She has become more reflective of whether she is staying true to her own philosophy for education and for her preferred way of being in the world.

#### ***Transformation of self in relation to others***

A big shift for Erin has occurred in the way she interacts with friends and family, as well as colleagues. Erin noted that she has a new, and substantial, ability to engage in hard conversations, take personal risks and responsibility, as well as feeling more confident to hold deeper and more meaningful conversations with others (personally and professionally). Erin provided an example of how she recently engaged in a solution-focussed conversation with a colleague about a difficult situation and instead of participating in negative problem talk (as she would have in the past), she was able to support her colleague to share vulnerable feelings and ultimately strategize positive way forward that felt authentic to her colleague.

#### ***Transformation of self as practitioner***

Prior to starting the program Erin had come to a point of feeling stuck in her practice. Right away, the opportunity to grow and discuss educational practice with like-minded professionals was rewarding. A realization struck her – she was not tired of work and school – but that what she needed was to stimulate her thinking and her practice. As a result of her learning during the M.Ed. program, Erin experienced a deeper integration of her personal and professional identities and the changes in her educational philosophy over time she noted as evidence of her professional growth and development.

A major shift for Erin professionally was engaging in qualitative approaches. Being a self-confessed, analytic person with a preference and comfort around quantitative methods, Erin was very disorientated by the focus on qualitative methodology in the M.Ed. EP. She floundered initially and was resistant to valuing and embracing qualitative measures as her professional practice centred on data driven decision-making based on behaviour mapping strategies. Despite her discomfort she grew to embrace qualitative methods, appreciating the holistic lens that they provide when considering each individual child.

### **Learning environment design that enabled learning activities to be successful**

#### ***Creation of community and sense of belonging***

Erin described how she felt the faculty in the M.Ed. EP program facilitated the development of a community that merged people from different disciplines in education and different years of experience to form a

cohesive and collegial group that could grow together through inquiry and sharing of practice. Erin noted that her learning was enhanced by having that diversity in the cohort and coming to realize that as much as she could see the surface differences in context, there was a commonality of purpose that was valuable to witness, explore and share with.

Having the cohort facilitated by caring faculty who were very passionate about their work and able to mentor from a place of compassion and understanding, was essential to building the community. Their composure during the 'freak out' times when everyone was feeling so pressured, helped to settle people and maintain the connected feeling in the group. The faculty were able to calm the crowds – they had seen it all before and were able to anticipate the stress points. Erin really valued the way that the faculty facilitated the cohort's learning. This, she believed, created a sense of feeling connected to SFU as an institution. Having completed other levels of education at SFU, she never came away with a sense of 'belonging' the way she did following the M.Ed. EP due to the depth of the relationships that were developed.

### ***The cohort***

Prior to the M.Ed. EP, Erin had not been comfortable exposing her own vulnerability with colleagues. Having her inner most thoughts and conflicts validated both by the literature and by cohort colleagues was an empowering experience. The benefit of learning in a cohort for Erin was being able to witness the process of others, and see theory being put into action, even if it was not her doing the action.

### **Learning experiences that lead to personal and professional transformative growth**

Erin described specific learning activities that were most significant to her learning and transformative growth. In particular, the readings, discussions, and the requirement for reflection were catalysts for her growth.

### ***Readings followed by cohort discussion***

Being challenged by the theoretical language and the concepts – the level of scholarship was initially unsettling. Erin found herself having to read some journal articles multiple times to try to understand them. The subsequent cohort discussions in class allowed her to share her level of discomfort regarding understanding the readings and offered opportunities for feeling connected to others, sharing vulnerabilities and also relief that she wasn't the only one struggling!

Reflecting on the readings later in the year, and realizing just how much she had grown, Erin was amazed. She thought: "Did I really not understand this at one point?" Those moments of struggle and subsequent awareness were meaningful, but the readings did not stand-alone for Erin. She noted that without all the rich dialogue, she wouldn't have gotten as much out of the readings. And without the readings, the dialogue wouldn't have been so rich. It was the combination of the two that enabled people to compare theory and their own practice. That helped to deepen the learning and professional growth.

Being able to start connecting all the dots together was hugely impactful for Erin. Looking at the readings, wrestling with philosophy, thinking about the bigger picture elements of education, the inter-professional dialogue, and relationship pieces – all together with learning to reflectively question oneself enabled Erin to better articulate her own practice and feel more confident in her decisions.

### ***Reflective practice – challenging self – letting go of control***

The reflective practice that Erin engaged in during the M.Ed. program was fraught with internal resistance. Throughout the program she found herself continually questioning: "Why we are doing this?", and "Why are we doing it this way?", and "What am I learning from it?"

It is only after repeatedly going through the cycle of reflecting on her learning, that Erin became to acknowledge just how much she was learning about herself through the alternative methods. She then

began to settle her resistance and 'trust the process'. Allowing the process enabled Erin to become critically curious about herself, her worldview, and how she was interacting with others.

Additional inter-personal changes came about as a result of the inner work on self. Erin notes that she wants to be proud of how she conducts herself with others and is more mindful of that both in her interactions with other people, and in witnessing interactions between people.

Letting go of 'hard numbers' to guide her practice and allowing for emergent ideas and insights was not natural for Erin. She fought it. She learned to embrace it. This is not to say that Erin no longer relies upon hard, number-based data, to aid in her professional decision-making, but it is now not the only lens she uses. This change Erin equates to a 'broadening' of her worldview. And it has impacted her personal life and her interactions with colleagues too. She is more able and willing to be spontaneous and to honour how other people need to be in the here and now.

In thinking about the meaningful learning activities, Erin stated categorically that learning how to 'trust the process' and 'go with the flow' was one of the biggest things for her. This was not a particular learning activity, but rather a learning process for Erin. Both personally and professionally, becoming more comfortable with not knowing, spontaneity, and curiosity were by-in-large foreign concepts for Erin. She didn't even realize she wasn't doing that – it just wasn't part of her way of being in the world. Today, she stated she is a different teacher as a result of her M.Ed. EP learning process. She has embraced this new way of experiencing education both as a learner and a teacher.

***Critical conversations with cohort – becoming vulnerable and open to other approaches***

In terms of process, Erin notes that the value of the input from other professionals in the cohort was immense. She recognizes that she would not have grown as much professionally if she had taken a 'read these articles, write a paper' type master's degree. Having others question her thinking and her practice, helped her to acknowledge where her philosophy and practice were not necessarily aligned and where she needed to pay more attention. In particular, Erin notes her awareness especially grew in her relationship-based practice. Becoming more aware that education centres on relationship and not just the strategies was important for Erin and discussing this with cohort colleagues, enabled her practice to be enhanced.

Overall, the connections made with cohort members were essential to Erin's process. The sense of safety and support was vital for the deeper, meaningful conversations, which in turn were essential for the meaningful learning to occur. Erin has continued to connect with faculty and cohort members, developing her professional network and maintaining the relationships that she grew to value so deeply.

***Phenomenological reduction: A descriptive summary of a primarily professional transformative experience: Enigma***

Enigma described her experience of the M.Ed. EP program as being 'transformative' on a professional level. Becoming a kindergarten teacher after 20 years in special education, Enigma had a deep desire to improve her classroom practice. She did not anticipate the substantive and transformative changes to her teaching practice, and to her in-school collegial collaboration, that arose out of her teacher inquiry during the M.Ed. The phenomenological reduction of Enigma's experience below demonstrates how through a sense of belonging to the cohort and the support that afforded her, she was able to engage in depth work on her professional practice.

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## **Introduction to Enigma**

Enigma is a kindergarten teacher with over two decades of experience (previously in special education). She described her many identities – mother, wife, kindergarten teacher, special education teacher, daughter, Muslim woman – and how all those identities somewhat shielded her from really getting in touch with her core self. The M.Ed. experience helped her to really see herself more clearly.

Family support was freely given and welcomed for Enigma in following her M.Ed. dream. Enigma felt that she worked very hard and she grew a lot – she got what she put into it. Engaging with the process of self-work, but also all the rich readings and learning activities helped her feel ‘alive again’ in the educational context.

### **Expressions of Transformation**

While Enigma described moments of personal growth—a deepening awareness of self in dialogue with others—it was in her professional practice where the significant changes have happened, changes that she described as transformative.

#### ***Deepening self-compassion and awareness of self***

Her experience across the program she termed “almost a spiritual experience” her sense of enlightenment was so substantial. Through reflective practices engaged in during the M.Ed., Enigma became much more in touch with who she was as a person – in addition to who she is as a teacher and learner. And this awareness lead to a deeper level of curiosity about herself as well as greater self-compassion.

#### ***Transformation of self as practitioner***

A core driver in enrolling in the M.Ed. for Enigma was the desire to become more democratic in her classroom and to do this she wanted to change her ‘teacher talk’ - to take a long hard look at her own practice. This process of professional practice reflection was new for Enigma. Really looking at her practice was hard and scary, and she resisted it at many levels for quite some time. With encouragement and guidance from the faculty, she did eventually start to record herself and listen to those recordings.

It was through her inquiry project that she realized that she was ‘rescuing’ the children. When she eventually became brave enough to embrace the vulnerability and to record and listen to herself, her level of discomfort was very high. She realized just how much she was dominating the classroom. She was asking questions and not even letting the children answer! She started asking herself; “What was I thinking?” and “What was I doing?” “Why was I answering for them?” This was a very disorientating time.

Eventually Enigma invited other teachers into her classroom to make notes regarding her teacher talk. This part of her inquiry process was very gratifying as she saw the recording of teacher talk substantially reduced to where the classroom was dominated by the students’ voices. But for that to happen, Enigma had to be willing to engage in the change process and be vulnerable.

### **Learning environment design that enabled learning activities to be successful**

#### ***Sense of belonging and empowerment through the cohort***

At the beginning of the program the faculty led an activity involving sharing of personal biographies. This allowed the cohort members to really get to know each other at a deeper level and for Enigma, it helped to build the sense of support and connection. The cohort members as well as the faculty played a supportive and validating role for her. The non-judgmental support – that sometimes came with a “Wow!” encouraged her to share more and be more vulnerable. Such feedback also validated her decisions and her practices and mitigated against stress. The mix of the people was beneficial—different ages and years of experience brought different lenses to discussions, but it was still clear that people had a common purpose for being there—to improve their practice and learn from one another.

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Faculty opened up the space for the students to take on leadership roles by encouraging students to share ideas and learning with the group. This type of openness from the faculty and their willingness to learn from students, was both validating and affirming. The faculty also realized that some of the group had not been in school for decades and that they needed more support in developing their scholarly writing. They provided students opportunities to be iterative in their essays– allowing for growth without excess amounts of stress. With the faculty modelling the way for curiosity, Enigma also noticed that she is now kinder to herself regarding her practice and abilities.

Enigma expressed that because of cohort collaboration, her ability to voice alternative perspectives has been empowered. In the past, Enigma may not have voiced her opinions or perspectives, but she has now found a way to do so that does not pathologize others, but equally, does not leave her wishing she hadn't stayed silent.

Never previously seeing herself as a leader, now because of her M.Ed. experiences, and her sense of professional growth, Enigma has begun to have visions of expanding her professional field and working as a Graduate Diploma mentor or other role in higher education settings. She now feels she has something of value to contribute to colleagues who are embarking on the M.Ed. journey, and she has the confidence to put herself forward.

### **Learning experiences that lead to personal growth and professional practice transformation**

A number of learning activities enhanced her overall growth throughout the M.Ed. The inquiry project was the most significant for her professional practice transformation, but other learning activities in-class helped her to develop her reflective practice and embrace vulnerability through cohort support. Enigma described the important roles that the faculty played in her learning too. By setting the scene, providing resources, and scaffolding her learning– they encouraged and nudged her in the right direction, provided choice and opportunities, without overwhelming her.

#### ***Inquiry project***

The ability to have some autonomy for what was studied, read and researched was essential as it allowed the learning to be authentic to what she needed – the self-work. Enigma engaged in the critical reflection process and ultimately changed her classroom practice. Not only did she revolutionize her talk in the classroom but also how she is with her colleagues, family and friends too.

Enigma describes how, now that she is not so caught up in controlling her classroom, she is able to observe and reflect more. This was a process that was encouraged and modelled by faculty in the M.Ed. program. For Enigma the inquiry project was a liberating experience, and she now is mindful all the time in her classroom as well as in other inter-personal situations that she allows for the other's voice to be heard. She now invites other teachers into her classroom regularly to share practices and to observe. The sense of vulnerability may not be there so much anymore, but the willingness to engage in critical reflection still is!

#### ***Readings / videos followed by cohort discussion***

Being able to dialogue with like-minded professional colleagues about the readings, videos, and witnessing the various perspectives helped to broaden Enigma's insights into education and allowed for an affirmation of her practice. Enigma was empowered to be courageous and vulnerable and this allowed for the deep, transformative changes that she experienced.

#### ***Professional dialogue***

The time allocated for professional dialoguing were what helped to bond the group – hearing the stories of others and sharing experiences. Since the M.Ed., Enigma has made a point of using times in her school's schedule for making such connections with colleagues too.

#### ***Journaling and reflexive practice***

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Developing a process of journaling and reflection is something that developed for her during the M.Ed. and enabled Enigma to dig deep into her practices, recognizing patterns. This helped her to become more mindful about her teacher talk and behaviours and, also helped her to set goals for new ways of being. Enigma stressed that the process was beyond being reflective—it was reflexive—it wasn't enough to just acknowledge something, but she was compelled to make a plan of action to do something about uncomfortable or negative patterns she was recognizing.

The act of purposeful journaling also helped her to grow in confidence as a writer. She started to see a more creative competency in her writing and recognized that her final inquiry paper would not have been so rich, if she hadn't been engaged in the journaling throughout the M.Ed. Her comprehensive paper would likely have been more one-dimensional, more technical. As it turned out, it was a weaving of the academic and scholarly piece of the research, along with an exploration of her emotional processes.

***Arts-based activities***

The arts-based approaches fostered a creative side in Enigma that she found liberating—at times, she lost herself in those projects—becoming immersed in them. Enigma enthusiastically engaged with the visual art projects, the poetry and metaphor development. She found the creativity freeing and that looking at her learning, and her inquiry project, from these other perspectives enriched her learning overall.

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#### **4.4. Description of the Essence of Professional Grounding, Validating, and Affirming Experiences**

A second discrete, yet inter-related experience, described by the majority (13 out of 20) of participants was one where individuals primarily experienced the M.Ed. EP as a place where professional hunches, intuition, ideas and/or practices were validated or explicated. The participants expressed 'aha' moments as they assimilated the theory they were reading for M.Ed. EP seminars with their current practices. This recognition arose too through critical dialogue with cohort members as they jointly reviewed understandings of theory in relation to new or current classroom practices and inquiries. The participants expressed increased professional competence and confidence that was both internally recognized and externally activated. They became more able to name, articulate, justify, and/or defend their educational philosophies and practices to colleagues, children (students) in their classrooms, and their students' parents/ guardians. Many also expressed that as a result of their professional growth during the M.Ed. EP, they have increased their capacity for professional networking and collaboration—developing new practices in seeking out other ways to share in the school/district through taking on leadership roles such as mentoring new teachers, leading professional development workshops for colleagues and/or becoming involved in district wide initiatives.

### ***Meaningful learning experiences***

During interviews the aspect of the learning environment that was most commonly discussed by 11 of these 13 teacher learners as a powerful aspect of their experience was the opportunity to dialogue with supportive 'like-minded' individuals—other teacher learners with a shared desire to explore educational ideas, practice, and inquiries. Through dialogue, teachers felt validated, stretched, and supported. Witnessing the reflective processes of their cohort colleagues, empowered these teachers to try new approaches in their own classrooms, and to share their results—confusions, frustrations, and successes with each other. For two of the 13, the learning community was expressed as having less of a direct influence on their learning and professional growth. This is described more following Cali Ann's phenomenological reduction below.

The critical reflection required to actively engage in the inquiry project was also a meaningful learning activity for these teacher learners. They articulated the value in carefully documenting what they were doing and being mindful in their classroom of what was working or not working with their students. What also helped to stretch some, resulting in an appreciation for alternative ways of viewing situations, was the variety of arts-based activities in the second semester. Some reported initially engaging with these activities in a light-hearted way, but they also grew to recognize the value in articulating learning in different ways. For these teachers, action in their own classroom followed—with many trying arts-based approaches with their own students. Confidence grew as a result of trying new pedagogies and debriefing them with their cohort peers.

### ***Value of community***

These 11 participants often spoke about how in their own workplace, conversations were often lacking depth, negative, one-sided, overly structured, or too informal compared to the dialogues that were occurring in the program which they described as rich, involved bigger picture philosophical issues, as well as a deep commitment to examining practice and interpreting scholarship. Within the master's community, these teachers felt they could be vulnerable, courageous, and take risks. These sorts of dialogic spaces in which individual contributions can be affirmed, clarified, developed or broadened without judgement or the pressure to reach consensus, can

create powerful spaces for developing and testing ideas. The participants noted that these positive attributes extended to the faculty too in the way they set the tone of the cohort, modelled pedagogical practices, and supported participants from a position of positive regard and curiosity. This encouraged participants to try new things, document that, share it, and plan for ongoing professional growth.

### ***Emergent sense of empowerment through professional validation***

Witnessing others and being witnessed by others involved active listening and a willingness to share and be vulnerable. Participants expressed an experience of (often) unexpected gratitude from others due to the critical dialogue and sharing. For many in this group, they had previously not had experience with sharing their ideas, they often felt they didn't have something valuable to express and were protective of their own teaching practices (especially their concerns and/or failures). Through the sharing, reflective writing, and inquiry processes, these participants began to recognize their own capacities and become more empowered to share further, try out new practices, and expand their professional practice both within and beyond their own classrooms.

#### **4.4.1. Phenomenological Reductions**

In this section I provide phenomenological reductions of experiences that were described as primarily grounding, validating, affirming resulting in altered and more confident professional practices and identities. The first is a reduction that provides an example of the 11 participants for whom the learning community was described as being central in their M.Ed. experience, and the second reduction is from a participant who described her meaningful learning as arising from personal reflection and engagement with the learning activities rather than through interaction with others in the cohort.

#### ***Phenomenological reduction: A descriptive summary of a professional grounding, validating, and affirming experience – cohort central to experience: Cali Ann***

The phenomenological reduction of Cali Ann's experience exemplifies an impactful, endearing learning experience that was more professionally grounding,

affirming, and validating than transformative. She described how the interactions with the cohort was central in her learning journey and professional outcomes.

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### **Introduction to Cali Ann**

Cali Ann is a high school metal work technology teacher with 11 years of experience. Self-described as an experiential and hands-on learner, prior to the M.Ed. she did not identify as someone with academic ability. She noted that she is the first person in her family to attend university.

### **Expressions of Personal Growth**

Cali Ann expressed that as a result of her learning on the M.Ed. program, she has become more flexible and open to others' views. She noted that both personally and professionally she has become less controlling and judgemental and not so concerned about 'being the boss of everything' as she was before. Through her personal growth during the program, she became more confident and grounded in her understanding of herself and this is what has resulted in her becoming less judgemental of others. She is now more readily able to believe that others know what they are doing for themselves too and this has released her from judging others for what they do.

### **Expressions of Professional Practice Transformation, Grounding, and Affirmation**

By engaging in the inquiry practice, Cali Ann, tried a number of new strategies in her classroom with the aim of improving student motivation. She felt that she had mixed results with these strategies. Cali Ann didn't always have the support of her colleagues at work to be using inquiry/discovery learning with her students as others didn't necessarily see the benefit of it, and so it was the support of the cohort that encouraged further explorations. She drew upon the pedagogy being modelling/experienced in the M.Ed. program and found that her teaching practice changed significantly.

### ***Increased knowledge leads to improved confidence***

Before the Masters Cali Ann would do things in her classroom that just felt right. She explains that she now has a much better understanding of what she was doing and why she was doing it the way she was. She concluded that it is that understanding that led to the increased confidence she now has. She learned to analyze her practice more and delve deeper into why things happened as they did. Through the learning on the M.Ed., she became more open to the inquiry approach and using inquiry methods became a new practice for her, and one that she continues to try to refine in her teaching. She has found that her students are way more engaged when they have input into what they are going to learn and how that will be assessed.

### ***Letting go of control***

The changes to her classroom practice are very different to anything she had tried prior to the M.Ed. year. She can see the potential of letting her students direct their own learning and has worked to let go of micro-control in the learning environment. A great side effect for Cali Ann is that by letting her students have more control in what they are going to learn, they start to teach each other more. This has reduced her stress as she no longer feels compelled to figure out every hour of the day. Without the M.Ed. she is sure that she would not have had the courage to let go of the control as much. She used to be 'the boss' in the classroom and was the one who decided everything that the students were going to do and how that would be graded etc. Now, she has the confidence and the courage to let go more and trust her students. She explained that this is rather liberating because she's not trying to do it all. And the kids are more engaged so it's a win-win situation. She has also started to use formative assessment and has found that her students are more likely to try to improve on a project rather than just say: "that's good enough". Formative assessment is something that she learned about in the M.Ed. too.

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### ***Teaching philosophy changes***

Cali Ann noted that her teaching philosophy shifted as a result of the M.Ed. What she believes education is for – she still very much questioning and she thinks it's good that she's not 100% sure of the purpose of education. She finds herself to be more open to what it could be and her focus has become more about the student growing and learning and getting better at something. Prior to the M.Ed. Cali Ann thought education was about getting good grades and going to university/training. But now, she's takes a more holistic view of each person. She notes that is a huge shift for her and it is a shift that she sometimes still struggles with.

### **Learning environment design that enabled learning activities to be successful**

#### ***Cohort helped to build confidence***

Despite being the only technology teacher in the cohort, and not knowing anyone in the group prior to the M.Ed. year, Cali Ann found that the cohort environment was supportive, and that she appreciated that although she didn't have much in common with others in terms of her teaching discipline, she could appreciate that they were all there with the common goal of becoming better educators, and she described benefit from engaging in the professional dialogue on a weekly basis.

Cali Ann noted that overall the M.Ed. experience resulted in significant changes in her professional practice. In particular her confidence in her practice really improved. She gained more from it on a professional level than she expected. Her teaching practice has changed substantially, and she has grown in confidence, as well as in her understanding of educational theory and practice. In the cohort there were older and more experienced people than her – those who had been teaching longer – and they would ask great questions that really made her think through things. This mutual learning was also reciprocal. She was able to contribute to the conversations too.

#### ***Faculty modelling***

Faculty too played a role in Cali Ann's learning. She deeply appreciated the modelling of practice done by faculty and how they scaffolded learning by creating opportunities to engage in different pedagogical approaches such as jigsaw learning and arts-based activities. Having engaged in different practices in the M.Ed. class empowered Cali Ann to try new techniques within her own classroom.

### **Learning experiences that lead to professional transformative growth, grounding, and affirmation**

Being part of the cohort was essential to Cali Ann's M.Ed. experience and her growth through the program and since the program.

#### ***Readings and Critical Dialogue***

Within the cohort learning processes, sharing ideas, problem solving together and having her practice validated was very beneficial for Cali Ann as, unfortunately, this is not something that she gets a lot of at her school. Having previously considered herself an introvert who preferred 'doing' to talking or writing, Cali Ann found herself to be someone who grew to really value critical dialogue. She discovered that this was an important part of how she learned as it really pushed her learning forward. A particularly useful learning activity for Cali Ann was the time given in-class for the walk and talks – exploring readings and inquiries together. This helped to bond the group, as well as provided insight and validation in her own personal understandings and practice.

The different readings during the M.Ed. program really helped Cali Ann to rethink some of her teaching approaches. One in particular related to assessment has been pivotal in changing her classroom approach – she now values competency-based assessment more and has found this helps her support students in their striving for success.

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***Writing and reflection***

What Cali Ann found really quite challenging was the amount of writing and reflection she had to do as part of the Masters. She doesn't consider herself to be a natural writer and she experienced a lot of discomfort regarding her written output. It took a long time to work through the readings and then figure out ways to condense them to create meaningful reflections. Cali Ann does note that it was that process that made it worthwhile as hard as it was at the time. Even now she finds she still go back to those reflections and see how far she's come in her understandings.

Despite all the practice, it didn't get any easier either! She tried lots of different ways – taping herself for example, blogging, but in the end her reflections ended up being written. The act of doing something with her thinking – creating those learning statements and artefacts – it was good. Cali Ann stated that if SFU didn't make her do that, then she probably wouldn't have gotten as much out of the Masters as she did. The reflections helped her to see what she's learned, and she did gain confidence in her overall writing ability. She has since translated those reflections into her teaching practice.

***Arts based approaches***

Cali Ann initially engaged with the arts-based learning activities in a perfunctory way. She didn't take it seriously and found it difficult and uncomfortable to create metaphors for her learning through artistic endeavours. However, the finished artefacts held a richness that she hadn't anticipated. Through the arts-based approaches she discovered new ways of exploring her learning and thinking about complex issues.

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***Description of Personal Journey Within the Cohort Context***

Two of the 13 teacher learners that expressed experiences of professional grounding, affirmation, and valuing of their professional practice also expressed that their experiences were essentially personal journeys and that although they were supported by engaging in the M.Ed. in-class practices, they were not particularly influenced by being a member of the cohort community. Each of these teacher learners expressed individual journeys, and as such, I did not encounter an essential essence of their collective experience. In these instances, the process of their learning was the more common element between them. They both acknowledged a value associated with the cohort community – the routine of coming together for seminars and how various in-class learning activities helped to stimulate their learning. What makes these two people different from the experiences outlined previously, is that they did not express that the cohort added essential value to their learning journey but rather they both expressed feeling a little outside the cohort group, and that their learning journey was driven by the learning activities, their personal reflections, and not the environment (albeit, value in professional dialogue and mentorship from faculty was noted). The outcomes expressed did align with the overall essence of a professional grounding, validating, and affirming experience.

***Phenomenological reduction: A descriptive summary of a professional grounding, validating, and affirming experience – individual journey: Georgia***

The phenomenological reduction of Georgia's experience provides an example of an experience that was impactful both professionally and personally but was also more of an individualized experience. In Georgia's instance, she acknowledged the value in the professional dialogue within the cohort, but also noted that it was the various individual learning activities that impacted her the most. During her interview she described feeling outside of the cohort group which she attributed partly to having a four-year gap between the Graduate Diploma and the M.Ed. year and, therefore, starting the M.Ed. without connections within the cohort.

**Introduction to Georgia**

Georgia is an Elementary teacher with 8 years of experience. During her M.Ed. year, she had a toddler and was learning to balance work – life – family commitments.

Education is highly valued in her family and achieving the master's has been a long -ime personal goal. Georgia took a four-year break between the Graduate Diploma and enrolling in the M.Ed. During that time, she became married and a mother. She also felt she needed time to catch her breath and gain experience.

She felt the time pressure to complete and with the encouragement of work colleagues and family, she decided to go ahead despite the conflicted feelings she had about taking time away from her toddler. Because her motivation for the M.Ed. was personal, she experienced motherhood guilt about prioritizing her own goals.

**Expressions of Personal and Professional Change**

***Personal growth – finding balance – letting go of control***

Georgia described the difference between her previous learning experiences and the M.Ed. EP experience as that before she felt she was learning more content and it was more 'defined' and detached from her personally. With the master's degree she was become more personally involved with the learning—it was intertwined with the different aspects of her life—personal and professional.

She began to see the world differently, making more connections. Her experience became a journey of personal and professional growth rather than a content learning experience. Throughout the M.Ed. year, Georgia really learned to value what was important to her and find a work-life balance that could work. Having a toddler at home and working full-time, she often felt conflicted about time spent away from her mothering role. Juggling all these different commitments, meant that Georgia had to develop new skills in setting boundaries around her work.

Georgia described a worldview shift as a result of the M.Ed. program. She has become less rigid, less destination orientated and more willing to take stock, seeing value in being more open to revisiting ideas from a position of curiosity rather than assumption.

Long lasting effects for Georgia are really noted in her more open practices both in her personal and professional roles. She has become less rigid, more discovery learning orientated both with her own child

and those in her classroom. She became more aware of self-care, and the need to create boundaries around her work life so she could engage in other areas that fuelled her.

### ***Professional practice changes***

As a direct result of her learning during the M.Ed. year, Georgia noted that she has become more flexible and spontaneous in her professional practice. She has found that this new way of being has impacted her in a number of ways. She has shifted from being so controlled and organized (a self-professed list maker) to be a teacher who embraces discovery learning and flexibility in the classroom.

She has developed competencies for finding balance in her life, and this required her to let go of control and collaborate more. Because of the experience of sharing or witnessing others during the M.Ed., Georgia has become engaged with professional dialogue in her school, as well as, begun to collaboratively support colleagues in her school with their own inquiry practices in their classrooms.

Her M.Ed. inquiry focussed on perceptions of others (specially refugees), and her learning became a process of self-development and awareness. She started to unpack concepts she had taken for granted and wonder about different ways of looking at things. This curiosity resulted in a deeper self-awareness as she realized her own preconceptions and bias. Being mindful of those issues has resulted in her improving her teaching practice, and ability to collaborate with others.

### **Learning environment design that enabled learning activities to be successful**

Being someone who joined the M.Ed. year after a four-year gap, Georgia didn't know anyone in the cohort. She was aware that everyone else had done a Graduate Diploma with at least one or two others in the group. Although Georgia attributed her learning as being based primarily on her own personal work, she did acknowledge that coming together for weekly seminars and the professional dialogue was useful for her professional learning, and she benefited from the role modelling of others on a personal level.

### ***The cohort peers and faculty – personal modelling***

In her description of the role of the cohort members in her learning process, Georgia focussed on how having their support for managing her parenthood guilt was valuable. One of the faculty had recently had a baby and a number of her peers had young children too. Georgia was inspired by their experiences and that role modelling helped her to find peace with her own choices. Georgia stated that the professional dialogue was useful but didn't indicate that it was a core part of her learning journey.

### **Learning experiences that lead to personal and professional growth**

Georgia described that it was the many activities that encouraged reflective practice during the M.Ed. year, as well as the inquiry project, that facilitated her integration of the personal and professional learning. For Georgia, her understanding of herself personally and professionally became intertwined which resulted in her feeling more grounded, confident, and assured in her professional practice.

### ***Journaling and reflective writing***

What worked for Georgia in terms of meaningful learning moments were the times when she found herself making connections between ideas. Often this occurred during moments she took to reflect on her learning. The structured reflection time in class wasn't particularly useful for her—she found more that when she just allowed her mind some space, that was when things would come to her—whether that was when going for a walk, or out in the school playground with the children.

The reflection practices did not occur as a result of a single meaningful learning activity for Georgia. Rather, it is an evolving practice for her that grew out of the inquiry processes and the many ways she was encouraged by faculty to review what she was learning during her inquiry and how that influenced her personally as well as professionally.

Georgia found that she used her intuition to notice various situations or items that could be of benefit to use in her M.Ed. inquiry and/or learning. She didn't always recognize the immediate relevance for items, but she followed her gut and found herself collecting a number of artefacts or making notes of certain interactions that later, when she had time to reflect, she found were relevant. If she hadn't taken the time to purposefully take stock, and reflect upon what was happening, she felt she would have missed some key learnings that emerged as a result of the reflective practice.

### ***Inquiry Project***

Georgia found it hard to 'turn off' her mind from her inquiry project. She started to see connections all the time in her everyday life—playing with her children, the story lines of a movie—she felt like the inquiry process was becoming embedded in everything that she was doing! The making connections to formal learning, and everyday life activities, was something new for Georgia as she used to compartmentalize different elements of her life. As a result of the M.Ed. and focus on inquiry and reflection, she was finding the professional, personal, student aspects of her life were becoming more integrated.

Thinking about how the inquiry was touching her life personally, helped her to make the connections about her own family's migration history and provided a deeper insight into herself and her family of origin's cultural worldview.

And a key learning that she has taken away and become comfortable with is the idea that there may not be a 'grand conclusion' and that adjusting practice, or inquiring about practice, may be cyclical or emergent. At first, she thought she would conduct an inquiry project and come to clear conclusion, but she has come to realize that isn't how things work in the classroom. Rather, it is more likely for the inquiry to evolve and change as new concepts come to light.

### ***Arts-based activities***

During the M.Ed. class times, the art-based activities provided space for reflection—the ability to think about learning from a different perspective. At first, Georgia couldn't see the point of some of the activities, but she quickly realized that they provided a space for reflection that she hadn't made time for before.

The activities that they engaged in during the M.Ed. class times were beneficial for synthesizing learning. She found it very beneficial to develop symbols for her learning—a visualization of where she was at, what she was feeling and learning. Those symbols act as prompts for her reflection and provided a tangible trail of breadcrumbs to help her to recall her learning, connect and synthesize ideas.

For Georgia, it was the reflection, her inquiry project, and the arts-based activities that allowed her to visualize and synthesize her learning, which in turn, lead to her professional and personal growth.

## **4.5. Summary of Findings**

I am cognizant that the participants for this study represented a self-selecting group of approximately one third of the learners from three cohorts, and therefore, their experiences may not be fully representative of all M.Ed. EP students. Nonetheless, despite being a self-selecting group, I have been informed by the program administration, that this participant group does represent the range of demographic profiles and backgrounds reflective of the overall student body in the M.Ed. EP program (as shown in

Chapter 3, Table 3.1). For example, the professed identities of the teacher learners were predominately female, they identified with a range of ethnic backgrounds, a variety of teaching disciplines and grade profiles, and there was an age range of 30 to 49 years. They also had a range of years in practice (7 to 24), and while some worked and lived in multi-cultural urban settings, (13/20) some were in suburban (5/20) or rural settings (2/20). Most of the participants moved directly from the Graduate Diploma (17/20) to the M.Ed. with cohort peers, and others (3/20) took a gap year(s) between the Graduate Diploma and the M.Ed. year.

Due to the nature of the phenomenological interview, participants were able to focus the telling of their experiences in ways that were meaningful for them. Three core questions were explored regarding what the program meant to them personally and professionally, whether there were any specific meaningful learning activities that supported their learning, and how the learning came about for them. Follow up, or prompting questions, were asked to explore participants descriptions of their experiences in more depth. These descriptions were varied and personal yet they also did have common elements that enabled me, through phenomenological reduction process, to elucidate a common overall essence of the experience of being an M.Ed. EP student. While some elements of the common experience were described as being more influential for some teacher learners than others (e.g., the role that relationships within the cohort played in their processes, the importance of critical self-reflection, or the value of specific learning activities), what held true for all was the importance of a safe learning environment, the ritual of coming together once a week for seminars, the expectation and opportunities for critical self-reflection, and the autonomy of choice for inquiry.

Due to the nature of the M.Ed. EP program, opportunities to witness others, as well as share personal and professional vulnerabilities with others, provided space for self-exploration and critical reflection. All the teacher learners expressed an increase in confidence in their teaching practice, the ability to express educational ideas, and to explain pedagogical practice and decisions. Sixteen to 20 months post-graduation from the M.Ed. program, the alumni described a sustained practice of practitioner scholarship whether by setting up communities of practice within their own school or district, taking part or leading professional development in their schools or districts, and/or through new

collaborative ventures within their schools including new inquiry projects with colleagues or team teaching.

For the majority of the teacher learners (13/20), the descriptions they provided made clear that their experiences in the program enabled them to more clearly articulate their pedagogical hunches. As well as expressing changes in their teaching practice, they also articulated a sense of feeling more confident, validated and/or affirmed as educators. The processes through which these outcomes came about were described as a mix between the learning activities as well as the cohort learning environment. In particular, the time for professional dialogue and sharing, enabled these learners to critically evaluate their own practice through witnessing others and taking their own risks. A key component for these learners was the requirement to reflect throughout the program on what they were learning, and how that was influencing their teaching practice, their educational philosophies, and their inquiry projects.

Seven of the 20 teacher learners expressed fundamental changes in either their professional practice and/or personal lives. In describing their learning processes, they used words like 'disorientation', 'crisis', 'discomfort' and 'vulnerability' to describe how, at key points in the program, they wrestled with their sense of self and core beliefs. For these participants, the expression of substantial worldview shifts which resulted in lasting changes to their personal ways of operating in the world, as well as their educational practices aligned closely with Mezirow's (1978, 1991) original phases of transformative learning theory descriptions (see Table 2.1). The roles that the cohort learning community, which was designed as a community of practice, played in the personal and professional growth and changes, was expressed by 18 of the 20 participants as being central in their processes. The sense of safety and common purpose provided an environment where critical reflective professional-focussed dialogue prompted alternative perspective taking and supported learners' self-inquiries and altered practices (Brookfield, 2005; Illeris, 2014a; Mezirow, 1990b, 1991; Taylor & Cranton, 2012).

Of particular interest to me, and what I believe may be of value from this research in terms of adding to the knowledge base around transformative learning, are the various ways that participants spoke about their professional praxis changes—including new ways

of viewing and experiencing their professional selves as well as self in relation to others. Participants, including those who clearly articulated personally transformative processes, all spoke of professional changes to some degree. For 13/20 participants, however, their descriptions focussed on outcomes of feeling more professionally grounded, validated, affirmed, and confident. While these descriptions were not necessarily professing transformative learning processes as espoused by Mezirow (1978, 1991) that focussed on the individual and cognitive processes (e.g., disorientation, dilemma, guilt, crisis), I propose that the participants' expressions of professional identity and praxis changes do align with second wave transformative learning theory that theory development that outlines the broadening of transformative learning processes and sustained outcomes (e.g., Hoggan, 2016; Illeris, 2014a, 2014b; Tennant, 2005). In the following Chapter 5 Discussion, I explore the findings of this study in relation to the second wave of transformative learning theory.

## **Chapter 5. Discussion**

Phenomenology is a project of sober reflection on the lived experience of human existence—sober, in the sense that reflecting on experience must be thoughtful, and as much as possible, free from theoretical, prejudicial and suppositional intoxications. But, phenomenology is also a project that is driven by fascination: being swept up in a spell of wonder, a fascination with meaning. The reward phenomenology offers are the moments of seeing-meaning or "in-seeing" into "the heart of things" ... the phenomenologist directs the gaze toward the regions where meaning originates, wells up, percolates through the porous membranes of past sedimentations—and then infuses us, permeates us, infects us, touches us, stirs us, exercises a formative affect. (van Manen, 2007, p. 12)

### **5.1. Introduction**

The focus of this research study was to illuminate the experiences of teacher learners who have completed the Master of Educational Practice (M.Ed. EP) program. Being guided by the central research question, "What are the essences of the experience of being a master's student in the M.Ed. Educational Practice degree program?", it was my intention to bring forth a richer understanding of the variety of learning design influences (environmental and activities) that the alumni described as being meaningful for their reported personal and professional development and changes, and how those changes are being sustained by the alumni 16-20 months post-graduation. By way of individual phenomenological interviews, rich narratives were provided by alumni of the program. Shown in previous chapters, through a process of meaning unit identification, and phenomenological reduction, the overall common essences of the experience was illuminated. Nuanced descriptions of two inter-related core experiences, described as either primarily transformative, or primarily grounding, affirming and validating were presented along with descriptive summaries of four of the participants as examples. The process of engaging in the phenomenological writing of the descriptions I equate to the process of piecing together a mosaic. There were pieces that were rough around the

edges, pieces where the colours were complementary, and other pieces that blended perfectly. Some sections of the phenomenological mosaic became identifiable quite quickly—perhaps because they resonated with my past, expectations, or biases—and other sections felt like a continual work in progress with pieces set adrift for a period of time from the overall artistry. The left-hand image shown in Figure 5.1 below is a digitally created image of Fran Kremen’s (2009) *Tree of Life* mosaic as a work in progress metaphor of my interpretation process.

**Figure 5.1** Tree of Life mosaic as a work in progress and finished art



Note: Artist and photographer: Fran S. Kremen (2009). Copyright release granted to use the original image (right hand side) within this thesis document. Image on the left was digitally created with permission from the artist.

While the *tree of life* as a symbol may have many spiritual or religious beliefs attached to it, I see it as representing, within a learning context, the inter-connectiveness of preparation and stability, strength and growth, as well as the vulnerability or precariousness that comes with branching out into the unknown—taking risks, responding to the cycles of blossoming new growth, thriving in purpose and action, followed by maintenance time to allow the new growth to solidify. I see the roots of the tree as representing the foundational environmental conditions and attributes of the learners that are required for engaging in transformative learning within a cohort community. These conditions include the time it takes to create a sense of connectiveness, belonging, purpose, and safety within the learning community. The personal attributes of the learners include their level of maturity (emotional and cognitive), courage, ability to be vulnerable,

and their readiness for change processes. In my imagining, I see the trunk of the tree to represent the various learning activities and community processes that facilitated and supported in the learners their processes of critical self-reflection, visioning, and trialling of new or alternative practices. In this study, this included engaging in professional critical dialogue with others, conducting self-study through reflective activities and the professional inquiry project, and the willingness to engage in learning activities in the seminar times that pushed boundaries and created moments of discomfort such as the various alternative forms of learning representation through arts-based activities, or sharing of reflections and vulnerabilities in small groups. The larger branches, I imagine to be the categories of outcomes of the learning. Different branches represent different types of expressed outcomes such as personal transformation, professional transformation, professional confidence and competence development, and/or feelings of being grounded, validated or affirmed as a professional. The smaller branches represent examples of how those outcomes were sustained and actioned in the personal and professional lives of the participants of this study. This includes, but is not limited to new behaviours in the world such as being less judgemental, active listening with others, being calmer and less reactive, more egalitarian ways of being in the world with peers and students, substantially altered teaching practices, adopting leadership roles in schools and districts, collaborating with colleagues in schools, engaging in ongoing inquiry practices, and living a sense of integrated personal and professional lives and identity. The leaves are instances of activities or internal processes that were expressed as meaningful for learning, including those that facilitated the growth and strengthening of the foundation—supporting environmental or personal attributes.

In Figure 5.2 below I provide a sketch that shows how I imagined the tree of life metaphor applied to the phenomenological descriptions in this study. While not theoretically applied, this process enabled me to see the story—as mosaic—emerge from the discrete pieces into an image that assisted me with the interpretation.



In this chapter, I discuss the findings for this study interpreted through the lens of transformative learning theory with the aim of adding to the literature recognizing transformative learning outcomes may be broader in expression than worldview and perspective changes that result in transformed actions (Mezirow, 1990b, 1991), and may include sustained descriptions and feelings of enhanced and altered professional practices and sense of professional identity (Hoggan, 2016; Illeris, 2014a, 2014b; Tennant, 2005). Mezirow's theory of transformative learning phases (Mezirow, 1978, 1990b, 1991, 2012) describes the necessity of a cognitive dilemma, disjuncture that leads to critical self-reflections (feelings of guilt or shame), followed by perspective changes, planning and transformed actions in the world. These have also been expanded upon to include more holistic and affective domains as entry into the experience of personal dilemma and not necessarily a cognitive entry point (Fisher-Yoshida et al., 2009; Jordi, 2011; Lange, 2018). By considering alumni reflections 16-20 months post-graduation, the sustained impacts of the program on personal and professional outcomes and practices are elucidated too (Hoggan, 2016). In the sections below I begin with a discussion regarding the foundations required for transformative growth as expressed by the participants and connect the learning processes to the literature reviewed in Chapter 2. This is followed with a discussion of how expressions of experience from the alumni align with transformative learning outcomes (Hoggan, 2016) that incorporate the expressions of professional grounding, validation, and affirmation, as well as professional and personal worldview and identity shifting (Illeris, 2014a, 2014b; Tennant, 2005).

I wish it to be clear that this process of interpretation and discussion is not carried out as a form of evaluation of the program nor the performance of any faculty involved in the program, rather, the intent is to illuminate the experiences expressed by the 20 alumni, in a way that will enable others—those who take on instructional and program development roles—to consider contextual decisions in their work when the desired outcomes for students might align with transforming and/or enhancing professional practices or personal worldviews.

## 5.2. Foundations for growth

For individuals to engage in transformative change processes, a level of readiness for change is needed (Moore, 2005; Prochaska & Norcross, 2018). This may include personal developmental attributes such as cognitive and emotional maturity (Dirkx, 2008; Gunnlaugson, 2005; Mälkki, 2012; Mälkki, & Lindblom-Ylänne, 2012; Mezirow, 1991, 2012) , as well as environmental factors such as the learning community structure (e.g., CoP), and taking the time to establish a sense of community and belonging (Ball & Freeman, 2004; Schapiro, 2009) where and feelings of safety (Brigham, 2011; Galbraith, 1989; Holley & Steiner, 2005; Mezirow, 1991, 1997) and purpose (Bondy et al., 2012; Brookfield, 1995; Mandell & Herman, 2007; Taylor & Laros, 2014) are facilitated.

For educators aiming to create courses or programs that promote transformative learning, circling back to the words of Wenger (1998) seems appropriate as he proposed that “[l]earning cannot be designed: it can only be designed *for* – that is, facilitated or frustrated” (p. 122). What educators have no control over is the predispositions of the learners when they start the course or program. Whether people are interested in stretching themselves, ready for change, or capable of change (at the time)—are all attributes outside the control of the educator. Designing for learning—facilitating an environment that is respectful, collegial, and safe, while providing a range of learning activities for adult learners to engage with that are designed to support transformative learning processes is something educators can do. There is ample evidence as outlined in Chapter 4 Findings, that faculty in the M.Ed. EP program did help to facilitate such an environment and provide a range of transformative learning supportive activities. Shown in Figure 4.8 what was common for the participants was the recognition of the community development which then lead to developing a sense of purpose and collegiality.

When I interviewed the 20 participants of this study, the first question I asked them was “What did the M.Ed. EP program mean to you personally and professionally?”. Each answered in a unique way. For some of the participants—particularly those with longer service records—the drive expressed could be summarized as ‘searching’ or a desire to ‘bring new life’ to their praxis. For these teacher learners, they expressed feelings of being ready to explore new challenges and to engage in reflective inquiry into their practice. For

some—mostly the younger teachers or those with shorter service records—the attainment of the degree was often stated as their initial purpose in enrolling (whether a personal goal, or for professional opportunity or pay scale). Without exception, those that answered this way, spoke of how they were surprised how much they changed personally and/or professionally as a result of the program. They had not anticipated that. They had planned for an academic year involving theory and research through self-inquiry, and had not expected the depth of personal impacts that the various learning activities and learning community environment would have on them. While learning cannot be designed, when it is designed for in ways that invite critical self-reflection and transformative actions, the safe and collegial nature of a cohort CoP learning environment may afford the capacity for individuals to operate at a higher level supported through a medium of generative dialogue (Gunnlaugson, 2007; Mezirow, 1990a, 1991).

### **5.3. Providing opportunities to critically self-reflect and engage in transformative action**

Shown in Chapter 4 Findings, along with the descriptive phenomenological narratives that express the learning activities and learning community processes that were meaningful for the participants, Figures 4.6 and 4.7 are bar graphs that show the emphasis participants providing during their interviews regarding these activities and processes. Various learning activities that prompted alternative ways of experience and expression (e.g., arts-based activities) were noted as meaningful for participants as were strategies that facilitated critical reflection (e.g., personal reflections, confronting disparities between beliefs and practice), and critical dialogue (e.g., theory and profession orientated discussions, giving and receiving feedback, witnessing others) along with opportunities for engaging in transformative action (e.g., inquiry projects, in-class discussions and collaborations). Subsequent to completing the M.Ed. EP, many participants spoke about how they have continued to engage in personal and professional actions that were, previous to the M.Ed., not in their lived experience. Such actions included incorporating alternative modes of learning representation in their classrooms with students (e.g., journaling or other forms of reflection, and arts-based approaches) which was of particular interest to me due to the resistance many expressed initially feeling about engaging in

such techniques are part of their M.Ed. Additionally, participants spoke of personal agency and capacities that are continuing to be further developed such as changed interpersonal behaviour as well as taking on new roles within schools and districts.

In Section 2.3 in the Literature Review I referenced five domains of educational design elements identified by Kasworm and Bowles (2012) in their review of over 250 research articles on transformative learning. While I will not here describe the specific pedagogy employed by faculty of the M.Ed. EP program, the phenomenological expressions provided in Chapter 4 Findings describe how many of the learning activities that the participants experienced as meaningful are in alignment with the five domains of transformative learning pedagogy outlined by Kasworm and Bowles as well as the phases of transformative learning proposed by Mezirow (1978, 1991). Evidence was provided by the participants that there were many opportunities to engage in critical reflection, critical incident analysis (Brookfield, 1990) and opportunities to challenge their own preconceptions and meaning perspectives (Mezirow, 1990b) regarding professional practice, education in general, and their own beliefs about their practice. The inquiry projects further enabled the teacher learners to engage in critical self-reflection (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009) and through sharing with cohort members (including faculty) they were able to refine and deepen their understanding of their own practice. Being able to think outside of the box, or express ideas in alternative formats may be prompted through a range of arts-based activities (Kasworm & Bowles, 2012) and as noted by the participants in this study, such activities in the M.Ed. EP seminars provided moments of discomfort as well as wonder. Many participants spoke of how a particular arts-based activity marked a turning point for them in terms of providing ‘a-ha’ moments on the cognitive level—connecting the dots moments—and/or feelings experienced at the affective domain level through evoking emotional responses and in the cases of two people, personal healing journeys. Such possibilities were outlined by Lawrence (2012) and Dirkx (2008) when they noted the potential for extra-rational experience when engaging in arts-based transformative learning activities. Through professional self-inquiry, and contemplative practices associated with self-reflection and (re)creation of praxis, some participants spoke of expanded consciousness and substantially changed worldviews enabling deeper levels of confidence and competence actioned in the world which align with what Tennant (2005) termed “(re)creating oneself” (p. 111) and Kasworm

and Bowles' (2012) holistic, affective and spiritual processes domain for transformative learning.

While some of the learning activities noted above could have been/were conducted individually, sharing of insights from individual reflective work, and professional dialogue occurred during the M.Ed. EP seminar sessions. The importance of the learning community was paramount for most the teacher learners based on their expressions of meaningful learning activities and processes. Interactions with others and the overall learning environment were noted as supportive and facilitative of their change outcomes described. Participants reported that professional conversations with 'like-minded' individuals who were passionate about engaging in dialogue about their teaching practice was a key aspect of the experiences that enlivened and transformed their practice. The learning community supported transformative learning not only by catalyzing disorienting events and validating perspectives (Mezirow, 1991), but also by creating spaces for professional vulnerability where teacher learners could unpack powerful ideas in relation to practice and explore professional tensions (Wenger, 1998). Engaging in broader conversations about theory and practice allowed teachers to transcend idiosyncratic notions of teaching, explore intersecting ideas, and theorize about 'what it means to teach'. Fluidity of identity and movement within the community was common despite the fact that participants were all practicing teachers (rather than apprentices), supporting the use of Lave and Wenger's (1991; Wenger, 1998) CoP model with established professionals (Hodge, 2014; Liu & Xu, 2013; Wilson & Meyers, 1999).

#### **5.4. Application of transformative learning theory to the different expressions of the M.Ed. EP experience**

Sixteen to 20 months post grad, all participants of this study expressed sustained personal and/or professional changes as shown in Figure 4.2 and referred to throughout the phenomenological descriptions of their experiences outlined in Chapter 4 Findings. As noted in Hoggan's (2016) typology and criteria for analysis of transformative learning outcomes (Table 2.4), in order for changes to be considered transformative, there needs to be evidence of deep impact of the change, that changes need to impact multiple life contexts, and that the changes can be seen to be sustained over time. Some participants

(7/20) in this study described what is traditionally considered transformative learning processes and outcomes such as experiencing moments of crisis, disorientation, and disjuncture which required critical self-reflection resulting in deep and profound worldview and perspective changes as well as altered ways of operating in the world (Mezirow, 1991). Other participants (13/20) described a process of professional praxis and professional identity changes (Illeris, 2014a, 2014b) that came about through inquiry, self-reflective practices, professional critical dialogue with cohort peers, and a range of learning activities designed to promote transformative learning opportunities. While the descriptions of their experience may not align with traditional transformative learning processes and expressed outcomes, I propose below that there are ways to understand their experiences through the application of second wave transformative learning theory lenses.

#### **5.4.1. Expressions of sustained transformative outcomes**

In this section I offer an interpretation of the phenomenon described in Chapter 4 Findings starting by applying Hoggan's (2016) typology of transformative learning outcomes to the described essences of the experiences. This is followed by a discussion of the ways Illeris' (2014a, 2014b) concept of part identity transformation may provide an explanation of the experiences of some of the participants of this study and how Tennant's (2005) descriptions of how different concepts of self may be oppressed and how different opportunities for self-transformation may be actualized.

##### ***Hoggan's typology application***

Hoggan's (2016) typology of transformative learning outcomes created from a review of 206 research studies on transformative learning, aligns with aspects of Mezirow's (1978, 1991) theory and includes categories of worldview perspective changes, altered ways of viewing self, altered ways of being in the world, along with expectations for behaviour change. Additionally, I believe that Hoggan (2016) describes two other categories that indicate second wave transformative learning theory. One of these categories is titled "epistemology" noting that this refers to extra-rational ways of knowing, being more discriminatory and more open. These topics align quite closely with the researchers who express the need for adult education to be focussed on the emancipation

of self or the development of the authentic self (Barnett, 2004; Ferrer et al., 2005; Morgan, 2012; Su, 2011; Tennant, 2005). Another category in his typology is that of “capacity” which refers to not just cognitive development (aligning with Mezirow’s theory) but also to consciousness and spirituality development that align with second wave theorists work such as that by Dirkx (2012) and the call for educators to more inner work in order to integrate personal and professional selves enabling an authenticity to be present in the educational environment (Bai, 2012; Cohen et al., 2012; Dirkx, 2012).

Examples from the phenomenological descriptions provided in Chapter 4 Findings, to Hoggan’s typology of transformative learning outcomes are shown in Table 5.1 below. I considered the professed changes and proposed transformative outcomes as stable (Hoggan, 2016) as the data was gathered over a year post-graduation indicating potential change sequences of at least 16-20 months and potentially three or more years (i.e., throughout the M.Ed. year and/or starting earlier during the graduate diploma years). While all participants spoke of sustained and substantial professional practice changes, they also spoke about changes to their sense of self as a person and as a professional (some minor, some more profound). They did not all, however, speak at length about the depth of these changes. While I did ask participants to expand on their descriptions and prompted with questions such as “In what ways is that change different from how you were personally (or your teaching practice) before?”, I did not quantify these changes by asking them to rate the level of change in anyway in comparison to previous lived experience. By putting in examples of depth of impact of these changes into Table 5.1 below, I recognize that these are representative of many of the participants and the collective essence of the experiences, but may not be representative of all participants as some may have experienced more subtle personal and professional changes putting the ‘depth’ of change for those participants in question.

**Table 5.1 Transformative learning outcomes matrix**

Transformative Learning Outcome	Depth / Evidence of Deep Impact <b>Transformative Experience examples</b>	Depth / Evidence of Deep Impact <b>Grounding, Validating, Affirming Experience examples</b>	Breadth / Evidence of Impact on Multiple Life Contexts <b>Described in the common experience</b>
<p>Worldview: Assumptions, beliefs, attitudes, expectations</p> <p>Ways of interpreting experience</p>	<p>Self-reflection leads to disorientating event, discomfort about personal or professional biases resulting in altered worldview and more compassionate to self and others.</p>	<p>Self-reflection leads to questioning professional practices, and beliefs – wrestling with assumptions and biases.</p>	<p>Awareness of own biases impacts both personal and professional lived experience.</p>
<p>Self: Self-in-relation Empowerment / responsibility</p>	<p>Calmer. Less judgemental. More able to listen to others.</p>	<p>Integrating personal with professional identity. Empowered to take on new leadership roles in school or district.</p>	<p>Moving from discomfort to empowerment in multiple contexts.</p>
<p>Epistemology: More discriminating Extra-rational ways of knowing More open</p>	<p>Deeper awareness of affective domain in learning – integrating altered ways of showing learning in own teaching. Letting go of control. More democratic in classroom.</p>	<p>Deeper awareness of affective domain in learning – integrating altered ways of showing learning in own teaching.</p>	<p>Increased capacity to demonstrate learning in alternative formats and recognize the power for other contexts in life (e.g., with own family, as well as within classroom for students and self)</p>
<p>Ontology: Affective experience of life Ways of being Attributes</p>	<p>Increased capacity to be emotionally vulnerable with others. Staying 'open'.</p>	<p>Witnessing and being witnessed. More curiosity, less judgement.</p>	<p>Changed personal and professional interpersonal capacities. Increased self-compassion.</p>
<p>Behaviour: Actions consistent with new perspective Social action Professional practices Skills</p>	<p>Listening more. Changed classroom practices to align with worldview changes. More compassionate to self and others. Taking risks – feeling vulnerable. Sharing and collaborating more in school and district settings.</p>	<p>Altered professional relationships. Changed classroom practices (trying new ideas out). More collaboration. New school / district roles. Professional dialogue in other settings (school, district, community).</p>	<p>Interpersonal skill development. Participation beyond comfort zone in personal and professional contexts. Increased capacity to share and be vulnerable. Trying new concepts – taking risks.</p>

Transformative Learning Outcome	Depth / Evidence of Deep Impact <b>Transformative Experience examples</b>	Depth / Evidence of Deep Impact <b>Grounding, Validating, Affirming Experience examples</b>	Breadth / Evidence of Impact on Multiple Life Contexts <b>Described in the common experience</b>
Capacity: Cognitive development Consciousness Spirituality	Wrestling with new concepts and ideas. Mindfulness in practice through self-inquiry. Sense of catharsis for some people.	Scholarly development. Inquiry develops mindful practices. Able to justify, and articulate practice.	More empowered to articulate reasoning. More aware of decisions in personal and professional contexts. Mindfulness.

Note: Applying Hoggan's (2016) typology of transformative learning outcomes shown in Table 2.4 to the M.Ed. EP's alumni experience.

While Hoggan's (2016) typology did not influence the design of my research as it was published after I had conducted the interviews, I have found it helpful in interpreting the phenomenon in terms of expressed transformative, and professional grounding, validating, and affirming outcomes. Transformative actions as defined by Mezirow (1990a, 1991) and others (e.g., Brookfield, 2000; MacKeracher, 2012; Taylor & Cranton, 2012; West, 2014) may be demonstrated through any of the transformative learning outcomes shown in Table 5.1 above. What was evident from the participants in this study were descriptions of how new ways of viewing self, others, and the world were integrated into their interpersonal relationships in both personal and professional contexts. Wrestling with moments of disorientation or disjuncture resulted in critical reflection and changed personal and professional behaviours. Where some noted a sense of disconnection or isolation in their school settings prior to embarking on the M.Ed., many spoke of how the M.Ed. EP experience resulted in them finding a voice, being more confident and empowered, leading to them taking on new roles in their schools or districts, as well as sustained changes to their ability to reach out, be vulnerable, and collaborate with others. When beginning the M.Ed. EP, the average length of teaching experience for the 20 alumni was 13.8 years and their average age at graduation was 39. This suggests that these were all mature adults who had been operating in their teaching practices for a substantial time period and likely had an established professional identity and practice. As described in Chapter 4 Findings, these teacher learners attributed sustained, broad, and substantial changes to their practices directly to their learning journeys during the M.Ed. EP program. These changes, while not all expressed in a way that neatly aligns with

Mezirow's (1991) transformative learning theory processes (i.e., expressions of crisis or disjuncture prompting critical reflection), nonetheless may arguably align with transformative learning outcomes when applying Hoggan's typology due to the many ways that the sustained changes have impacted personal and professional ways of being in the world and potentially their sense of personal and professional identities.

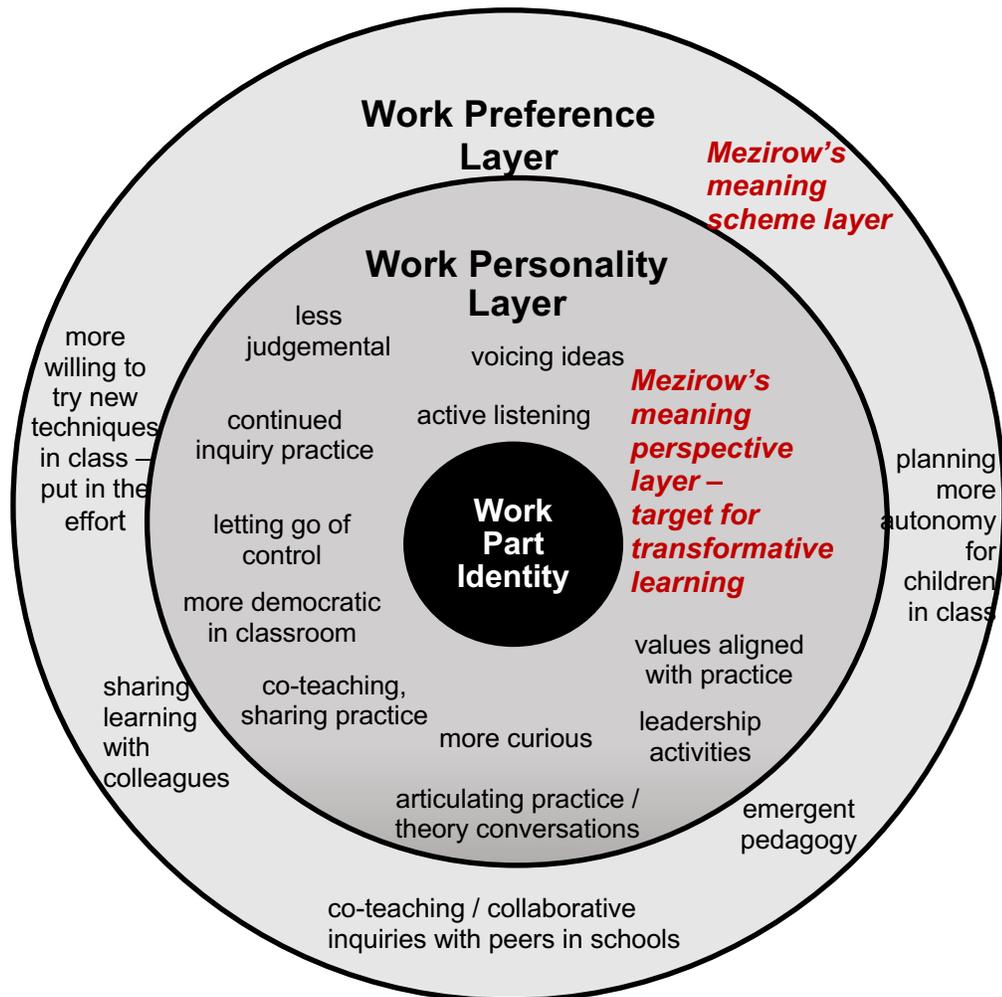
### ***Identity and part identity changes***

Illeris (2014a) explained how concepts related to identity structures are no longer considered established in childhood and fixed from adolescence onwards—it is more commonly understood that identity structures are dynamic and multi-faceted and adjustable to socio-cultural influences. While the core identity may remain predominately stable over time once mature adulthood is achieved, life situations and critical reflection borne from crisis or other life events, may result in personality layer changes that provide evidence of transformative learning as proposed by Mezirow (Illeris, 2014a). Illeris further proposed that even when the core identity's personality layer remains stable and not overtly changed, individuals have several 'part identities' that may be more fluid and adaptable and that sustained core changes within a part identity structure may be evidence of transformative change. The probable dominance of the part identity related to work for most adults (especially for those in professions) may provide evidence of transformative learning when the sustained and substantial changes occur to a person's sense of self in a professional capacity (Illeris, 2014a). In the case of the participants in this study—all professional educators—many spoke of how their professional and personal identities had become more integrated as a result of their M.Ed. EP program. There was no longer a sense of 'me the person' and 'me the teacher'. This aligned with a sense of becoming more authentic and grounded in who they were as people. The professional validation and affirmation received through the program also empowered them to make changes in their actions in the world becoming more collaborative, curious, and willing to take risks—trying new techniques, sharing practice, and taking on a variety of leadership roles. The professional empowerment influenced personal lives too, resulting in expressions of feeling more stable overall as individuals and self-assured regarding their beliefs, abilities to recognize bias, and improved ways to interact with others.

While all participants spoke of changes to core self and/or professional practices, not all expanded specifically on the depth and breadth of these changes. For some, it is reasonable to imagine, that the changes may have been more surface level—or identity preference layer (Illeris, 2014a). For others, where descriptions provide evidence of sustained changes to beliefs, values, and styles of interaction—I propose the changes may be evidence of identity personality layer changes (Illeris, 2014a) even when described as occurring in the professional context. As shown in Figure 2.1, the target for transformative learning is the personality layer on the structure of identity (Illeris, 2014a). This layer includes—amongst other attributes—behaviours, beliefs, communication styles, patterns of collaboration, abilities to empathize, habits, and attitudes. Applied to the part identity of work, while the core may be fairly stable for these teacher learners (with 13.8 average years of practice), for many, the attributes commonly expressed as being changed included an improved sense of self as teachers, increased professional confidence and competence, less judgemental and more curious stance with children and colleagues, and an increased alignment between their beliefs and their practice. These changes came about as a result of willingness to be vulnerable and engage in critical self-reflection facilitated by a range of learning activities including professional dialogue with cohort members, self-inquiry, a range of arts-based activities, engaging in scholarly reading and discussion, and various forms of personal reflection—all within an accountability structure that challenged previously held beliefs and practices. In Figure 5.3 below I apply examples of professed changes to a part identity structure related to work as professed by participants in this study.

When compared to Illeris' (2014a) core identity structure (shown in Figure 2.1 in Chapter 2 Literature Review) I propose it can be seen that the professed professional changes do align with the personality layer changes which are the types of changes that can be considered transformative (Illeris, 2014a, 2014b). With the work part identity being typically dominate for working professionals, it is probable that changes in work identity will impact the core identity due to the integration of work and self that is common amongst professional people (Illeris, 2014a).

**Figure 5.3** Examples of expressed work part identity changes



Note: Adapted from Illeris, 2014a, p. 71.

For some of the participants, the descriptions of professional changes were described as outcomes following a transformative learning process as described by Mezirow (1990a, 1991)—i.e., following moments of crisis and personal disorientation arising from self-inquiry and/or critical self-reflection. For others, these changes, while sustained and substantive, were described as arising from critical reflection and mostly prompted by the professional dialogue and learning activities that prompted them to challenge their beliefs and practices and try new practices in their classrooms. The sense of empowerment that arose through these practices resulted in expressions of feeling more grounded as a professional, validated and affirmed in practice, and confident and capable of taking on new and expanded roles in the education system.

From the descriptions provided by the alumni, the M.Ed. EP program would appear to provide students with opportunities to transform their sense of selves through critical reflective inquiry practice within a supportive learning community. The pathways to transformative outcomes were personalized for each individual as they each came to the experience with their own internalized concept of self, past experiences, and present contexts, that influenced their sense of self and possible opportunities to engage in change processes. As outlined in Chapter 2 Literature Review (Table 2.2), Tennant (2005) described different conceptions of the self, and how societal inputs may oppress people resulting in specific challenges and opportunities for self-transformation. These concepts are considered in the section below.

### ***Transformed selves***

In Chapter 1 Introduction, I described my personal fascination with other peoples' stories. As a counsellor, I often use a Narrative Therapy approach (White & Epston, 1990) which is a post-modern therapeutic modality that uses techniques such as externalizing problems and integrating a Feminist stance that both highlight the influence of societal norms and pathologies that may be challenging or oppressing people on their path to fulfilment and life satisfaction. Tennant (2005) described how transforming one's sense of self through engaging in strategies to confront societal oppressions can be viewed as forms of identity transformation and transformative learning. He proposed five main conceptions of self which can be externally oppressed in unique ways—and as a result—methods to confront such oppressions are varied based on how individuals conceptualize themselves (and how the educator designs learning opportunities based on their own conceptualizations of self).

In this study, numerous participants spoke of ways they took action that resulted in a sense of freeing themselves from perceived constraints, previously held self-concepts, as well as offering a range of expressions that indicated increased self-efficacy and autonomy aligned with expressions of feeling more grounded, validated, affirmed and confident as practitioners. As a researcher, I felt privileged to be offered those narratives as they were very personal and, at times, emotionally charged. What I cannot do in this section is write about individuals and their specific ways that they overcame various societal oppressions to transform their sense of selves. This is for the following three main

reasons: Firstly, as I had only had email contact with the participants prior to meeting with them for the interview, I did not specifically ask people about such intimate details as I would not have wanted to put people in a position of feeling obligated to disclose when they might not have felt safe to do so. Secondly, while I did adopt a therapeutic stance at times in the phenomenological interviews, these were not therapy sessions and exploring externalized oppressions were not part of the research outline. Thirdly, it would have been unethical to me, as a therapist (BCACC, 2018), to engage in a therapeutic conversation in a ‘one-off’ interview that lasted an hour—especially as that was not outlined in the informed consent and would not have been what the participants were expecting. Without knowing the individuals, and what their various experiences were in the M.Ed. EP program, I felt there was a risk of triggering moments of discomfort that may be left unresolved or unsupported for those individuals. For these reasons, the descriptions I provide below are generalized from the participants and relate to the phenomenological expressions outlined in Chapter 4 Findings. In providing these interpretations, I wish to emphasize that these are suppositions and are in no way intended to suggest any form of pathology for participants, nor their wider socio-cultural environment including family, friends, living arrangements, and workplaces.

Of Tennant’s (2005) five concepts of self and possibilities for self-transformation outlined in Table 2.2, I recognize that there may be many different and nuanced experiences held by the participants of the study. For the reasons noted in the paragraph above, I will discuss two examples expressed by multiple participants. These are descriptions that relate to Tennant’s categories of ‘authentic or real self’ and ‘autonomous self’ and their aligned processes of self-transformation. During the interviews, a common concept expressed was that of feeling more authentic in practice and experiencing the sense of personal and professional identity integration. I propose that such expressions align with what Tennant (2005) described the “authentic or real self” (p. 104) as being a concept of self that experiences distortion through adherence to misaligned societal expectations. By way of emancipation from dominate discourse (specific to the teaching profession), individuals expressed being able to engage in the world and/or their teaching practice in ways that were more reflective of their authentic selves. In this study, the participants described experiencing disorientation or dilemmas attached to self-reflection activities related to identifying disconnections between their held beliefs about

self/practice and their actions. By taking steps to align their beliefs and practice more authentically, participants expressed feelings of leading a more integrated, authentic, grounded, and confident life in professional as well as personal contexts.

The input from society that creates oppression for the concept of “autonomous self” (Tennant, 2005, p. 104) relates to individuals experiencing a sense of being shaped by society—of having lack of agency in their lives. Self-transformation is described by Tennant as occurring by learning to be more self-directed, and critically analytical of own, and others’ beliefs and actions. Within this study, the M.Ed. EP alumni described many instances of developing (strengthening) their sense of autonomy, and personal and professional agency. By engaging in inquiry-based practices, self-reflection, critical professional dialogue, witnessing others and being witnessed by others, the teacher learners became more mindful and purposeful in their practice. Expressions of feeling more confident to contribute to scholarly and profession-focussed discussions (within the M.Ed. EP seminars and in their schools or districts) resulted in many describing a sense empowerment that impacted them personally and professionally in multiple contexts.

On an intuitive level, when in relation with the participants during the interviews, I believe I experienced some participants express moments during their M.Ed. EP that may align with one of Tennant’s (2005) other three described concepts of self and self-transformation (i.e., repressed self, storied self, and entangled self). As noted earlier, such examination of insight was not appropriate to explore in the context of this study. As a counsellor, however, exploring such concepts in a further study, or with my own clients, has an appeal.

#### **5.4.2. The purpose of adult education**

From a transformative learning lens, the emancipation from oppression, embracing the authentic self, challenging the unjust, inequitable status quo in society are just some of the desired outcomes of adult education (Freire, 1974; Mezirow, 1990, 2012). Su (2011) and Barnett (2004) both position the core purpose of adult education as being the development of critical consciousness and one’s authentic ways of being. By engaging in practices of self-inquiry, critical reflection and dialogue, as well as transformative actions,

the participants in this study have been empowered to wrestle with the various aspects of their authentic selves in ways that they operate in the world generally, as well as their professional praxis. As one participant noted; “It isn’t about old ways and new ways, but I think that the impact of the learning will never be lost” (Enigma). From a position of raised consciousness comes the capacity to make purposeful choices (Prochaska & Norcross, 2018). When teachers chose to live an authentic life with both personal and professional actions being in congruence with core identity values and beliefs which are aligned with social justice, personal empowerment, and honouring of the human potential, ultimately, the result will be a more just and equitable education system for our children.

## **5.5. Summary**

The M.Ed. in Educational Practice program has at the heart of its design purposeful strategies for enabling transformative learning experiences to occur within a community of professional learners. The alignment with transformative learning theory in terms of learning activities and environments that support and facilitate transformative outcomes has been explicated. A way that this research study may add to the second wave of transformative learning literature is by providing descriptions of how expressions of professional grounding, validation, affirmation and confidence outcomes that resulted in transformed sense of professional identity and praxis offer evidence of part identity transformation (Illeris, 2014a, 2014b) at the personality layer. It is proposed that the work part identity is integrated with the core personality, and when change is sustained over time, that this may provide evidence of transformative learning outcomes viewed through a professional practice lens. Expressions of authentic practice, personal agency, and autonomy (Tennant, 2005)—described primarily from a professional practice perspective—also provide examples of a broader view of transformative learning outcomes. The interviews were conducted 16-20 months post graduating from the M.Ed. program, these changes may, therefore, be confirmed as being sustained (Hoggan, 2016) as they have continued to be present in the teacher learners’ personal and professional practices.

## **Chapter 6. Strengths, limitations and suggestions for future research, summary and conclusion**

Openness—in the sense of interpretive availability—is a sustaining motive of all qualitative inquiry. Such inquiry is based on the idea that no interpretation is beyond challenge. It behooves us to remain as attentive as possible to the ways that all of us experience the world and to the infinite variety of possible human experiences and possible explications of those experiences. (van Manen, 2002, p. 237)

### **6.1. Introduction**

Undertaking this study was a relational endeavour. Utilizing a phenomenological methodology provided opportunities to engage deeply with individuals in an unstructured interview that, at times for some of the people, bordered on a therapeutic conversation (White & Epston, 1990). Participants spoke openly with few prompts about meaningful moments during their M.Ed. experiences and how that has impacted them personally and professionally. They spoke of specific memorable and meaningful learning activities as well as ways that learning within a community influenced their learning journeys. The depth of these disclosures were made possible, I believe, because they had trust in the university—and by proxy, in me—and because I took time to develop a compassionate and open-hearted listening stance with each individual (Prochaska & Norcross, 2018). Cutcliffe and McKenna (2002) indicate that in qualitative research, the reciprocal relationship between researcher and participants will impact the concept of 'knowing' and that the lens of witnessing through the relationship is akin to a 'craft' in praxis. They indicate that "ultimately, knowing is temporary and fleeting, but in 'knowing through the relationship', in qualitative research as craft there exist the mechanisms and opportunities for the researcher to become empirically confident that he [sic] knows" (p. 611). What is 'truth' in qualitative research is, thus, perhaps elusive. With the phenomenological reduction process that aims to illuminate the core of an experience, a sense of 'knowing' may evolve through the resonance of expressions both when witnessed within the

relational context of the interview and when narratives are compared to create the common essence. This sense of knowing is owned by me, the researcher, and may resonant for readers of this work in a similar or altered way. Each of us will have experienced the phenomenon presented in this thesis through the lens of our own worldviews and personal truths. I am hopeful that readers of this work can draw from this phenomenon awareness that can assist them in making decisions moving forward for their personal and/or professional lives.

In this final chapter, I start with a description of strengths and limitations of this research as well as suggestions for future research. This is followed by a summary of the research and conclusions drawn from the interpretation. The chapter is concluded with a discussion of how engaging in this study has impacted me personally and professionally.

## **6.2. Strengths, Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research**

Being naturally curious, I enjoy researching lived experiences. In the context of a Ph.D. degree program, and being an unfunded research study, this has at times been a solitary endeavour (albeit with wonderful support of my co-senior supervisors). Being comfortable with drawing a line under this project and attending to my discomfort regarding my competence and ability to make sense of it all, has been a challenge. While recognizing the research story told in this thesis document may resonant with some readers, for others, more questions than possible answers may have arisen. Possibilities for interpretation are bountiful, and I encourage others to gain from the phenomenon presented in this thesis concepts for their own inquiries and practices. In this section of this thesis, I offer what I believe to be strengths of this work as well as limits. Areas of intrigue for me are outlined in suggestions for future research.

### **6.2.1. Strengths**

Outlined in Chapter 1 Introduction, and Chapter 3 Methodological Approach, my reasons for conducting the research with professional educators over a year removed from the euphoria of M.Ed. degree completion was purposeful. I explicitly wished to explore,

and gain insight into, the lived experience of learning within a community of professionals in a program designed to promote personal and/or professional transformation. Exploring sustained, and deep changes in personal and professional ways of being in the world 16-20 months post-graduation allowed for confidence in the descriptions of change as being aligned with transformational learning theory. As a phenomenological study, this would likely be considered 'large scale' as I interviewed 20 participants for an hour each which resulted in a complex and rich data set from which the essence of the experience emerged through a phenomenological reduction process. The number of participants provide a level of trustworthiness to the described common essence of the experience, while at the same time the uniqueness of the individual stories allowed for nuanced experiences to be witnessed that may resonant with readers.

### **6.2.2. Limitations**

It is not unusual for people to be their own worst critics. This is true of me, and although I do try to critique from a place of compassion, it has taken me many years—a counselling degree and engaging in a transformative process through this study—to embrace curiosity as opposed to internalized criticism. With that in mind, there are potential limits to this study that I outline below that are inherent in phenomenological studies of this size conducted by a single researcher for the first time.

#### ***Data collection and analysis***

Undertaking 20 phenomenological interviews was a time intensive endeavour. Going to individual homes or workplaces from Mission to Vancouver took about seven weeks to complete, navigating time commitments and space constraints. The unstructured, open interview format resulted in participants focussing on quite disparate issues making comparison between them and overall analysis challenging. I was also cognizant of the potential researcher influence and bias that I brought into the conversation with the participants. While I engaged in the process of phenomenological epoché to attempt to bracket my preconceptions and biases prior to interviews, I am fully aware that I am human and my own cultural identity, race, worldviews and experiences may have influenced my attention. While attempting to remain neutral and ask open ended, non-leading, Socratic questions, it is nonetheless possible that I unintentionally

influenced the participants' narratives in some way through asking follow-up questions about some of their descriptive expressions while not following up on others. In so doing, it is possible that participants provided narrative that they felt I wanted to hear. Having a single data set (interviews) also meant that I had no other data to triangulate my analysis with. A follow up questionnaire to all potential participants might have resulted in others, who were not able to commit to an interview, being able to express their experiences.

The phenomenological reduction data analysis process took a long time for me to complete. Due to the extensive data collection, personally transcribing the interviews, and engaging in multiple systematic analyses processes, it took me approximately 18 months to gather the data and develop the phenomenological descriptions of the participants' experiences. It took me a further few years to complete the interpretation, and this final document. The time lapse I experienced created, at times, a sense of distance from the overall research experience, which may have resulted in some key issues being overlooked or minimized in the presentation and interpretation of the phenomenon.

While results of a phenomenological study are not expected to be generalizable, the overall expressions of the essence of experience expressed by 20 alumni of the M.Ed. EP program were representative of three cohorts and a heterogeneous group of educators. It is possible, therefore, that the results may inform other similar adult learning programs where transformative learning is a desired outcome. As Guba (1981) asserts, the concept of transferability invites readers to assess the applicability of the findings based on thick descriptions provided by the researcher. Descriptive results may not, however, provide empirical answers to questions which may be a preference for certain queries or needs.

### ***Participants***

The 20 participants of this study were a self-selecting heterogeneous group of educators representing approximately one third of those invited to participate. While diverse in terms of teaching experience, teaching disciplines, and professional contexts, it is possible that this could be a skewed participant group—for example those with primarily positive outcomes and learning experiences expressed. While noted to be representative of the M.Ed. EP cohort makeup, the participant group was predominately cis-gendered female (19/20, with one self identified cis-gendered male). Explicit

exploration into barriers or affordances for participation related to race or other identity constructs may be under-represented in this study's results which may limit the applicability of these results to other, more diverse populations (in terms of gender, cultural identity, and race). Additionally, the participants were self-selecting from three different cohorts which included different teaching faculty as well as geographic locations. Such variety may have influenced participants' cohort community development and diversity of worldviews and other influences that help facilitate critical reflection and perspective challenging.

### **6.2.3. Recommendations for Future Research**

As I engaged in the phenomenological reduction and interpretation of the M.Ed. EP experiences, I became increasingly intrigued by expressions of transformative learning observed through lenses of professional identity (Illeris, 2014a, 2014b), and expressions that align with changed concepts of self, arising as a result of transformed professional practice (Tennant, 2005). For ethical reasons, exploring the depth of transformation to participants' sense of selves and forces that oppress them, a single interview style research project such as this one would not be appropriate. This is because emotional distress to participants could be possible through exploration of perceived oppression within selves or from their lived contexts. A possible future research project exploring these concepts could be conducted over a longer time period where a researcher, with appropriate skills, develops a relationship with participants early in the M.Ed. through to a time (1-2 years) post-graduation. Through an agreed format of exploration, concepts of change within the participants may be revealed and witnessed in a non-threatening way that supports participants' empowerment and change processes.

For adding to the second wave literature on transformative learning, I believe it could also be useful to see further explorations on the range of transformative outcomes such as the epistemology (more discriminating), ontology (affective lived expressions), and consciousness/spiritual capacity categories outlined by Hoggan (2016) and the various learning activities and environment attributes that support such outcomes. Such insights may provide more awareness around the interplay between changed perspectives, and transformative actions that align with calls for social justice and ways to

confront inequities in our society (and education systems). For similar reasons noted in the paragraph above, I imagine such explorations would require an open and curious, non-pathologizing (therapeutic) stance with participants to ensure ethical care of research participants.

Additionally, as noted in the Chapters 4 Findings and 5 Discussion, it was interesting to me how many of the participants spoke of initial discomfort in utilizing arts-based approaches that evoked somatic and extra rational experiencing of their learning. While such holistic pedagogies are atypical in many institutions in which Western ideologies are predominant, they may be common in other places of learning, such as within Indigenous and African communities. Further research into the reasons for this discomfort utilizing a holistic lens that explores psychological, as well as other potential variables such as cultural identity, race, gender, age—to name a few possibilities—would be of interest to me, and perhaps others, to explore further.

From an educational design perspective, based on the important role that the learning community played for the participants in this study, I also imagine that further explorations into ways learning communities may facilitate transformative learning in educational contexts could assist educators in the design of learning contexts. Regarding community of practice approaches, there is a substantial literature on CoP design but this is somewhat limited when applying transformative learning theory to CoP processes and outcomes. With the view of exploring alternative delivery modalities for relational pedagogy based professional programs, it may also be useful to consider a program environmental design and ways to monitor outcomes for expressions of transformative learning in a mixed-mode or online format. This could be of benefit for the university in the future with the aim of provincial outreach to educators removed from easy access to the Lower Mainland cohorts.

Future research studies conducted using a case study, narrative, or more structured mixed methods approach may yield a broader data set useful to compare with the phenomenological narrative presented in this study to add nuance and/or deeper understanding of aspects of the phenomenon of professional and personal transformative learning within formal education programs.

### 6.3. Summary and conclusion

This research study involved a process of witnessing. Through phenomenological interviews, I was given the privilege to witness the telling of personal accounts of deep and sustained changes in peoples' lives. Engaging in the phenomenological reduction and interpretation processes involved another form of witnessing—the emergence of the essence of experience. As the title of this thesis indicates, this emergence took the form of a mosaic for me. Individual pieces of experience came together to form a picture of the participants' journeys of personal and professional change and growth.

Twenty graduates from three cohorts of the M.Ed. Educational Practice program participated in this study 16-20 months after degree completion. They shared expressions of sustained transformative learning outcomes including personal growth and change, as well as professional identity and praxis transformations. Through applying concepts related to identity transformation (Illeris, 2014a), it is proposed that professional praxis and self-concepts related to professional identity provide evidence of the breadth of possible expressions of transformative learning. In this study, the deliberate community of practice learning environment helped to facilitate transformative learning providing a safe, collegial space for the teacher learners to share, reflect, witness and be witnessed. A variety of meaningful learning activities and processes were expressed by the participants of the study which supported the growing literature on educational design considerations for transformative learning. This included recognition of entry points for self-reflection to arise through a wider variety of methods, such as arts-based activities and/or professional dialogue, as well as through cognitive disjuncture arising from personal reflection.

In conclusion, I am hopeful that what may arise from this research are moments of wonder. As noted by van Manen (2002), wonder and questions are not the same things, as once a question is answered, wonder may cease to exist. The pursuit of a 'truth' in researching lived experience may also be elusive. My intention was not to uncover the empirical truth of the experience, but rather, by way of *aletheia*, provide opportunities to wonder, recognize, make meaningful that which has been disclosed by the participants of this study. I cannot, as a result, propose a singular interpretation of the findings of this study. I instead offer my interpretation as a being the result of my own lens created through

my lived experience with the hope that I have assisted readers in their own ponderings, and curiosities—to wonder.

## **6.4. Personal Reflection**

It was my intention, in conducting this study, to explore my curiosities that have arose through my own experience as a graduate student, and to better inform my praxis as a counsellor, teaching faculty member, and Instructional Development Consultant. The advantage of exploring transformative learning with an alumni group from the M.Ed. EP program had the added potential benefit of providing SFU's Field Programs with evidence of the sustained impact of their program for their students. That possibility was pleasing to me as I began this research journey. Undertaking this research study has, as I alluded to earlier, impacted me in ways I consider to be transformative. Not only has my professional praxis been changed in many ways (which have been sustained over time), my sense of self has undergone some adjustments regarding letting go of self-doubt, self-criticism, control, and becoming more open to my experiences of discomfort and frustration from a more self-compassionate position.

Undertaking a phenomenological research project was a conscious decision to push my boundaries as a researcher. Because of the scale of this undertaking at this point in my personal life trajectory—sandwich generation—I've had to take stock, reflect on my priorities, and the result is that writing this thesis document has taken me longer than I had planned. At first, the delays that have happened as a result of life circumstances resulted in me questioning my own judgement for engaging in a phenomenological study. (Internal rumination: I might have been finished two or three years ago if I had undertaken a more straightforward research project). At times my lack of movement to completion resulted in feelings of failure as a Ph.D. candidate. I experienced feeling that I've let down myself, my supervisors, my family, and my work colleagues because I did not finish on my initial expected schedule that I was on track to accomplish. In my past, I have always been able to juggle family, work, and finish 'school' on track. Not this time though. Being able to sit with this discomfort has ultimately been good for me. I've made gains in self-compassion and have validated the internal positioning of priorities which provide a sense of purpose and focus in my life. I believe this time of reflection and 'delay' also enabled

me to engage in the interpretation phase of this research from a more grounded position. With the rush to completion paused, the time and space facilitated an emergence of conceptualizations that may not have occurred had I worked to a tighter timeline.

On a professional front, the impact of this research is evident in my work as a counsellor. I have begun to integrate (as appropriate for clients) alternative ways of emotional expression into my therapeutic work. While my counselling practice is still predominately 'talk' based, I have also brought more expressive activities into the therapy room. I have begun to offer guided arts-based and reflective activities for clients directly as a result of hearing the narratives from the participants in this study regarding the therapeutic and transformative impact that such activities had on them. Within my teaching practice, working with graduate level counselling students, I have been deliberately taking more time to ensure cohort cohesion and to get to know students and for students to know each other at a deeper level. I have introduced new in-class activities (including arts-based approaches), and discussions to deliberately, but safely, promote disequilibrium in students. I have developed small group discussion topics to promote worldview challenges, and provide opportunities for alternative ways to represent learning, as well as ways to promote self-reflection through journal writing and self-inquiry. Over the past four years, I have grown in confidence and my pedagogical practice has grown in breadth and depth as a result of the learning I have gained through this research study. I feel that, in many ways my teaching has become more energized, emergent in response to the learners, and transformed in terms of taking risks with curricular approaches that were previously (for over 15 years) outside of my comfort zone.

My evolved teaching practice has impacted my current work as an Instructional Development Consultant too. Working at a polytechnic institute, faculty are often focussed more on technical skill development than on students' personal growth. As a result of this research study, I find that I am encouraging and supporting faculty to design space for wonder and curiosity with their students, promoting a community of practice approach where possible, highlighting social and adult learning theory and the importance of relationships within the classroom, and helping faculty design alternative learning outcomes and assessments that support worldview development and transformative learning outcomes. While such approaches are not of interest to all faculty in every

discipline, it is variety and choice that I aim to promote in my workplace, and this is an important way that I feel I can give back to the educational community and to the next generation of students.

I feel deep gratitude for the opportunity to witness, reflect, and integrate this new knowledge into my personal way of being in the world, as well as into my professional praxis. While this thesis document marks the end of a phase of my own complex journey of inquiry that began 23 years ago when I enrolled in my first undergraduate course in education theory, it also represents a point in time from which I cannot reverse or unlearn what I have embraced as gifts arising from this Ph.D. journey, and this thesis study in particular. This ending also marks the beginning of a new phase of my professional praxis—one where I will continue to embrace curiosity with a newfound openness and willingness to explore the spaces of discomfort and vulnerability that enable transformative growth to emerge.

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## Appendix A.

### Interview Protocol

Study Application # 2014s0395

Version 2: 28 May 2015

**Alumni Interview Protocol**  
**Exploring Students' Learning Experiences in a**  
**Professional Practice Master's Program**  
**(PhD Research)**  
**Simon Fraser University**

#### Alumni Interview Protocol

*[Interviews will be arranged at a mutually convenient place. This may be in the participant's home or workplace, my home or workplace, a local public library, university library or other public setting that has a quiet space. I will bring with me bottled water for the participant, tissues, copies of the informed consent, my student credentials, audio recorder and paper for taking notes, and drawing materials for the participant to use if wanted].*

Thank you for agreeing to meet today and take part in this study.

Prior to us meeting today, I sent you some information via email. One of the documents was the informed consent. I have a copy of it here today for you to sign if you are in agreement. Do you have any questions regarding the informed consent?

*[I will answer any questions and go over main points of the informed consent]*

Please review the consent document and sign it in the space indicated.

I also sent you some information regarding the purpose of our research and the questions I'll be asking you today. I have the same information on this paper and ask that you please take a few minutes to read this and we'll discuss it afterwards.

*[I will handout the sheets of paper shown overleaf and allow participants to read it]*

## ALUMNI INTERVIEW

*[The following will be supplied on paper for the alumni participants to read before the interview and I will also have sent it via email prior to the interview]*

**Information supplied to alumni participants via email one week before the arranged interview and again on a sheet of paper along with the informed consent at the beginning of the interview**

We are interested in the impact of your graduate studies at Simon Fraser University on you and your practice.

We invite you to describe specific experiences in your graduate study that you feel were impactful or otherwise meaningful for you.

If you feel you've experienced personal or professional changes as a result of your study, you also should feel free to describe them.

We are interested in your experience and any specific examples you can describe in your work and personal life that might illustrate the changes or impactful experiences you report.

In addition, we will be asking you for a pseudonym we can use for your responses and to tell us a little about your personal background.

If you have any questions before we meet for the interview please feel free to contact me via email or telephone.

I look forward to meeting you on [date] at [place].

Yours sincerely

Lynda Beveridge  
Email: [...]@sfu.ca  
Cell: [...]

*[I will go over briefly the above with alumni and ask if there are any questions. I will answer questions if any].*

This interview is likely to take about an hour. As a reminder, you are welcome to choose to pass on any question you do not wish to answer and quit the interview at any time.

Also, if you would like to stop the recording for any reason, let me show you how you can stop the recording [*demonstration*]. You can also ask me to stop the recording or state that something you wish to say is not part of the study.

Are you ready to begin?

*[If 'Yes' then I will continue with the interview. If 'No' then I will answer any questions, and/or make other arrangements or end the interview].*

## **ALUMNI INTERVIEW QUESTIONS**

Remember there are no right or wrong answers to these questions.

### **Main Interview Questions**

Please describe what taking your Master's degree meant to you personally and professionally.

What would you say were the most memorable, deeply impactful, or otherwise significant learning experiences during your Master's program?

In the program we sometimes talked about 'co-emergence,' and viewing the classroom as a complex system in which many factors come together sometimes in unexpected ways to produce particular outcomes. If we think about the co-emergence of some of the more significant learning experiences you have described in the program, what is the story of their co-emergence?

Updated after 3 interviews to:

Learning is often the result of many different factors such as curriculum, past experiences, ideas of others, mediums of instruction, forms of representation, community expectations etc. coming together sometimes in complex and unexpected ways. If you think about your significant learning experiences you've described in this program, how did they come about?

### **Probing Questions- based on responses to questions 1, 2 or 3**

**A: If participant highlights personal changes, renewals or affirmations, some or all of the following 7 questions may be added to the main interview questions -**

How do you account for the personal changes, renewals or affirmations you described? (e.g., did you engage in any specific practices that helped to facilitate the changes described? Inquiry project, journaling, reflective writing, canvas/blackboard postings, discussions, arts-based methods...)

Are there any specific SFU experiences or events that you feel contributed to these changes, renewals or affirmations?

Do these personal changes, renewals or affirmations you describe manifest in other aspects of your life? (e.g., is your professional practice different now?)

Can you describe in more detail how “x” impacts your overall worldview?

What was it like for you to be learning within a community of professionals?

Please tell us about the role [if any] of your instructors and cohort members in relation to your learning and your personal and professional changes, renewals or affirmations described.

Is there anything else you would like to share regarding your personal and professional learning and changes, renewals or affirmations resulting from your Master’s study?

*[At the conclusion of the interview, participants will be given the short survey for background information and to identify their pseudonym. Regardless of whether they complete the interview or withdraw their consent at anytime during the interview process, they will be given the honorarium of a \$25 gift card for taking part].*

**B: If participant highlights professional changes, renewals or affirmations, some or all of the following 7 questions may be added to the main interview questions -**

How do you account for the professional changes, renewals or affirmations you described? (e.g., did you engage in any specific practices that helped to facilitate the changes described? Inquiry project, journaling, reflective writing, canvas/blackboard postings, discussions, arts-based methods...)

Are there any specific SFU experiences that you feel contributed to these changes, renewals or affirmations? Please describe.

In what ways, if any, do these professional changes, renewals or affirmations you describe manifest in other aspects of your life? (e.g., does this impact your personal life in any way?)

Can you describe in more detail how “x” impacts your overall worldview?

What was it like for you to be learning within a community of professionals?

Please tell us about the role [if any] of your instructors and cohort members in relation to your learning and your personal and professional changes, renewals or affirmations described.

Is there anything else you would like to share regarding your personal and professional learning and changes, renewals or affirmations resulting from your Master’s study?

*[At the conclusion of the interview, participants will be given the short survey for background information and to identify their pseudonym. Regardless of whether they complete the interview or withdraw their consent at anytime during the interview process, they will be given the honorarium of a \$25 gift card for taking part].*

**C: If participant does not relate stories of ‘change’ from questions 1, 2 or 3 but focuses more on enjoyment or issues to do with community/cohort, some or all of the following 7 questions may be added to the main interview questions-**

How do you account for the development of your experience of “x” (e.g. enjoyment, sense of community) that you described? (e.g., did you engage in any specific practices that helped to facilitate the changes described? Inquiry project, journaling, reflective writing, canvas/blackboard postings, discussions, arts-based methods...)

Are there any specific SFU experiences that you feel contributed to the meaningful/impactful moments, renewals or affirmations you describe?

How do you imagine these experiences have impacted different aspects of your life?

Can you describe in more detail how “x” impacts your overall worldview?

What was it like for you to be learning within a community of professionals?

Please tell us about the role [if any] of your instructors and cohort members in relation to your learning and the meaningful experiences, renewals or affirmations you described.

Is there anything else you would like to share regarding your personal and professional learning and changes, renewals or affirmations resulting from your Master’s study?

*[At the conclusion of the interview, participants will be given the short survey for background information and to identify their pseudonym. Regardless of whether they complete the interview or withdraw their consent at anytime during the interview process, they will be given the honorarium of a \$25 gift card for taking part].*

Note: some questions are adapted, with permission, from interview protocol followed by Stevens-Long, Schapiro and McClintock (2011).

### **Alumni Background information**

Participant Code #:                      Date:

Age:

Pseudonym to use in the research study:

In what year did you complete your Master’s program?

What field of work did you do before the Master’s? (i.e., already in practice, or a new field of study?)

What field of work are you currently in?

How do you self-identify in terms of gender?

How do you self-identify in terms of cultural heritage and race?

During your Masters program – how would you describe your community where you lived? (i.e., rural, urban, suburban, etc. or other description?)

## Appendix B.

### Email Invitation Script

Study Application # 2014s0395

Version 3: 28 May 2015

**Alumni - Email Invitation to Participate  
Exploring Students' Learning Experiences in a  
Professional Practice Master's Program  
(PhD Research)  
Simon Fraser University**

**An email invitation to participate in the research study was sent out via the SFU M.Ed. Educational Practice Field Program's administrators.**

The invitation script is below:

Subject heading: Inquiring about your learning experiences

Dear [insert name]

My name is Lynda Beveridge and I am a PhD student at Simon Fraser University, Faculty of Education. I am inviting you to take part in a research study focussing on exploring aspects of alumni's learning experiences in the M.Ed. EP program.

This research is supported by Field Programs and will inform their programs and practices as well as contribute to my doctoral dissertation.

If you wish to take part in this study, or wish to have further details before making up your mind, please email me at my email [...]@sfu.ca or M.Ed. EP Coordinator Dr. Cher Hill at [...]@sfu.ca. If you choose to participate, I will arrange a mutually convenient time and place for an interview that will last approximately 1 hour.

As a token of appreciation, participants will be offered a \$25 gift card for taking part in this study.

Thank you for your consideration.

Lynda Beveridge, MA (RCC)  
Doctor of Philosophy Student  
Simon Fraser University  
EMAIL: [...]@sfu.ca  
Tel: [...]

SFU Collaborator: Dr. Cher Hill: [...]@sfu.ca

SFU Senior Supervisor: Dr. David Kaufman: [...]@sfu.ca

## Appendix C.

### Email follow up with consent script

Following the initial invitation to participate sent via email from M.Ed. EP program coordinator to alumni of the program, interested alumni contacted me directly. I then sent them the following email and began the process of arranging an interview time.

---

Dear [name]

Thank you for expressing interest in the research study.

I am writing to provide you a little more information and should you wish to continue, we can liaise about a mutually convenient time and place to meet.

#### **Timing of the research and expectations**

I am willing and able to meet you at a time and place that is convenient to you. This could be at your school, home, or a location such as a public library. Ideally the location will have an element of privacy and not be subject to residual noise as I will be using an audio recorder for the interview (so Starbucks won't work - but I'm happy to bring coffee or tea with me!).

I am hoping to conduct the interviews before the end of November or early in December.

The interview will last about 1 hour. After the interview, I will type up the transcript and share that with you to provide you the opportunity to clarify, correct or otherwise edit the transcript.

We will offer you a \$25 gift card of your choice (Starbucks, Chapters, Tim Hortons) and I will give that to you when we meet.

#### **Focus of the study**

We are interested in the impact of your graduate studies at Simon Fraser University on you and your practice.

We will invite you to describe specific experiences in your graduate study that you feel were impactful or otherwise meaningful for you.

If you feel you've experienced personal or professional changes as a result of your study, you also should feel free to describe them.

We are interested in your experience and any specific examples you can describe in your work and personal life that might illustrate the changes or impactful experiences you report.

In addition, we will be asking you for a pseudonym we can use for your responses and to tell us a little about your personal background.

I attach a copy of the research informed consent document for you to review as it provides more details on the study and how the information you supply will be used. In brief, I will compile themes from the interviews and share that with the M.Ed. Field Programs to assist in program review, design and ongoing improvement. I will also use the information as part of my PhD research. At all times your pseudonym will be used to protect your identity.

If you are still interested in taking part, please email me at [...]@sfu.ca and we can arrange a date and time for the interview.

Thank you and I look forward to meeting you.

Yours sincerely

Lynda Beveridge  
Email: [...]@sfu.ca  
Cell: [...]

## Appendix D.

### Email brief description of interview process

The following information was supplied to participants approximately one week before the scheduled interview and again when I met with participants prior to the interview commencing.

---

Dear [name]

In preparation for our interview on [date], I am forwarding this information as a reminder about the focus and purpose of the research.

We are interested in the impact of your graduate studies at Simon Fraser University on you and your practice.

We invite you to describe specific experiences in your graduate study that you feel were impactful or otherwise meaningful for you.

If you feel you've experienced personal or professional changes as a result of your study, you also should feel free to describe them.

We are interested in your experience and any specific examples you can describe in your work and personal life that might illustrate the changes or impactful experiences you report.

In addition, we will be asking you for a pseudonym we can use for your responses and to tell us a little about your personal background.

If you have any questions before we meet for the interview, please feel free to contact me via email or telephone.

I look forward to meeting you on [date] at [place].

Yours sincerely

Lynda Beveridge  
Email: [...]@sfu.ca  
Cell: [...]