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A narrative inquiry

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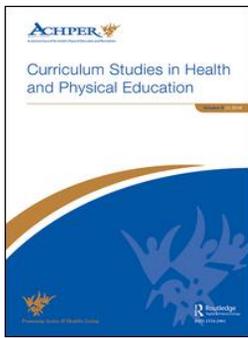
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# Being an early-career teacher–researcher in physical education: a narrative inquiry

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## ABSTRACT

This paper describes my practitioner inquiry as a newly qualified teacher, initially used as a form of teacher learning, but ultimately became the reason I remained in the physical education (PE) teaching profession. In Scotland, early-career PE teachers are encouraged to embody the role of teacher–researcher and pursue Career-Long Professional Learning (CLPL) opportunities that nourish creative and enquiring dispositions. However, it is also understood that failure to integrate into political school structures, successfully managing workload and relationships, negotiating curricular content and aims and becoming a competent classroom manager can lead to dissatisfaction and attrition. Supported by critical friends, I use narrative inquiry to explore the contexts and people that shaped my learning during my initial years in the profession and factors contributing to my professional teaching identity. Through this process, I began to understand my professional knowledge landscape as an arena of contested stories that bump, intertwine and converge. This understanding was important for me to feel comfortable as a teacher–researcher and in my decision to remain in the profession. These findings reflect the capacity for growth inherent in a narrative understanding of experience and potential for sustaining PE teacher–researcher identities via research-based practitioner inquiry. Those within Physical Education Teacher Education (PETE) should consider the application of narrative identity work to encourage early-career PE teachers to reflect on the personal, social, and contextual aspects of identity construction in their lives, with the hope they can effectively navigate the shifting landscape of twenty-first century PE.

## KEYWORDS

identity; teacher–researcher; teacher learning; narrative inquiry; narrative identity

## Introduction

In Scotland, all early-career PE teachers are required by the General Teaching Council for Scotland (GTCS)<sup>1</sup> to reflect on their experiences while developing the knowledge and skills to become active agents in curricular change (Craig, Thorburn, Mulholland,

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Horrell, & Jess, 2016). To prepare them for this, part of the remit for PETE is to encourage pre-service PE teachers to conduct their own practitioner inquiry to equip them with the tools to critically reflect on how their experiences shape beliefs and practices (Wrench & Garrett, 2012). This was my experience, as I was encouraged throughout my PETE programme to engage with and in research with the aim of developing the skills and propensity for continuous learning (Armour, Quennerstedt, Chambers, & Makopoulou, 2017). The purpose of this paper is to describe my attempts at engaging in a practitioner inquiry project as part of a post-graduate master's course during the first two years of my career as a PE teacher in Scotland.

Typically, early-career teachers focus their inquiry on classroom matters, developing subject knowledge and other issues directly related to teaching and learning (Kennedy & McKay, 2011). Indeed, initially, the main aim of my inquiry was to understand how masculine body ideals were being (re)produced in physical education (PE). However, as I proceeded to read the literature in this area, attend conferences and engage in dialogue with colleagues to develop my knowledge, I began to experience tension and confusion about my role as a teacher, a teacher–researcher and, as a result, my future in the PE profession. The resulting dissatisfaction I experienced *being* a PE teacher, one keen to engage with and in research, encouraged me to change the focus of my inquiry. It moved me to consider my identity and role as an early-career teacher, one interested in pursuing research activities as a form of CLPL. I was driven to explore the cause of the tensions I felt so that I could derive a sense of meaning from my experiences, ultimately making an informed decision about my future within the profession. This paper describes my use of Clandinin and Connelly's (2000) narrative inquiry as part of my post-graduate master's practitioner inquiry, designed to understand my experiences as an early-career PE teacher–researcher navigating the professional and political landscape of PE whilst working and seeking stable employment.

### **Context: teacher learning in Scotland**

Teacher learning is an important, yet complex, area to understand and negotiate, not only for teachers but also for teacher educators, professional learning communities and schools. Working on complex shifting landscapes, PE teachers require critical skills to contextualise broader curricular and policy aims to guide innovative practices that meet the changing needs of learners (Craig et al., 2016). In Scotland, the development of such skills is encouraged and supported nationally by the GTCS. One of the Professional Standards for teachers in Scotland is the Standard for CLPL. Underpinning the Standard for CLPL 'are the core principles of practitioner enquiry. In practice, this involves teachers having an enquiring disposition at the core of their professional practice' (GTCS, 2012, p. 4). This standard suggests that much teacher learning occurs after graduating from university, and teachers should seek out a variety of personally relevant avenues of teacher learning according to their changing needs and contexts. In other words, if teachers and their practices are to meet the evolving needs of pupils, then teacher learning should mirror the complex and unique contexts that they live and work in.

Unfortunately, this model for professional learning is not always evident. Initial investigation into the state of teacher education (Donaldson, 2011) revealed a disparity across

provision and access to effective CLPL. Despite an increased awareness of the various forms of CLPL available, a follow-up report revealed that options remained restricted by contextual factors such as time and available resources, and if teachers' learning needs matched the priorities of schools and local authorities (Black, Bowen, Murray, & Zubairi, 2016). One source of dissatisfaction with CLPL opportunities among teachers arose from the predominance of 'one-off' courses relating to raising attainment and national qualifications, which limited possibilities to pursue individualised learning relative to their professional needs (Black et al., 2016). Indeed, Priestley, Biesta, and Robinson (2015) observe that the rhetoric encouraging teachers to pursue individualised teacher learning, while being accountable to uphold certain standardised benchmarks for learning, may establish doubt and contradiction around what and how teachers should develop. Early-career teachers, therefore, may require support to understand and negotiate these learning structures, make connections with their own professional experiences and address their personal development needs.

### **Narrative inquiry**

Narrative inquiry has gained prominence in educational research since the 1980s (Armour, 2006) and contributed to the literature on teacher learning in PE in areas relating to social justice, gender and inclusivity (Dowling, Garrett, Hunter, & Wrench, 2015) and more recently for its transformative possibilities for pedagogical change (Dowling & Garrett, 2017). This, in part, is due to a commitment to understanding the lived experiences of teachers and students in PE. It offers a way of giving teachers and student teachers a voice, helping to draw connections between teachers' practice, the contexts in which they work and their lives (Armour, 2006). Narrative inquiry is a method that uses storytelling as a primary mode of understanding and sharing experiences (Clandinin, 2006). Clandinin and Connelly (2000) draw on Dewey's (1986) theory of experience that suggests each experience has continuity (stretching backward and forwards) and interaction (between people and places). Dewey believed that life is a continuum of experiences, each experience positively and negatively impacting those yet to come, and that a fundamental condition for positive growth is learning from experiences (Dewey, 1916/1951). When people tell, re-tell and re-live their experiences, they contextualise biographical information and embodied knowledge (Clandinin & Connelly, 1999), revealing what, and importantly how they have learned in the past, which helps to direct future learning.

As teachers and teacher educators, Clandinin and Connelly (2000) were interested in this view of experience, and how knowledge, context and identity intersect as teachers move through their professional knowledge landscapes. Clandinin and Connelly (1999) use the term 'stories to live by' to 'understand how knowledge, context, and identity are linked and can be understood narratively' (p. 4) and to capture the temporal and fluid nature of teacher identity construction. Early-career PE teachers bring their 'stories to live by' with them as they enter the profession, composed of embodied, experiential knowledge acquired before, during and after PETE (Connelly & Clandinin, 1988). This knowledge is developed in interactions with people in professional contexts (as pupils in schools and as students during PETE and during practical placements) and in personal contexts like relationships with family and friends (Pike & Fletcher, 2014).

Shifts in ‘stories to live by’ can be caused by changes to this knowledge, influenced by policy and the values and beliefs espoused by pupils and colleagues in schools (Flores & Day, 2006; Rossi, Hunter, Christensen, & MacDonald, 2015). Narrative inquiry can be used as a tool to understand these shifting experiences, a form of teacher learning or narrative identity work (Smith & Sparkes, 2008). As Rosenwald and Ochberg (1992) suggest, examining ‘personal stories are not merely a way of telling someone (or oneself) about one’s life; they are the means by which identities are fashioned’ (p. 1). The fashioning of identity is an interminable and interactive process, and one that narrative researchers begin to understand by ‘walking into the midst of stories’ (Clandinin, 2006, p. 47) that teachers live out.

In the context of PETE, narrative identity work has predominantly involved encouraging pre-service PE teachers to narrate their experiences via biographical inspection, paying attention to the personal, social and contextual factors that have shaped their narrative identities across time and space (Hennig, Schaefer, & Gleddie, 2020; Wrench & Garrett, 2012). Wrench (2017), explored the narrative identities of pre-service PE teachers to make connections between the temporal spaces of sport, family and teacher identity. One pre-service PE teacher reflected on the construction of her narrative identity by linking ‘notions of being equitable, inclusive, and committed to making a difference for disadvantaged students in PE’ while establishing distance from teachers who appeared not to share the same beliefs and attitudes (p. 883). Research conducted by Hennig et al. (2020) demonstrates the utility of encouraging pre-service PE teachers to craft autobiographical narratives to unveil the complexities of their storied experiences. This, the authors claim, prepared their pre-service PE teachers to grapple with complex social justice issues despite their own social privilege.

Narrative inquiry has also been used to explore how in-service PE teachers’ ‘stories to live by’ shift in relation to dominant ways of teaching PE, and the role expectations they may encounter as new staff members. For example, positioned as teacher–educators, Casey and Schaefer (2016) retrospectively explore the former author’s ‘stories to live by’ as a PE teacher attempting to implement models-based practices in one school context. Adopting a narrative conceptualisation of teacher identity, Casey highlighted moments of ‘autobiographical revision’ (Carr, 1986, p. 76) as he began to imagine new ‘stories to live by’ as a future physical educator despite bumping and tension with existing beliefs about PE shared among colleagues and pupils. He was able to establish more coherency between himself, his pupils, and his colleagues on an unfamiliar professional knowledge landscape by coming to understand the challenges they too may have faced as they attempted to live out stories of change in PE.

Similarly, Schaefer (2013) reflected on how his own ‘stories to live by’ shifted upon entering the professional knowledge landscape as an early-career PE teacher. Imagined stories of developing relationships with staff and encouraging learners to pursue healthy lifestyles bumped against the realities of being a new staff member, allocated difficult classes outside of his subject expertise without time to prepare. Schaefer (2013) shifted his ‘stories to live by’ to cover stories of compliance to avoid social tension with senior colleagues, and in doing so, developed feelings of discomfort with the teacher he had become. Learning from this experience, Schaefer (2013) suggests that a narrative conceptualisation of identity as personal, social and contextual, may develop a higher resolution description of the lived experiences of teachers on the

verge of leaving the profession, and increase the likelihood that strategies for retention are successful.

The findings from these studies highlight how narrative inquiry and understanding ‘stories to live by’ contribute to the literature on CLPL. Encouraging early-career PE teachers to explore how their ‘stories to live by’ shift as they enter unfamiliar professional knowledge landscapes may create a lasting and holistic form of teacher learning. By engaging in narrative inquiry underpinned by Dewey’s (1986) notions of experience, early-career PE teachers may begin to understand how relationships, time, space and knowledge form their ‘stories to live by’ and how this can influence, not only *how* they teach but also the ways they understand and navigate collegial relationships, employment opportunities and policy change. This approach to teacher learning may also be a powerful antidote for the reproduction of homogenous teaching identities, dispositions and practices (Altan & Lane, 2018; Dowling, 2011). The present study seeks to contribute to the conversation on teacher learning by describing a practitioner inquiry that harnesses the ‘agentic possibility of learning to tell or re-story one’s experience by using new repertoires and by constructing counter narratives of resistance to challenge repressive stories of knowing, being, and learning’ (Dowling & Garrett, 2017, p. 332). This may resonate with those teachers dissatisfied with current opportunities for learning and development (Mäkelä, Hirvensalo, Laakso, & Whipp, 2014), and those in the early stages of their career whose ‘stories to live by’ they imagined for themselves are challenged in and by their current professional landscape.

### **Methods: narrative inquiry**

I used autobiographical narrative inquiry (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) for my master’s course to explore the difficult experiences I had during the initial years of being a PE teacher. In accordance with Clandinin, Pushor, and Orr (2007), I started my inquiry by clarifying my research puzzle and identifying what it was I sought to understand about my experiences. I initially attempted to engage in a practitioner inquiry to develop my understanding of how masculine body ideals are (re)produced in PE, but I soon came to believe that this form of professional learning was not highly valued in the contexts in which I worked. Moving from PETE to school as an early-career PE teacher, my experience was that, although engaging in practitioner inquiry is encouraged and supported nationally by the GTCS (2012), it was not commonly practised. The tension, confusion and isolation I felt as I initiated my inquiry encouraged me to question who I was as a teacher, which then led me to change the focus of my inquiry. I had to explore and understand the challenges I experienced being a PE teacher–researcher so that I could begin to work out how to navigate this landscape, and ultimately, remain in the profession.

My inquiry was guided by Clandinin and Connelly’s (2000) four phases of narrative inquiry. In addition, it aligns with Mulholland and Wallace’s (2003) criteria for legitimation, namely, strength, sharing and service. In the description of the four phases that follow, I hope to demonstrate a process that has structural corroboration, that is, a rigorous process of curating, constructing and telling lived stories over time. In doing so, I endeavour to provide thick descriptions of contexts, relationships, actions and emotions that enable the reader to make meaningful connections with, and even learn from, my

stories (Mulholland & Wallace, 2003). In the first phase, I wrote a series of stories about my experiences during the first two years of being a PE teacher–researcher. These stories were developed from diary entries documenting key incidents relating to me adopting this dual role. Included were experiences with colleagues and job interview scenarios which exposed tension about the merit and purpose of research in securing employment. In the second phase of my narrative inquiry, my two university tutors acted as critical friends by entering the ‘metaphorical 3-dimensional inquiry space’ with me to explore my experiences along the dimensions of temporality, sociality and place. In the metaphorical 3-dimensional inquiry space, our questions followed four directions: backwards, forwards, inwards and outwards to ‘addresses both personal and social issues by looking inward and outward, and addresses temporal issues by looking not only to the event but to its past and to its future’ (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 50). During two two-hour conversations, my tutors and I discussed the first five-storied experiences I had written. Conversations were audio-recorded, while annotated field notes helped to contextualise our lines of enquiry.

In the third phase of the research process, I chose to write three new stories reflecting the ‘autobiographical revisions’ (Carr, 1986, p. 76) made from analysis in the metaphorical 3-dimensional inquiry space. Crucially, ‘writing to learn’ (Clandinin, 2013) became a prominent feature in developing my understanding of my ‘stories to live by’ while beginning to forge possibilities to regain them. New stories explored my past, where I discovered much about how my ‘stories to live by’ were shaped by familial relationships and department colleagues, while helping to explain why I proceeded to conduct research despite threats to employment and my professional well-being.

The fourth phase involved fluid reading of the series of storied experiences. Fluid reading is the ‘dynamic reading and rereading of a set of field texts’ (Christensen (née Flanagan), 2013, p. 76) to discover consistencies and connections in and across the series of stories that were situated at different places and times with various people. Drawing from my previous analyses, reflections and my knowledge of the existing literature in this area, this final analytical process helped me to identify themes within my stories, common threads that focussed my learning and that form the framework for the discussion below. In the discussion that follows, the story segments presented reflect this learning and exemplify those aspects of my life and career that shifted my ‘stories to live by’. I have described these as: ‘entering the professional knowledge landscape’ and ‘regaining stories to live by’.

## **Discussion of findings**

### ***Entering the professional knowledge landscape***

The unfamiliar professional landscape I entered as my journey began as an early-career PE teacher was a significant influence over my shifting ‘stories to live by’. A key component in this shifting was my experiences seeking employment. In the segment below, I reflect on a job interview I had for a post in the school I was working in at the time. It illustrates how little I knew of senior colleagues’ role expectations, and the impact of my actions as I attempted to live out stories of a PE teacher–researcher:

We sit down on those high plastic seats that squeak upon sitting, similar to those sometimes found in science classrooms. In the cupboard, next to the department base, we start to discuss the details of the interview I just had, three days prior. I had known I didn't get the job, I found that out by phone call a couple of hours after the interview took place. What I didn't know was why I failed to get a job in the school I had been working at for a year already, for my probationary year. The answer to my question:

the panel thought ... we weren't totally convinced you were committed to being a classroom PE teacher. We know that you are considering a master's degree and we thought that this may be a risk for us as a school.

As the deputy head teacher continued to explain why the panel thought this, I bite my lip, trying desperately not to vent my frustrations. Foreseeing that my interest in further accredited learning may have acted as a symbol for a lack of commitment to teaching, I omitted the work I had completed with the university from my application form and from interview discussions. The rest of the conversation between myself and the deputy head teacher passed in numbness. I can remember little of what was discussed, my mind drawn to thoughts about what it means to be a committed PE teacher. Am I not a good teacher because I take an interest in reading articles and research? What does a committed teacher do that I have failed to?

This selection of writing was a significant moment of tension in my career. Rejection is a well-documented characteristic as early-career PE teachers enter new landscapes and have their ideas and beliefs challenged (Flores & Day, 2006). Inquiring inwards towards my personal feelings, aspirations and dispositions, it hurt to be rejected for a permanent job at a school I had taught at for a year already. I had worked hard to establish myself as a competent practitioner and meet the expectations placed upon me by my new colleagues. I did the extra-curricular clubs, reviewed all my lessons, voiced my opinions during meetings and developed positive relationships with staff and pupils. I also tried to establish myself as a reflective practitioner by engaging with research articles and trying to integrate the research-based teaching practices I had learned during PETE. I was disheartened to discover that my colleagues felt that these latter actions overshadowed the former teaching responsibilities I was upholding. To understand more about the professional knowledge landscape I entered, and why my research interests may have been viewed unfavourably, I inquired outwards by discussing with my critical friends the historical and cultural perceptions about the role of the PE teacher and the components of a committed 'classroom PE teacher'. We discussed the challenges of being a teacher-researcher and, while in Scotland at least it is expected that all teachers engage in critical reflection and inquiry, not all have the time or the desire to do so (Black et al., 2016). Outwards and backwards, we discussed the historical disparities between PE teaching and practitioner inquiry, and the perception by some PE teachers (and other subject teachers) that the primary function of the PE teacher is to teach (that is, the basics of planning, instruction and assessment) and that academia is perhaps not a space for them (Spittle, Petering, Kremer, & Spittle, 2012). From this perspective, I was operating in an unfamiliar space, between practice and research not typically inhabited by early-career PE teachers in school. Uncertainty about my commitment to the profession was perhaps influenced by the unfamiliarity of my actions and from the assumption that teachers who conduct research do so as a pathway into employment in higher education (Donaldson, 2011). This is despite the fact that (PE) teachers do engage

in research, not just to further their career, but to become more knowledgeable and effective teachers (Casey, Dyson, & Campbell, 2009).

This analysis of my interview experience encouraged me to shift my inquiry back to my time within the PE department, a space where I learned much about how to be a PE teacher. The following selection of writing is set in this space, not long before my interview. It highlights an incident that contributed to my belief that the teachers I worked with considered research as a learning activity for those out with the PE teaching profession:

After writing a short post-it note on my computer screen reminding to 'create reference list for presentation next week', I leave for the store cupboard to fit in twenty more minutes of reading before the bell. As I return to my computer, stuck to the screen next to my original post-it is a new one. A to-do list written by one of my colleagues: 'Remember to buy new elbow pads for my lecturing jacket' was first on the list; second, 'remember to use big fancy words'; and third, 'remember to introduce yourself as 'the professor''. Upon reading these notes, much to the delight of my colleagues, I gave the customary smirk in recognition and crumpled it up to put in the bin. The room erupted with laughter at my expense, with one colleague, James, hushing the group 'ssshh, you don't want to piss off the professor'

The relationships that early-career PE teachers establish are important indicators for future success when they enter unfamiliar professional knowledge landscapes (Schaefer, Hennig, & Clandinin, 2020). This narrative highlights the positive relationships I had established in the department. In discussion with my critical friends, as a new colleague, I was invited to 'play the game' (Sirna, Tinning, & Rossi, 2010) and be part of pranks that often act to strengthen social bonds. Looking inwards, I felt welcomed and respected in the department, which enabled me to live out stories of a teacher-researcher by embodying the personal practical knowledge I had brought with me from PETE (Connelly & Clandinin, 1988). Had I not felt welcome, I would have been more reluctant to express my interests in the 'arena of contested stories' (Christensen (née Flanagan), 2013, p. 81). However, the commonalities between this story and that of the interview scenario above suggested to me that research was again a concept or practice estranged from the types of CLPL that PE teachers pursue. The hyperbolic term 'big fancy words' used by my colleague to me reflected how PETE staff were viewed by department colleagues, suggesting research and theoretical work informing practice was unnecessarily complicated and deliberately inaccessible (Svendsen, 2020). Inwardly, while proposed as innocent humour, it disheartened me to believe that my colleagues' views, which I valued, were somewhat aligned with senior colleagues in the school. This suggested to me that the colleagues living on the professional knowledge landscape I entered had shared beliefs about research and the limited value it was ascribed. In the section below, I recall the simile used to describe just how jeopardising expressing my research interests could be. It was a day before another interview at a neighbouring school:

I am surrounded by people who have become more than just work colleagues, and we are discussing whether I should mention my part time masters degree during an upcoming interview. I lean on the door handle, fidgeting. One senior colleague concludes the conversation with a caveat: 'mentioning your masters during the interview would be like if Charlotte [female colleague] announced at the end of the interview ... oh by the way, I'm pregnant'. Coming from an experienced teacher well versed in interview proceedings, I

think heavily on it as I make my way to the car park. Should I mention my master's tomorrow?

Looking backwards across the year in this school, being transparent about my interests in research may have hindered my opportunity for employment, and the warning evident in the narrative above was to ensure I did not repeat the same mistake at another school. While the warning was made with my interests at heart, it served to reinforce my belief that others in the profession did not value research as a form of CLPL in the way that I did, and that it was viewed as a distraction from my teaching responsibilities. These narratives influenced my 'stories to live by' as I moved from being confident that employers would look favourably upon my research towards feelings of self-doubt. This shift developed 'feelings of ineffectiveness, loneliness, and alienation from the profession' (Schlichte, Yssel, & Merbler, 2005, p. 38). Loneliness was not physical but emotional and psychological, as the weight of these coherent experiences pressed upon me the reality that if I was to live out a story of being a teacher–researcher, it would have to be a silent one or perhaps not at all. As seen elsewhere (Schaefer, 2013), 18 months into my teaching career, I began to consider shutting this part of me out of school life, and adopt a cover story of compliance despite internal tension:

Maybe I should play the game, sell myself as the day-to-day teacher, one who can jump as high as required. Perhaps I should just 'go with flow' and climb down from the wrong tree I have unwittingly barked up. My ideas, the way I want to teach, the palpable buzz coming from the pupils as they engage with each other, quizzing each other, helping each other, is but a distant memory now. How do I change so much? Where do I start? There is only so long one can swim against the current before one is dragged into the abyss.

This shift in my 'stories to live by' changed the way I felt about being a PE teacher. Although my colleagues knew that I continued to engage in narrative research, it perhaps became less obvious from my interactions with them in the school. I began to close channels of communication by avoiding dialogue about research informing practice with colleagues, as it was not what a new teacher should be concerned about. Instead, I turned to others, outside the school context to pursue my interest in research and explore my experiences through this narrative lens. Here, I was able to reflect on my experiences in meaningful ways, free from the power relations between colleagues and me, and the unidimensional learning structures that I had experienced within my professional knowledge landscape.

### ***Regaining 'stories to live by'***

I was able to regain my 'stories to live by' by establishing a professional learning community with critical friends outside of my local context. Our learning conversations in four directions encouraged both introspective and retrospective analysis of key moments in my life and helped me to understand their impact on my teaching dispositions and my ability to form trusting collegial relationships (Altan & Lane, 2018). Indeed, looking back to my previous experiences became a significant moment in my narrative journey, helping me to make sense of the present, discard my cover story and to rediscover my 'stories to live by'. For example, within my metaphorical 3-dimensional inquiry space, I was drawn to the time when I was considering a career as a PE teacher:

I sit in the living room corner, staring into the computer screen, it reads: 'offer for Physical Education'. I don't celebrate, nor do I react in any way. I just sit there and sigh deeply, relieved. Grateful that I have a chance to get out of this place.

I never shared my home life with my friends, and to this day most of my friends know little of my adolescence. I was ashamed to tell them. Both my parents were alcoholics and my mother suffered from what I now think was depression. I felt angry that I had to look after my little brother and couldn't rely on her when she disappeared to her room for days at a time.

When I embarked on this inquiry as a teacher, I did not imagine I would travel back to this moment in my personal life, but it became clear that to make sense of myself in the present and in the future, I had to look towards my past. Critical friends and I puzzled at this moment, why I had chosen to bring this story forward from the past? Perhaps I underplayed the impact of my experiences of depression, and of providing care for my younger brother. I thought that everyone had troubles, far worse than mine. I had nothing to complain about, I was fortunate enough to attend university and experience the opportunities that a middle-class upbringing afforded me. Consequently, I learned to become independent and reluctant to ask for help, and distrusting of those who could support me. Tracing the impact of this learned behaviour, two previously separate experiences were linked in my re-telling as we started to see how this aspect of my personality affected me as an early-career PE teacher–researcher. My experiences had depth (Dewey, 1938), blurring the distinctions personal and professional contexts even years apart. The same reluctance to ask for help and rely on other people was evident in my department. Instead of seeking support from my colleagues, I remained silent, feeling frustrated and isolated. Inwardly, I assumed I could not be helped with my inquiry, considering what I had learned of my colleagues' views about research. I did not think to ask about their experiences as an early-career PE teacher, how their 'stories to live by' may have shifted, or if they too were silencing or being silenced in the 'arena of contested stories' (Christensen (née Flanagan), 2013, p. 81). Had I done so, I may have learned about how their own teacher–researcher 'stories to live by' may have been silenced by the same role expectations espoused by senior staff and the established learning culture in our school. Perhaps even just the act of reaching out may have increased the possibility for change (Lovell, 2003) by establishing a safer space where together we could negotiate the taken for granted assumptions about teacher learning while establishing future possibilities of being more than 'day-to-day classroom PE teachers'. Unfortunately, as I arrived at this point of realisation, I no longer worked at this school. I had no opportunity to reach out, to listen, to share. However, in coming to this point, my stories once again were beginning to shift. I began to understand that we were all muddling 'in the midst', a complex storied world together where each of us is living our own unique 'stories to live by' and trying our best to secure ourselves on the shifting professional knowledge landscape.

Acknowledging and understanding the uniqueness of each person's 'stories to live by', my critical friends and I looked outwards towards the broader context, puzzling on the variety of narrative beginnings that encourage people to become PE teachers and the dispositions they develop in past experiences. For me, that was largely providing care for my younger brother, but also somewhat paradoxically, wanting to escape my environment:

Several moments after the news of my offer, I shouted for my little brother to come through and I shared the news. I remember him asking me if I wanted to be a PE teacher, to which I replied I was unsure. To become a teacher or not, at the time I didn't care.

Now, I don't regret taking the offer, as I have grown to love the profession.

Often the motivation for becoming a PE teacher stems from a love of sport, and a commitment to encourage the pursuit of healthy lifestyles (Ferry, 2018). This was not the case for me. Reflecting upon my narrative beginnings, I was reminded that my 'stories to live by' were not built on the foundations of a 'love of sport', but rather derived from personal experiences that encouraged me to be caring, inquisitive and empathetic; dispositions that enable me to connect with pupils who may be living out similar stories to ones I was as a pupil. In coming to this point, I began to rediscover the possibilities of having a critical disposition, and in doing so, I was beginning to allow my identity as a teacher-researcher to re-emerge. This is evidenced in the excerpt below from one of the final stories in my inquiry:

It wasn't that doing the 'day-to-day' things isn't important. They are. It was that my interpretation of teaching, my role, I believed to be so much more: more than teaching sport; living with pupils whose stories may resemble mine in some way, researching so that I can find ways to amplify silenced stories, while trusting others to help me. That's what I've grown to love. Finding meaning in my own experiences of frustration, doubt, anger, and fear. Accepting how my experiences have shaped me and learning to live at the boundaries, maintaining my stories to live by: not as a teacher of PE, but a teacher-researcher *in* PE.

Growing to love the profession stemmed from a renewed understanding of what I could bring to it, and to my pupils. By altering my understanding of what it means to be a teacher, I could begin once again to embrace my 'stories to live by' as a teacher-researcher *in* PE. I no longer felt that my abilities as a PE teacher were limited (Mäkelä et al., 2014) and that I could trust myself to seek support from others. Two years of professional conversations, reading and writing re-socialised me into a profession I could commit to. I was moved to alter my perception of PE as a strictly local, atomised subject, to demarcate my position in a broad profession filled with like-minded teachers and academics whose stories have similarly shifted, been silenced and amplified, in infinitely unique ways.

## Conclusions

As I entered the profession as a fully qualified PE teacher, I was motivated to engage with and in research to improve my practice. However, upon entering the professional knowledge landscape, I learned that my 'stories to live by' and aspirations of being an early-career PE teacher-researcher *in* PE was a story that was silenced by the role expectations of senior administrative staff and perceptions about research held by department colleagues. Determined to understand this position, and in an attempt to remain in the profession, my narrative inquiry helped me to understand my professional knowledge landscape as an arena of contested stories that bump, intertwine and converge, as colleagues live out their unique stories. By looking back to my narrative beginnings, to the stories beneath, and the reasons for entering the profession, I was able to find comfort and security in my feelings of difference, while imaging my future as the

teacher–researcher *in* PE who could respond to the learners’ own differences, and the complexities of their learning. This helped me to rediscover my ‘stories to live by’ and was a major turning point in my decision to remain in the profession.

While my stories are highly personal, given my attention to the criteria of sharing and service (see: Mulholland & Wallace, 2003), I hope that my research and experiences are also of value to other early career teachers, and to those responsible for pre and in-service teacher learning. Furthermore, my findings support previous observations that engagement in CLPL is contextual and supported by the establishment of equitable and open learning cultures (Black et al., 2016). In asking what ‘effective’ CLPL might look like for contemporary PE teachers, Armour et al. (2017) discuss the possibilities for a Deweyan framework for teacher learning, where learning is recognised as a deeply complex and personal phenomenon, yet also socially and contextually bound, with the capacity to develop curious and inquisitive teaching dispositions. However, my inquiry suggests that, where open, situated and social learning cultures do not exist, early career teachers may begin to develop strategies of compliance to avoid social tension, and in doing so, shift the ‘stories to live by’ they imagined for themselves, towards existing homogenous stories. This study demonstrates that narrative inquiry may be a useful way to help early career teachers navigate the personal, practical and political challenges they face when entering the profession and attempting to engage in CLPL. Teacher educators and schools looking to support early-career teachers with their learning should consider the value of narrative inquiry to engage in personally and socially meaningful CLPL while also attending to the emotionally driven processes of identity construction that occur during the initial years. For example, teachers can create a local culture that acknowledges a variety of identity positions via constructive story sharing. In this context, each member takes stock of their current position on the professional knowledge landscape, appreciating their shared and different historical, cultural and political stories from the past, present and future. In doing so, like I hope to demonstrate in the following narrative written towards the end of my masters, they may also begin to shift their own stories to live by in meaningful ways.

Although it may feel it sometimes, the world is not against you, and perhaps you were guilty of playing the martyr before. Pain and suffering are not markers of authenticity. Communicating concerns and worries rather than letting them turn to resentment and bitterness is an important step towards becoming a better teacher, and person. You have engaged in a research project that has shown you just how much other people can help you, if you let them. After all, we are all just walking in the midst.

## Note

1. The GTCS is a self-regulating national teaching body for Scotland that promotes the professional learning of teachers, setting the Professional Standards that guide their professional learning.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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