

Runners in the Gym: Tales of Resistance and Conversion at an Adolescent Treatment Center

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This article presents the author's interpretation of her own experiences during two years of teaching physical education at an adolescent treatment center school that had a high percentage of Native and Metis students in attendance. Using a variety of fictional writing techniques in a mixed genre format, a series of self-relevant stories are strung together in an attempt to construct a meaningful and coherent understanding of the process of learning from and working with troubled youth. Initially, the narrative text was produced as a means to introduce the context of a larger research project investigating the experience of physical activity for youth at risk. However, as the reflective writing process evolved through experimentation, revision, and the reading of other interpretive educational research texts, a tale of transformation emerged. By situating the reader in the context of the author's lived experience, and blurring the boundaries between literature and science, the author hopes to challenge conventional notions of both scholarly research and traditional pedagogy.

Of Course, This Story Will be Different

It was a hot, sunny August afternoon, and I took my time walking out to the field for a lunch-hour cross-country practice. In three hours I would be able to say that I had survived my first week back teaching after a break of two and a half years. As I looked around at my new surroundings I could imagine the voices of my former colleagues, no doubt chuckling at my predicament: *relegated* to the minor leagues of the school division as payment for subverting the system. Twice before I had resigned my teaching position in search of fresh horizons. Twice I would negotiate a return, each time motivated by a desire to reconnect with young people. This time was different. Perhaps people would think I had my due; offered a one-third time contract to work at *that* school with *those kids* whom no one else wanted or could handle. Except that I had wanted to work at *this* school with *these* kids. And I was *without* mortgage, one-third time would fit me well.

In the years I spent away from teaching I had tried to experience a more balanced life. I changed how I ate, slept, worked, and played. I contemplated life and how I wanted to live mine. At some point I recognized that in my heart I was a physical educator and that teaching physical education was still a great way for me to work and play at the same time. Years before I had chosen my profession because I believed that it was holistic: body, mind, spirit all wrapped up in one interconnected, experiential blend of movement and emotion. Physical activities are sensual, I thought; kids feel what it's like to score a goal or miss a pass, expand their lungs in a run, or stretch their limits in a race. When participating in the gym, students actively engage with their environment,¹ and through these interactions,

however positive or negative, their subjectivities are affected. It is in this experiential sense of self that I believe the spirit is connected. While other physical educators were boasting that *we* (physical educators) were unique because we had the only subject to deal with the physical, I would side with those who said that the power of physical education came from the interdependence of the whole; that is, *we* teach persons, not skills.

As physical educators, I was beginning to think that *we* had marginalized ourselves by enacting a pedagogy predicated on the Cartesian mind-body split, which imposed a curriculum of motor development and physical fitness, with little emphasis on anything else. I agreed with Gallahue (1996), who suggested that "only when educators in general, and school boards in particular, recognize and respect the fact that children are multifaceted individuals with a wide range of backgrounds, and that becoming physically educated involves complex interaction of the cognitive, affective, and psychomotor domains will physical education take its place in North American schools as a legitimate and respected force in the total school curriculum" (p. 5). Now that I had found the courage to adopt personal lifestyle changes that would allow greater balance of my own body, mind, and spirit, I wondered how this philosophy would translate into my work with *those* kids, the ones with emotional and behavioral *dis-orders*.² My one-third time at their school meant that students would receive physical education in four out of every 36 classes. Because the school did not offer an extracurricular program (in my interview for the job, I had been informed that three hours with *those* kids in the gym would be enough for *me*), providing students with an opportunity to grow in body, mind, and spirit would involve a certain creativity.

In the months leading to that first week of school, I prepared over and over for what I perceived would be the unique challenges of the students at *that* school. I ran for miles, lost in images of which programs to adopt, what problems to expect. I visited the library to read up on the latest interventions for youth at risk. All the anticipation often left a ball of anxiety in my stomach, a nervous sensation that would dissipate only with action. I was scared, but I was also excited. The feeling in my stomach was like that feeling before a big game; a discomfort, but somehow good for you: my own concentrated pit of readiness. On that hot Friday afternoon before the long weekend, I organized a practice and waited for the games to begin.

The first student to arrive was Calvin (all names and identifying characteristics have been changed). I had kicked Calvin out of class the day before, so I was pleasantly surprised to see him opting to join my practice. Soon a group formed. I could feel my pulse rising with the arrival of each new student. Jenny, Jane, and Melissa were also there. Were they meeting me, or waiting for someone else? These girls did not look like runners, which was just another curiosity in this first week of school. The five others had arrived as a boisterous blur. There were just too many new faces and names. I asked each to sign my clipboard, and like a billiard player set to rack nine pool balls, I collected them all into a small circle and explained what the cross-country team was all about. We warmed up our muscles, and I quietly suggested that we do one easy lap around the field, each at his or her own pace.

The boys were the first to stand up, and one by one they kicked out into a jog, forming a staggered column stretching slowly down one side of the grassy field. I chose to stay back with the girls. I thought it was wonderful that they were out for a run, and I told them so. I was elated. Our physical education classes that first week left much to be desired, and I was sure that I had not made a very good impression on anyone. Of the three separate groups I taught each had its own problems. Students had ignored me, refused my instructions, wandered off aimlessly during class, made fun of me, and were openly hostile to me and some of their classmates. Nonetheless, I tried to work with whatever each class presented. I had chosen what I had hoped would be easy, nonthreatening activities; for example, juggling scarves (in the wind?) and orienteering (an easy, scavenger-hunt version). When Joey had signed his orienteering form with the words *fuck this shit*, I simply gave him a new sheet of paper and asked him to sign his name again. Unfortunately, there were more than a few Joeyes, and I sent a few of those students back to their locked residence from each class. It had been a rough start, but not unusual, I was told.

As the girls and I set off for our first lap around the large, open grounds bordered by a forest of evergreens and domestic gardens, I felt hopeful for the first time. If these girls felt comfortable enough to want to join my running practice, then my first week must have made some kind of an impression. By the time we turned the last corner of the field, the others were waiting, and I ran ahead to organize the boys before I lost them to their own boredom or bullying. Once again gathered as a group, we decided to do another lap. Again bodies spread out in single file, tracing a crooked line around an unsure oval. As I watched the boys break into a jog, I thought it might be a good idea to run ahead and “bond” with Calvin, who had told me to fuck off the day before. Not wanting to waste this opportunity, I turned to the girls and mentioned that I had better run ahead with the boys for a while. They smiled and waved me on. I caught up to Calvin and cautiously entered a conversation with him—about running. I asked him if he liked running (“‘cause you look like a runner”), what activities he had done in the past, and talked a bit about the running club I was hoping to organize. In two weeks those who wished could enter a division cross-country race. I said I would take anyone who came to the lunch-hour practices, and that the races were fun and might give them a break from the treatment center. I was trying to connect. Although I had hoped for monosyllabic responses at the least, Calvin was friendly enough and less hostile than expected. Perhaps I had won another mini-battle. Maybe our class would be better this afternoon. As we reached the three-quarter mark of the second lap, I sighed and thought, This just might work. At that point, I looked back over my shoulder to throw the girls an encouraging glance.

Immediately, my heart sank, a sour rush of adrenaline fouling the empty pit of my stomach. The girls were nowhere to be seen. I quickly looked ahead and started to count: one, two, three, four, five, Calvin makes six... That concentrated pit of readiness disintegrated as I realized the girls had tricked me. I stopped in my tracks. Calvin stopped too, and realizing what had happened, barked his glee at my predicament with a “you-loser” vernacular. I could have done nothing better to endear myself to him. If you’re going to bond, why not let him see your weakest

side, the one that returns to the principal to say, "I lost three students during practice"?

Surprisingly, and to my relief, if I had made a mistake no one seemed to panic. When I informed the school what had happened it was generally agreed that I had been set up for this to occur. It was a Friday, before the Labor Day long weekend, the weather was good, and the successful turnout meant I had too many students to supervise on my own. The girls were known to be runners, but not the kind I had known. They lived in the locked units at the treatment center, and should not have been let out for the afternoon practice without extra eyes to supervise them. By the start of first class that afternoon, I was told to forget about the incident. Apparently, kids going on the run was part of the culture of the place. Organizing a lunch-hour practice was not.

Despite the assurances that it was normal for kids to take off from the treatment center, I couldn't stop thinking about those three girls. Where would they stay? What would they eat? Who would they link up with? They were children, barely 12 years old. How would they survive in an urban center that preyed on young girls, where child prostitution was an accepted cornerstone of the downtown economy, and gang rape was a dangerous possibility? How could I not worry about them? With a quick glance over my shoulder, everything I knew to be true about the teaching of physical education was itself subverted. Abruptly, *those* kids at *that* school, in a defiant show of resistance, would force on me an intensive search for new ways of doing. If physical education was to meet their needs, something had to give, and I knew the giving would necessarily start with me. On that Friday afternoon, I began what Brown (1998) refers to as the practitioner's "conversion" experience in the pedagogy of the oppressed.³

Converting the Balance of Power in the "Contact Zone"

In retrospect I recall noticing a change around the third week in October, some seven weeks after that first Friday. This moment stands out because a colleague working at the treatment center sat across from me in the staff room and asked what I was doing in the gym that made kids want to be there. His question made me stop and think: did my students really like coming to class? I was certainly not sending as many students back as I used to. There were the few who persisted in bringing their own brand of hostility to the *contact zone*⁴ (Brown, 1998), which in this case occurred in my class with the interactions between myself, my teaching colleague (a teacher's assistant), and our students. But the conflicts, although not disappearing, had certainly become more localized to certain relationships with particular students.

The most obvious innovation had taken place in the first few weeks of school. Out of a respect for "how things were always done," I had continued the previous teacher's class management structure, whereby each class would begin upstairs in the library. We would gather all students together, make them wait while we checked off their attendance and gym attire on individual student record sheets, tell them what was going to happen in class that day, send students who had not brought their gym clothes back to the residence, and then walk those who had down the stairs to the change room, make them wait as a group until the last

student straggled out of the tiny, closet-like box of a washroom in their gym clothes, walk them into the gym, and sit them down for a warm-up.

It was a structure of control predicated on a relationship of distrust, and the students met our expectations with glowing remarks of "fuck you," "this sucks," and "why are you picking on me?" One by one students were sent back to the residence for poking and provoking, most dissenters evicted in the first 10 minutes of class before they had even made it to the gym. I couldn't stand the tension, and in my own first act of resistance we changed the attendance procedure, thus reducing the students' opportunities to fail. A year later we changed the procedure altogether; students were now allowed to go directly from their class to the gym, and each class would start after a 5-15-minute period of free time. A simple evolution of rules and the number of students *mis*-behaving at the start of class decreased significantly.

Conflicts did still occur, however, and when I was involved, I would make the first move to ask what I could do to make the situation better. In each case I made a deliberate effort to ask the "offending" student what I might have done to cause the offence and what I might do to help prevent it happening again. The results varied. When Darryl persisted in goofing off and subverting the group activity, I would calmly give in and ask him to leave. He would calmly pick up his skateboard, and in an act of resigned compliance head back to the lockup. After a month of this daily ritual, I stopped him in the parking lot one day and asked him what I could do to keep from kicking him out of class. He didn't like phys. ed., he said, and why couldn't he just skateboard every class? Although I explained that we could not possibly give in to every student's personal likes and dislikes,⁵ we did try to negotiate a compromise. It was a *postmodern détente* with the tension between us proportioned out, that is, we found a way to disagree with less acrimony. His goofiness took on less of an edge toward me, and I sent him back less often. In this case, it wasn't a clear cut settlement, but boundaries between us became more flexible, allowing us to share time and space together a little better.

With others the conversations produced more promising outcomes. One afternoon, I sent Lisa back for walking into the boys' change room while the boys were changing. Her response was to call me a "fuck'n' c..." over and over again as loud as she could as she deliberately wound her way back through the entire school en route to her residence. My response was to meet her in her room after school with the opening line: "You're mad at me, eh?"⁶ She agreed and then described for me which chair she had broken in the center, which staff members she had verbally accosted in the process. We talked about what had happened. She understood that the privacy of change rooms should be respected, but thought it was unfair that I sent her back without giving her a warning. "You give other people warnings." She had a point. I explained that some cases, like protecting the privacy of young people who may be dealing with issues of sexual abuse, necessitated that I skip the warning and go right to the consequence. It still wasn't fair, she said, but at least we were talking about it. Lisa apologized for swearing at me, and I apologized for not being more clear about the rules. The next day she was back in class as if nothing had happened. Our relationship was intact, and I explained more clearly to each class that any potential voyeurs should stay far away from the change rooms

doors. To my relief I was also learning how the young people at my school never seemed to hold a grudge, an unusual and highly utilitarian quality that I had rarely experienced in all my previous contact with adolescents.

Interpreting the Phenomenon of Lived Experience

I include these stories because they describe my own lived-through experience (van Manen, 1997) as a negotiator of change⁷ in the school. The process of transforming the phenomenon of lived experience to text is interpretive, and I construct an interpretation of my own experience here as a full acknowledgement of my own embodiment (Greene, 1994; Heshusius & Ballard, 1996) in the research I am undertaking. Van Manen (1997) says that interpretive study "is always the project of someone: a real person, who, in the context of particular individual, social, and historical life circumstances, sets out to make sense of a certain aspect of human existence" (p. 30). In my time as a teacher, I was the real person searching for meaning in the experiences I lived with my students in our contact zone. Despite years of teaching in a middle school in the same neighborhood, and a one-year assignment working overseas in a British comprehensive school, all the successes that had gone before were like books I had read, assimilated, and forgotten. Been there, done that, fell flat. Designing a physical education program with tools from the traditional curriculum was like using an old, cracked foundation to build a new school. The students at our school forced the imbalance; and to survive I had to craft new teaching implements.

Each student's demonstrative resistance to my pedagogy compelled me to reevaluate my ways of being in their world.⁸ Like Brown (1998) and Pratt (cited in Brown, 1998), I needed to question the underlying pedagogical assumptions that were guiding my actions and attracting the "unsolicited, oppositional discourse" of my students. I also needed to increase my awareness of the personal, social and historical influences that were shaping who my students were. van Manen (1997) says that "pedagogy requires a phenomenological sensitivity to lived experience (children's realities and lifeworlds)" (p. 20); more important than curricular content, I needed to know my students and how their lived experiences affected who they were in my class.

One of the first lessons I learned was that these young people were not the type to be controlled. Worse yet, I could not control them. That was a frightening proposition given the ubiquitously promoted assumption that if you can't control your class in the first week, you'll never control them (which reads "you are a failure as a teacher"). At the risk of losing favor in the eyes of conventional thought, I began to ask myself pointed questions. For instance, some of my students arrived with ineffable stories of sexual and physical abuse; was it not a good thing that they were presently resisting any efforts by another (particularly an authority figure) to control them?

The "Peda/logical Conversion" Experience

On reflection I believe that I was engaged in what might be called an unsophisticated brand of "peda/logical" hermeneutic phenomenology,⁹ where the logical pedagogical intervention was for me to "read" (Ellis, 1998) how students presented themselves in my class, and act on my interpretations of what van Manen (1997)

calls their "texts" of life (p. 4). The texts were my students' bodies, language, laughter, hostility, clothes, absence or presence in class, and their ways of orienting to the experiential demands of my program. To create some form of curriculum that was relevant and nurturing, we needed to find how to interpret the texts they presented.¹⁰ Over time I converted from teacher as power broker to teacher as learner, seeing it as my moral duty to deliver a program constructed of an ongoing dialogue centering on their needs:¹¹ an "alter/native" pedagogy for the oppressed (Brown, 1998) rooted in a survivalist instinct that said, however threatening, "Listen to the message behind the words."

What Brown (1998) referred to as the painful first step in the conversion process proved to be an invaluable remedy; I asked my students what they thought we should do, and trusted their input enough to carry through on what they said. In what is now a cliché, I hoped they would take some ownership for the program. They made up the teams for tournaments and special events; they chose the class activity. As my students opted time and again to play basketball or low organized tag games, I agonized over my noncompliance with the standardized government curriculum. Was I a bad teacher for allowing so much choice? (And then I paraphrase Brown's words: contextualize the curriculum to the environment and games, language and lore, of the group.)

When the school division increased my teaching assignment from one-third to half time, I invited a small group of students for coffee so I could ask them how best to use the extra time.¹² It would be my first time taking students off the grounds during the school day, and I was well aware of the risks involved. However, Keen (cited in Anglin, 1996) states that "the chief function of the teacher is to give students permission to allow exiled portions of their personalities to return home and be welcomed" (p. 97). As we took our seats at the restaurant table, I wondered how long it would be before my little group of "conduct *dis*-ordered, attention deficit, operationally defiant juvenile offenders" would do something *bad* in this public setting.

Suddenly, out of the corner of my eye, I caught sight of my older brother walking toward me. My protective barriers went up, encircling him. How would my students react? Would they make fun of him too, as was the culture of our shared environment? Not surprisingly (for, despite my worry, I believed this to be true), my students were exceptionally polite and welcoming to my own exiled personality, the youngest sister of an older brother. Like my students I had family: a big brother who teased me. A chance encounter and we all had brothers and sisters, one less differentiating factor between us. My brother left and we went back to the task at hand, the distance between us shortening as I learned another impromptu lesson about how to be as a teacher.

With the students' input, we used the increased physical education time to provide phys. ed. options, flexible opportunities in the school day for selected students to participate in physical activities. If the weather was fair, and other teachers were in agreement, we could schedule a lacrosse game during class time, and give students the option of coming outside or staying in their regularly scheduled class. Once engaged and happy in games and playtime of their choosing, introducing less familiar activity options became a process of gentle per-

suasion. Folk and social dance would become one of the most memorable activities among others from cross-country skiing to cycling to tai chi to volleyball, track and field, and hockey (to name a few). The only condition for taking part was that kids had to have been "good" in their previous classes (i.e., not kicked out of any class during the day).¹³ The popularity of the option classes suggested that for some being good was worth the effort.

Another "peda/logical" action was the initiation of a variety of schoolwide special events, such as the inaugural winter carnival, and Friday afternoon tobogganing. Although the hint of these extra activities was enthusiastically received by students, a few staff members were openly resistant to any proposed change to the regular schedule. An attempted field trip early in the year had been an unqualified disaster and had dramatically confirmed for some teachers their personal expectations that "these kids couldn't handle" anything out of the ordinary. But the idea persisted, and with doggedly meticulous planning (and more than a few nervous moments), the special events began to take place without any serious setbacks. In time teachers and staff who were skeptical became more willing to take risks to improve the programming.

One winter lunch hour we were playing spongee on the ice rink. When I stopped to check the time remaining till afternoon classes began, I realized that about three quarters of the student population were playing outside on the rink or inside in the gym. I asked a few of the participating staff members if they wanted to extend the lunch hour into period one of the afternoon. Of course, they smiled, but could we really do it? I ran back inside the school and asked a few of the support staff what they thought of the idea. The principal wasn't on site, and they were the wise decision-makers. When they said "okay", and that they'd look after the few students who weren't already taking part that lunch hour, we were set. The kids were thrilled, the games carried on, and some 25 minutes later we all returned to class feeling a little excited that the regular school day was ours and could be converted with one small gesture. Although it wasn't a revolution, we were in some respects co-conspirators, having managed to extend a lunch hour to keep playing that one day. Was it a small step toward meaningful emancipation in an education system dominated by the punch-in-time-clock world view? Perhaps.

My first year of teaching in *that* school would end with almost as unexpected an event as the sudden disappearance of those three students on that August afternoon 10 months before. In a June staff meeting to plan the following year's timetable, one of the more traditional teachers looked up at the group and quietly offered the comment that "*these* kids need physical education more than anything." She then suggested to the other staff that I should take a blank school timetable home and fill in the physical education schedule for the following year. The others agreed and built their classes around the timetable that I returned. *We* physical educators are not always accustomed to such concrete validations. But *this* school and *those* kids and my colleagues were quite exceptional. Through dialogue and discussion, feedback and follow-up, we, as a group, interpreted the challenges of our school life world in ways that nurtured creativity and empowered risk.

Creating a Peda/logical Active Living and Life Skills Training Program

In my two years at the school other teachers added their own flavor to the daily program: a greenhouse was built, weekly student visits to the local seniors' home were organized, camping trips were jointly offered by school and treatment center staff, and soon after, an option period (offering arts and crafts, photography, greenhouse, board games, ice hockey, to name a few) was scheduled into the daily curriculum. Concurrently, activities such as the woodshop, school field trips, weekly swimming, and lunch-hour basketball continued their popularity with students. We named the programs we were implementing *active living* and *life skills training*, cultivated to meet the unique needs of the students.

Happily, this school was an exciting place to work, and for a physical education specialist it was rewarding to feel empowered and appreciated by the staff and especially by the students who were participating actively in most of the programs. The year after I left the school, the curriculum was "peda/logically converted" once more. This time, academic courses were moved to the morning schedule, and other activities, particularly daily physical education, were offered in the afternoon. This rearrangement of the schedule allowed for an increase in the physical education schedule from once every second day to once daily. With daily physical education supplemented by daily physical activity options in conjunction with daily lunch hour basketball (and other activities), once weekly swimming, special events, and unscheduled activity breaks, the school's active living program offered *those kids at that school* plenty of opportunities to participate in *our* (i.e., teachers, paraprofessionals, principal, and students) peda/logical interpretation of a relevant curriculum.

The Conversion Experience: Building a Sequel

Hot Friday afternoons still came, and kids still went on the run. Some would run in winter time and others throughout the year. Some would return safely on their own, others in the back seat of a police car; yet others were never seen again. The outside world remains dangerous for young children and youth, especially those who end up at treatment centers such as the one in this story. Young people at risk wear their vulnerabilities like a beacon, flashing signals that are picked up loud and clear by street gangs, predators, and a society that provides access to alcohol, drugs, and criminal opportunities. Even the most progressive teaching practices cannot override the social and economic conditions and institutional structures that facilitate failure for those disadvantaged by the effects of poverty and discrimination (Dudley-Marling, 1996). One-size-fits-all solutions to educational problems do not exist (Guba, 1996). A school's physical education program is only a portion of the school day, and the school day only a small part of the whole of a child's life.

When Brown (1998) says to contextualize the curriculum to the language, lore, environment, and games of the nondominant subculture, I become more aware of what that implies for working with the young people in this story. I realize now how much more there was to the school's mission statement: enhance the students' "self esteem and personal safety." I had not been prepared for the realization that for some of those kids a decision to stay in school could be the difference between staying alive or falling by the curbside.

In a discussion of the reflexive nature of self-narrative, Ellis (1998) suggests that the narrative process is a search for coherence, historical unity, and meaningful integration. "The narrative accounts people generate need to be understood, not as records of what happened, but as current drafts of their own interpretive work of searching for cause-and-effect or making connections among self-relevant events" (p. 42). As I complete this moment of reflection regarding my own experiences in the stories I have told, many questions still beg consideration.

To begin, how should a teacher, particularly a *whitestream* Canadian¹⁴ be toward extremely vulnerable, high-risk young people? And what of the cultural divide that exists between me as a member of the dominant class and my students, many of whom were Aboriginal? Under these conditions it is critical to adhere to the words of Chrisjohn and Young (1997), who emphatically state that "ahistorical and acontextual" strategies of helping individuals must be expanded to include the "cultural, historical, and economic context in which First Nations continue to struggle" (p. 247). Curricular programs, especially those still governed by "assumptions of European superiority," must be resisted (Haig-Brown, Hodgson-Smith, Regnier, & Archibald, 1997). This, Pewewardy (1998) advises, requires hard work and flexible thinking to change instructional procedures. To resist is to ask fundamental questions. For example, what are the pedagogical imperatives that are assumed to be central to the success of education, and, to what extent are they really ethical (Brown, 1998; Chrisjohn & Young, 1997)?

I have walked with these questions since that first day when the girls went on the run. I suggest that the school's physical activity program evolved out of an unsophisticated hermeneutic phenomenological process, a *peda*/logical conversion enacted as a logical response to the students' "unsolicited oppositional discourse" (Brown, 1998). Although these changes in direction brought more kids running to the gym, continued acts of student resistance provide starting points for further inquiry. The knowledge that I have gained from my own past conversion experiences leads me to believe that further attempts to understand the lives of young people requires continued collaboration and the willingness to enter into their cultural life worlds. I realize more acutely the importance of listening; that is, reflectively attending to feedback from my students, however negative; from my colleagues, however tense; and from my own interpretations, however incomplete.

A Final Thought on Connecting Narrative Text to Research

If social inquiry is an emotional and moral undertaking (Schwandt, 1996), so too is the act of teaching. To listen and trust and look for the best in one's students is an act of love, a respectful acknowledgement that in their defiance and resistance to your pedagogy, they probably know more about themselves and what their needs are than you do. Again, it is a question of how to be. Similarly, interpretive researchers should ask, "How should I be toward these people I am studying?" in order to answer "How shall I know these people that I am studying?" (Schwandt, 1996, p. 84).

Although the practice of narrating the ordinary and mundane events of daily life is a contested form of research (Ceglowski, 1997; Sparkes, 1995), I cannot deny the transformative effect, the somatic knowing (Heshusius & Ballard, 1996) I feel in my gut that says, to me, "When interacting with youth at risk, no matter how

personally vulnerable the act, ask them how you can help." Thus there is no ending to this story, only a wish for a "more hopeful beginning for new stories" (Ellis, 1998, p. 10).

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Notes

¹Miller (1990) refers to the active engagement of learning through experience as "holistic education" and emphasizes that "education is not the mere acquisition of information, but a joyful, exhilarating and enriching exploration of the world and one's intricate relationships to it" (p. 157). Speaking from a different perspective, Ermine (1998) says that "experience is knowledge," and points to Aboriginal traditions that are holistic in that they explore the inner space, "that universe of being within each person that is synonymous with the soul, the spirit, the self, or the being" (p. 103). Incorporating aspects of these two interpretations, I have come to view physical activity "environments" as interactive, both outwardly (with the external world), and inwardly, with the self (i.e., constituting the spirit).

²Many of the students in this story were identified as having severe emotional and behavioral disorders (Coleman, 1996), a categorization that enabled them to attend an adolescent treatment center school. In order to recognize the problematic nature of using socially constructed labels such as these that are predicated on assumptions of normalcy (Shogan, 1998), I have chosen to represent the word *dis-order* with italics and hyphenation. I continue this practice throughout the text to trouble the use and interpretation of other words and categories.

³Brown (1998) reflects on his own conversion experience, which he described as a self-reflexive process of seeing oneself through the eyes of the oppressed other, that is, the Indigenous student. "Seeing myself, not through my own self-congratulatory eyes, but through the more critical gaze of the Athabaskan, comprised the first painful step toward an "alter/native" pedagogy—one oriented less toward the urban centers of the Euro-American culture and more toward the borderlands of the local indigenous subculture" (p. 136). Although many of the students at our school were of Aboriginal descent, all the young people belonged to a subculture of the oppressed. My own success in implementing a "relevant and nurturing" pedagogy (Brown's terms) would depend on my own efforts to "contextualize the curriculum of the dominant culture within the history, language, lore, environment, and games of the subculture" (p. 136). In my case, I had much to learn about the *subculture of those kids*. As a starting point, I endeavored to view myself and my physical education program through the eyes of my students.

⁴The contact zone has been described by Pratt (Brown, 1998) as the space where cultures "meet, clash, and grapple" with each other in "highly asymmetrical relations of power," often to the detriment of the less dominant culture. A traditional classroom setting, with teacher as authority over the student, is a variation on this theme.

⁵Choice was limited by space and safety considerations. Whether in the small gym (too many equipment options could lead to potential injury), or on a large field (too many options would be difficult to supervise), the structure of the environment and the nature of the students constrained our efforts to meet individual needs.

⁶Although much was tolerated in terms of student language and behavior at the school, indoctrinating a female staff member into the "F... C..." Club was not. I knew that Lisa would have to arrange through the principal to meet with me and apologize before she would be allowed back in the school. After an afternoon of classes, I had forgotten about

the incident. When a colleague approached me later that day with a very sympathetic "how are you?" I looked at her a little bewildered. It had been a great day in the gym. Kids were involved, every class went well. "But Lisa," she replied, throwing me a look of support. "Ahhh, ...Lisa. I better go talk to her." Lisa's angry words had bounced off my back so fast that I had forgotten the incident had occurred. I realized then and there that I had *arrived* at the school.

⁷By *negotiator of change* I refer to my role in enacting change in a variety of contexts, for example, changing the relationship between myself and my students; changing aspects of the physical education class in the school day; changing curriculum; changing attitudes; and so forth.

⁸van Manen (1997), a pedagogical phenomenologist, defines pedagogy as the "activity of teaching, parenting, educating, or generally living with children, that requires constant practical acting in concrete situations and relations" (p. 2). I think that such a definition appropriately essentializes the experiential, performance-oriented nature of teaching as a human interaction without narrowing the focus to a more pedantic, teacher-centered orientation or dogma.

⁹Social science inquirers refer to this commonsense practice of analyzing one's own actions and the actions of others to arrive at some form of interpretation as *verstehen* (Greene, 1994). People move into this commonsense world from various biographical locations from which experiences are shaped and reshaped with the help of predecessors and contemporaries (Schutz, Greene, 1994). Social reality originates from this frequently occurring phenomenon carried out by human beings. Although some dismiss the knowledge claims made from such endeavors, the interpretations themselves are worthy of interpretation. We can learn from experience, and as teachers, it is logical to do so. It is knowledge for a feedback loop.

¹⁰I knew this, and had even studied ways for a physical education teacher to recognize the meaning of negative feedback in the gym (Halas, 1991). But this was really hard, and I was prepared to give up teaching if I couldn't learn a better way of working with these kids.

¹¹I was not the only teacher struggling through *pedagogical conversion* processes. I would often sit around after school with my colleagues and ruminate on the tensions that were played out in our respective classrooms that day. In a sense this debriefing was a feedback loop, a shared process of describing and interpreting experience, not unlike the sharing of textual data and construction of emergent themes in hermeneutics (Ellis, 1998). The collaboration allowed us to prepare better for the next day's challenges. A key figure in this collaborative conversion process was the school principal, who was not in any sense hierarchical and allowed individuals to enact change, including structural change (e.g., timetables), based on our shared interpretations of what was needed in the school.

¹²Although I had started out as a one-third time physical education teacher, within months my position was expanded to half time, which was a rarity in an era of education cutbacks and fiscal restraint. The principal had raised the argument that the young people at our school "needed phys. ed.," and the school division seemingly agreed.

¹³I should clarify that my conversion experience still left room for the use of traditional teaching truths, for example, Skinnerian reward and punishment behavior management.

¹⁴I borrow this term from Denis (1997), who coined *whitestream* to indicate that Canadian society, although principally structured on the European, white experience, is more than a "white" society in sociodemographic, cultural, and economic terms.

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