ATHABASCA UNIVERSITY

IMPROVISING A VIRTUAL SCHOOL:
DANCING THROUGH THE COVID-19 STORM

BY

EMILY CARUSO PARNELL

A DISSERTATION

SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES

IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF

DOCTORATE OF EDUCATION IN DISTANCE EDUCATION

FACULTY OF HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES

ATHABASCA, ALBERTA

MARCH, 2024

Athabasca University
Faculty of Graduate Studies

Approval of Dissertation

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IMPROVISING A VIRTUAL SCHOOL: DANCING THROUGH THE COVID-19 STORM

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In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Education in Distance Education

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Dedication

For the staff of the virtual school who trusted my leadership through this process and who were willing to optimistically embark on a great adventure into the unknown, you made everything possible and I thank you from the bottom of my heart.

For the students and families of the virtual school who improvised with us, were patient with us as tried to figure things out and who were always ready to show us their pets, my gratitude is profound.

Acknowledgements

For Jodie, who has always pushed me to be a better version of myself, gets me out of my head, and has met me at the door with a plate of cheese and a glass of port more times than I can count. “When you hold me, it holds me together” (Swift, 2023).

For Ari, who is the kindest, most loving boy, who can always make me laugh, and who will do great things.

For Mara, who lights up the stage and my life, improves everyone she meets and who considers her mother a work in progress, at best, but who still lets me hold her hand sometimes, which I adore.

For Pat, who knows a cup of tea solves most problems and has always believed in me.

For Debbie and Er, who always cheer me on.

For Sharon, who showed me what’s possible.

For Jan and Gary, who gave me their house to write in and made sure my kids were loved and cared for and for Bubby Vivian whose steadfast love has been so healing.

For Kristin and Nazli who were the best study partners and venting audience I could ask for and for Katie, Alexis, Rosie, Paula and Ariella, the kindred spirits who have kept me afloat.

For Connie, whose assignment as my dissertation advisor was truly *bashert*.

For my dance students, who have helped me to keep my love of dance alive.

And, finally, for my late grandmother, the formidable Betty Cawley, who would have enjoyed there finally being a doctor in the family.

Abstract

In this dissertation, I will use embodied epistolary autoethnography and reflexively layered dance improvisations to explore the process and experience of creating and administering a K-12 virtual school in Ontario, Canada through the period of August 2020 to June 2022, during the COVID-19 pandemic. I will use the framework of improvisational practice in the Arts, as well as research in organisational improvisation, disaster management and cultural-historical activity theory (CHAT), to examine what it was like to adapt and evolve pedagogical and administrative structures to fit the novel context of universalizing online learning in a system of public education. My conceptual framework, based in dramaturgy, will support an examination of how online learning blurred the lines between the well-established front-and-backstage of elementary and secondary schools and the traditional cultures of those school systems by pushing teachers and administrators to improvise their practice and leaving them "professionally naked" (Hargreaves, 2021, p. 1853) in the face of scrutiny from students, parents, and the public. I will interrogate my own creative process as an artist-educator-administrator as well as a practitioner-researcher and reflect on what this experience has taught me about leading in a time of crisis and what are important considerations and recommendations if online learning is to become a more permanent feature of Canadian public school systems.

Keywords: improvisation, embodied research, virtual school, dance, evocative autoethnography

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Vignette

We had just finished a very difficult meeting and the principal and I were catching our breath in her office. She and I were sitting there, a little stunned, when our phones began to ping. It had been quite a week. I had put up “respiratory hygiene” posters early Monday morning before the kids arrived, reminding them to cough into their sleeves and wash their hands. Monday had also been Purim. We didn’t know it at the time but it was the last holiday our small Jewish community would celebrate in the synagogue building for 18 months.

The anxiety continued to dial up day by day. On Wednesday, my community had identified its first COVID-19 case, an employee at our local university who had attended a natural resource conference out of town. Half of the natural resource professionals in our industrial town had attended that conference. By Wednesday at noon, parents were showing up to take their children home. Some of them were already presciently wearing masks.

By Thursday, the day of that difficult meeting, we had only 50% attendance. We looked at our phones. Ontario’s Minister of Education was announcing that schools would remain closed for two weeks after the March Break (March 14 - April 3, 2020). The school board’s Director of Education was holding a conference call for administrators at 4pm. The last normal school day had ended and, for Ontario’s educators, the pandemic had begun.

Chapter 1: Introduction

On March 13, 2020, Ontario's elementary and secondary schools closed their doors to students in an unprecedented lockdown of communities during the COVID-19 pandemic. That Friday the 13th marked the beginning of the annual March Break week; the provincial government of Doug Ford announced an extension of that break by an additional two weeks while the Ministry of Education decided whether or not schools would reopen for face-to-face learning. Ultimately, while there were several points between March and June when it seemed that schools might reopen, face-to-face learning did not resume until September 2020 in Ontario's K-12 schools.

During the period of March to June 2020, teachers were directed to provide asynchronous instruction, via posted videos, instructional materials, and interactive platforms such as FlipGrid and Padlet. Teachers' unions actively discouraged teachers from using synchronous instructional methods via Google Meet and other video platforms due to concerns about privacy, equity, exposure to adverse events in students' homes and the possibility of being recorded by parents or others in the household (Elementary Teachers of Toronto, 2020). Assessment guidelines were also adapted during this period to account for students who did not participate in the asynchronous learning that was offered.

Not Just Another September[1]

Cases of COVID-19 were very low in Ontario during the summer of 2020 but experts were uncertain about what would happen to case counts once schools reopened and more people were interacting indoors. Parent advocacy groups, teachers' unions and other stakeholders were very concerned about the safety of face-to-face learning. On August 13th, 2020 Ontario Minister of Education Stephen Lecce released Policy/Program Memorandum 164 (PPM 164) which outlined the online learning option that the province would be offering to all students for the 2020/2021 school year (Government of Ontario, August 13, 2020). PPM 164 dictated that instruction would be offered almost entirely through synchronous methods, in spite of a lack of research to support that modality. Students in Grades 1-8 were required to be online with their teacher for 225 minutes a day and Kindergarten students were required to be present in the synchronous classroom for 180 minutes a day. In contrast, the Canadian Pediatric Society (CPS) recommends no more than one hour of screen time per day for children ages 2-5 (CPS, 2017). The requirements for Kindergarten students in PPM 164 tripled that recommendation.

The school day in Ontario has 300 instructional minutes and teachers were asked to provide asynchronous learning content to make up the gap between the synchronous minutes prescribed in PPM 164 and the 300-minute instructional day (a gap of 75 asynchronous minutes in Grades 1-8 and 120 asynchronous minutes in

[1] My subtitles are, purposefully, witty and humourous (or at least I hope they are). One of the most important tools I have as an administrator is my sense of humour. According to Şahin and Tabak (2020) "as teachers' perception of positive humour towards school administrators increase, perceptions about school climate increase positively" (p. 45). Given the stress that teachers experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic, maintaining a sense of humour and not taking ourselves too seriously was essential to retaining staff. Part of the evocative autoethnography in the dissertation is maintaining my authentic voice as a writer and a person throughout. I am trying to evoke for the reader what it was like to lead and live through this period; humour was an essential part of that experience.

Kindergarten). Timetabling was left to the discretion of school and board administrators. Synchronous learning was presented as being superior to asynchronous learning (Lecce, 2020a; Lecce, 2020b; Lecce, 2020c; Lecce, 2020d; Lecce, 2020e).

The synchronous online learning option was offered to all students in the four publicly-funded school systems (English Public, English Catholic, French Public, French Catholic). Parents were also offered an asynchronous opt-out if they could not (due to connectivity) or did not want to (due to concerns about screen time, scheduling and special needs) register their students in a synchronous program but were not comfortable sending them to a face-to-face school. Board and school administrators were left to decide what the asynchronous option would look like.

PPM 164 also included funding for school-based administrators to be hired to organise and administer virtual school programming. As I sat in my kitchen listening to Minister of Education Stephen Lecce announce the government's plans for online learning, I had a moment of intuition that I would be one of those administrators. A week later, my intuition proved correct and on Monday August 24th 2020 I began a new job as one of the freshly minted Principals of Remote Learning K-12 in Ontario, in a small school board that, for the purposes of this dissertation, will remain unnamed.

Brute-force Logistics

School boards across Ontario faced a situation where 20% of the total enrolment had selected online learning. That meant approximately 2000 K-8 students were initially enrolled in the Remote Learning Program I administered. The percentage of secondary students who had selected online learning was similar, but those programs were mostly

organised through each secondary school and offered through a hybrid model by teachers teaching their face-to-face and online students simultaneously. The only exceptions to that model were grades 9-12 Physical Education and Technical Education classes which were offered asynchronously through the remote learning program. While the terms remote learning program (RLP) and virtual school were used interchangeably at an administrative level throughout this period, the dissertation will favour the term 'virtual school' to describe the program as that is the term that students, staff, and families tended to favour.

This dissertation, like the RLP itself, will focus primarily on the K-8 context but will also examine the secondary context as we transitioned to an autonomous online secondary school in the 2021-2022 school year. Although most of the improvising at the elementary level took place in the first year, the secondary school was newly created in September 2021 and many of the elements that had worked well in elementary classes had to be re-thought for the secondary context, including scheduling to accommodate 4 teachers teaching in 70-minute periods, the role of guidance counsellors and student success support. Some staff members were part of the virtual school staff during both years, but most were part of the first year only, as the cohort of students was much larger that year.

While many boards implemented hybrid teaching in both the 2020/21 and 2021/22 school years, wherein a teacher in a bricks-and-mortar school taught both face-to-face students and online students simultaneously, the virtual school remained committed to providing a dedicated online teacher for those students who had enrolled in the RLP. After trying the hybrid model in secondary schools during the 2020/21

school year, it transitioned to a separate virtual school model for those students as well as their elementary counterparts in 2021/22.

The elementary schools in this area range in size from a few dozen students in some rural schools to over 600 students in urban schools but there was no model for an elementary school of 2000 students, let alone one that would operate exclusively online. The virtual school program in other boards was equally overwhelming and without precedent. The enrolment in the Toronto District School Board's (TDSB) virtual school was equivalent to the size of the 6th largest school board in the province (Story, 2020). In the Peel Region, nearly half of all elementary-aged students were learning online in 2020/21 (CBC News, 2020).

Here be Dragons: Facing the Unknown

As an administrator, I was faced with the stark reality that just as the size of the school was unprecedented, there was also no model in the research literature. K-8 online education had, prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, been implemented only in small pockets: charter and private schools (Lueken et al., 2015), programs for very specific subjects (Hsin et al., 2014), and religious schools. My own children had been some of the few elementary-aged students attending any kind of learning online prior to 2020 (Caruso Parnell, 2015; Caruso Parnell, 2018). Rice (2006) observes that "a paucity of research exists when examining high school students enrolled in virtual schools, and the research base is smaller still when the population of students is further narrowed to the elementary grades." Barbour, Labonte and Nagel (2021) affirm that this research gap continues to exist during and after the pandemic and that, given how widespread

online learning has become over this period, filling the research gap is more acute and urgent than ever.

While Arnesen et al. (2019) claim that Rice, Barbour and others are wrong and that there is a substantive corpus of research into online learning in the elementary grades, their own review of the literature turned up precious few articles that could actually be put to use by classroom teachers or school administrators to support instructional decision-making. Even if there was more relevant research, Arnesen's meta review of the literature turned up only 356 articles over the 18-year period between 1994 and 2016 (Arnesen et. al., 2019). That's an average of only 1.5 articles being published, worldwide, on K-12 distance education each month, and most of those focused on the Grade 9-12 context. A pre-pandemic literature search for the terms "distance education or distance learning or online education" and "K-8 or middle school or elementary education" reveals mostly research into teacher professional development directed at elementary teachers and delivered at a distance.

The literature to support universalizing distance education across a system of public education, particularly in K-8, is scant. The operative word in that statement is "public". The education policy of the Government of Ontario, outlined in PPM 164, meant that anyone could choose to enrol their child in an online education program, it wasn't tied to fee-for-service tuition. The digital doors were flung open wide but, unlike a physical school building, not all students were entering the same learning environment.

Unlike in some American states, Ontario's school boards supplied Chromebooks and Internet access when required but there remained inequities in access to technology. The biggest inequality, however, was not in hardware or modem speed but

in “parents’ ability to support their children’s learning [which] depends on their own knowledge and on whether they can work from home during the crisis” (Agostinelli et. al, 2020, p.1).

One important difference between the pockets of K-12 distance education that existed prior to the COVID-19 pandemic and the virtual schools that were created in Ontario during the pandemic was the population of students who selected this option or had it selected for them by their parents. Farhadi (2019), mapping enrolment and credit accumulation in the TDSB’s pre-pandemic Grade 9-12 elearning program, reported that schools with the lowest Learning Opportunity Index (LOI) score (and therefore the most economic and social privilege) had the greatest number of students enrolled in elearning courses.

> “The LOI ranks each school based on measures of external challenges affecting student success” (Toronto District School Board, 2020, p. 1). The factors that the LOI takes into account include median family income, parental education levels and the percentage of families who rely on government social support programs. Farhadi (2019) clearly shows that students with the greatest social and economic challenges did not register for elearning classes and argues that the program therefore stratified existing inequities in the public education system. She writes that “elearning simultaneously serves those most privileged while failing those without the means, even when they have access” (p. 85).

Pandemic-era virtual schools in Ontario, in contrast, had demographics that were the inverse of the pre-pandemic elearning program. The TDSB reported that students

enrolled in their virtual school during the 2020/21 school year tended to be from homes with lower incomes, lower levels of parental education, and were more likely to speak a language other than English at home (Toronto District School Board, 2020b). “The relationship between socioeconomic status (SES) and school choice is most pronounced at extreme ends of the Learning Opportunities Index (LOI), with the lowest proportions of students choosing In-Person School in schools between LOI 1-50 and the highest proportions of students choosing In-Person School in schools between LOI 420-472” (Toronto District School Board, 2020b).

While most school boards do not have sophisticated data-gathering tools like the TDSB, it was also my experience that students from our lowest SES schools were overrepresented in the virtual school, as were Indigenous students. Particularly in the second year of the program, we had very few students from our highest SES schools registered in the virtual school. These demographic factors presented an additional challenge because, even prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, “moving coursework fully online increases gaps in success. Outcomes for students with weak academic backgrounds suffer most from the loss of personal contact with faculty and other students” (Baum & McPherson, 2019, p. 239). Kim et al. (2021) have also identified parents’ capacity to support children’s learning online as one of the factors of greatest concern for teachers. These academic gaps may be further exacerbated by the “learning gains among some children and young people in more privileged or affluent families, who have gained support, encouragement and even a bit of competitive nudging from on-hand family members during virtual school” (Hargreaves, 2021, p. 1836).

All of these factors (the scale, the student population, and the lack of models) made the creation of a virtual school a daunting enterprise. The timeline was also very tight. The first day of school was scheduled to be September 8th, 2020. When I reported to work on Monday August 24, 2020 there was no staff, no classes were set up, and no one was trained in how to teach synchronously in a way that would be effective for students in Grades K-8. Did we even know what that was? Was it possible?

Administrative Concerns

While the start of the virtual school year was postponed by three days in September 2020 to provide some training for teachers and support staff, the school year began with almost 2000 students and roughly 100 staff on September 11th, 2020. The number of tasks that various departments in each of Ontario's school boards had to accomplish between August 24th and September 11th, 2020 was staggering. Schools aren't created from thin air in a typical school year but nothing about this year was typical. It took cooperation from all board departments (Special Education, Information Services, Program, Health and Safety, Human Resources) to get the Remote Learning Program up and running.

While many of these difficulties were mitigated by experience when the second year of virtual school began, setting up an online secondary school in a compressed period of time presented many of the same challenges. Teachers had to be hired, a timetable had to be created, and students' existing timetables had to be modified to reflect the courses we were offering in the virtual school. Many classes had to accommodate students in different grades or from different streams (applied, academic,

workplace) learning together which presented challenges for teachers and students alike.

Detours and Dead Ends[2]

The mundane tasks involved in setting up a school became extraordinary; simply enrolling students presented a huge challenge. Because there were planned opportunities for parents to switch their children in and out of remote learning during the year, it was important that enrolment be flexible. The decision was made to use what was known as the “share function” in the Student Information Service (SIS) to build the virtual school’s enrolment instead of creating a stand-alone enrolment for the virtual school. This function had previously been used to share one or two students with a specialized program (e.g.: early intervention, behaviour, mental health) outside of their home school for a period of time, after which they would return to their home school. It wasn’t built to share hundreds of students at once but it was the best tool we had available.

What was quickly discovered was that this function required choosing a grade for all of the students who were being shared by a particular school. Every student from that school, regardless of what grade they were actually in, had to initially be put into one grade (Grade 4, for instance) and then administrative assistants had to comb through each student’s profile and put them in the correct grade in the SIS. There was also no way to distinguish during the sharing process whether a student was in an Intensive Support Program (ISP) or French Immersion (FI) classroom. It required a

[2] This is a reference to the Indigo Girls song *Dirt and Dead Ends* from the album *Despite our Differences* (2006).

concerted team effort to get students sorted into the correct grades and program streams.

Staffing Stressors

There were also logistical issues that weren't related to the students; staffing presented many challenges in every one of Ontario's school boards. Because so many students had selected online learning, there was surplus staff in virtually every face-to-face school building. There were also permanent teachers who had medical problems that prevented them from being in contact with students during the pandemic. However, the number of students in the RLP was so large that additional teachers had to be hired. The expense of hiring these long-term occasional teachers (LTO) was significant as was the need to provide training and support to a group of largely inexperienced teachers. Not only were all of the teachers inexperienced in teaching online, many of them were newly-graduated teachers who were experiencing full-time teaching, assessment and evaluation for the first time. Many of those young teachers had had a very interrupted teacher induction process (Godhe & Wennås Brante, 2022) because of the pandemic. In many boards, the school year started without the required number of teachers in place (CBC News, September 22, 2020).

In Ontario, class sizes are capped and those caps are guaranteed in collective agreements. Kindergarten classes, staffed by both a teacher (OCT) and a designated Early Childhood Educator (DECE) are capped at 29 students. Primary classes (Grades 1-3) are strictly capped at 20 students and Junior/Intermediate classes (Grades 4-8) are capped at 25 students (by board-wide average) (Government of Ontario, 2019a, p. 3-4). There are also caps on secondary class sizes which vary depending on the pathway

that the students are enrolled in (caps for the academic stream are higher than caps for the applied stream, for instance). Therefore, although each school's in-person enrolment was down by approximately 20% due to enrolment that shifted to the virtual school, that didn't necessarily mean that their allotment of teaching staff was also reduced by 20%. The impact on teacher employment depended on how the enrolment shifts were distributed across the grades and many virtual school teachers were on long-term occasional contracts (LTO) for the duration of the school year.

While some of the teachers who taught online were based at their home schools and continued to participate in school-based duties such as bus and recess supervision, many of the teachers worked out of a central school building. Teachers also worked from home during Ontario's two stay-at-home orders in the Winter and Spring of 2021 and a local work-from-home order in the winter of 2021/2022.

The RLP also employed a spectrum of educational workers such as an administrative assistant, special education teachers, educational assistants, and designated early childhood educators (DECE) who work in partnership with Kindergarten teachers to support programming for 4-and 5-year-olds. Each DECE worked with more than one teacher, and one DECE supported a Senior Kindergarten/Grade 1 split class as well as a Kindergarten class. This type of arrangement is not typical of DECE staffing in Ontario schools. Usually, DECEs are assigned to one classroom and do not work with students outside of that classroom group. However, because of the reduced number of synchronous minutes in Kindergarten, DECEs were available to work with more than one group of students during a school day. DECEs are required by law to be assigned to any Kindergarten

class with more than 16 students (Government of Ontario, 2019, p. 5). The program also benefited from the support of school-based SERTs and other professionals such as Speech Language Pathologists, Social Workers and Indigenous Support Workers.

Improvising Under a Microscope

While some boards maintained a stand-alone virtual elementary school for the research period of September 2020 to June 2022, many boards either began with a hybrid model or switched to a hybrid model part-way through the pandemic. These choices were made due to staffing challenges and the financial burden of hiring additional teachers to staff the virtual schools. While boards were granted permission to dip into their reserve funds to pay for this additional hiring, some boards did not have reserve funds and therefore were unable to meet the hiring demands that a stand-alone virtual school created. In those boards, elementary students logged into a livestream of the classrooms in their home schools. The hybrid model that many boards chose to use due to financial pressures has been condemned by teachers' unions, parents and researchers alike (Mahoney, 2020; Farhadi, 2021; Wong, Aug 29, 2021) and became the object of teacher bargaining as unions sought to have it eliminated (Rushowsky & Edwards, 2022).

Media interest in the development of virtual schools was intense at the local (Juric, 2020; Aubin, 2020; Sudbury.com, 2020; Ulrichsen, 2022), provincial (TVO, 2020; Little & Farhadi, 2020; Toronto Star Editorial Board, 2020), and national levels (Bennet, 2021; Alphonso, 2020; Mahoney, 2020; Wong, 2021; Alphonso, 2022). Mistakes by virtual school administrators were also scrutinized by the media with an intensity that

public schools rarely experience (Alphonso, September 24, 2020; Samba, 2020). Ontario's COVID-19 virtual schools existed on an amplified and unforeseen scale that was tied to the heightened public interest in all things related to the pandemic as well as to the rapid changes taking place in a system that is usually slow to change.

The COVID-19 pandemic presented educators in Ontario's public school systems with circumstances that are likely to be dissected and analyzed by researchers for many years to come. The challenges in providing an equitable learning experience for students, alone, were overwhelming and, while it will not be the focus of this dissertation, I would be remiss if I didn't mention the significance of those challenges.

Some students may never recover academically from the learning loss they experienced during the period of pandemic distance learning. None of what will follow is intended to erase the gravity of that loss nor the repercussions on a generation of students of implementing systems of learning that were never designed for children and adolescents and that relied heavily on the participation of parents and guardians to facilitate students' learning. Teachers too faced extraordinary challenges and inequities during the implementation of pandemic-era virtual schools, the nature of which depended largely on where they happened to be teaching (Farhadi, 2020). Several researchers have already begun the work of exploring the inequities of distance learning during the pandemic (Agostinelli et. al., 2020; Ezra, et al., 2021; Farhadi, 2019 & 2020; James, 2020; McGoron et al., 2021; Shields, 2022) and more work needs to be done.

Research Questions

What this dissertation *will* explore is the ways that I used my background in modern dance and dance improvisation to develop and adapt effective administrative practices for K-12 distance education during the COVID-19 pandemic and how I worked with teachers to adapt their pedagogy to this emergency context. It will examine the interplay between the structures that were established by the Ontario Ministry of Education in PPM 164 and the educational practice that evolved over the course of the 2020-2022 school years. This practice evolved in the absence of guidance from the distance education literature and required all stakeholders to improvise within the framework of their repertoire of practice as teachers and administrators in the public education system and the requirements placed on them to teach synchronously in a direct-to-camera format for most of the day.

The improvised evolution of this COVID-19 era virtual school also blurred the lines between what are usually well-defined frontstage and backstage (Goffman, 1959) areas in face-to-face K-12 schools. The improvisation *became* the performance as the curtains that usually separate teachers, students, and families faded into transparency, allowing students and families to see the mechanics of teaching in greater detail and with more awareness of the teaching process.

This style of teaching that evolved in Ontario's virtual schools is novel in relation to established practices in distance education but was presented to parents as the gold standard by the Minister of Education (Lecce, 2020a; Lecce, 2020b; Lecce, 2020c; Lecce, 2020d; Lecce, 2020e). While a search of the distance education literature will not provide any researcher with support for this policy decision, it was the path that the

government chose and that Minister Lecce enthusiastically pitched in media appearances as being supported by parents.

Using an arts-based, evocative autoethnographic research approach, I will inquire into the ways that my own practice as an administrator during this period was improvisational and how entering into this process with a background in improvisation guided my choice-making as a school leader. I will also draw on the literature in disaster management to explore how communities of promise often arise in moments of crisis, as people are forced to improvise outside of the norms of their professions. I will also try to draw lessons from this unusual experience that could be applied more broadly to public K-12 virtual schools as we move out of the crisis period of the pandemic and into a period when the public school system is asked to continue, perhaps permanently, educating K-12 students remotely (Jones, 2022). From this context, my research questions include the following.

Research Questions:

1. How did I experience the process of improvisational practice as administrative performance during the development of a pandemic-era K-12 virtual school?
2. How will the experience of administering an online school inform my ongoing practice as an artist-educator-administrator as well as practitioner-researcher?

Conceptual Framework

Given my performance background, it is perhaps unsurprising that I see the creation of K-12 virtual schools through a dramaturgical lens. The sociological theory of dramaturgy, first proposed by Erving Goffman in his 1959 book *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, proposes that every social situation can be seen as a performance with the actors in any context moving in and out their roles as the action develops. This metaphor focuses particularly on the faces we present to our audience as we move into and out of social settings; Goffman labels these public and private faces the front and backstage. “In face-to-face interactions, the front and backstage are two related but separate areas, where the front is the space in which the performance of self takes place, and the back is where that performance is prepared” (Mediatexthack, 2018, p. 124). Scholars have used this theory to explore social contexts as diverse as motherhood (DeGroot & Vik, 2021), family (Collet & Childs, 2009), religious conversion (Kravel-Tovi, 2012) and youth hockey (Koch, 2012).

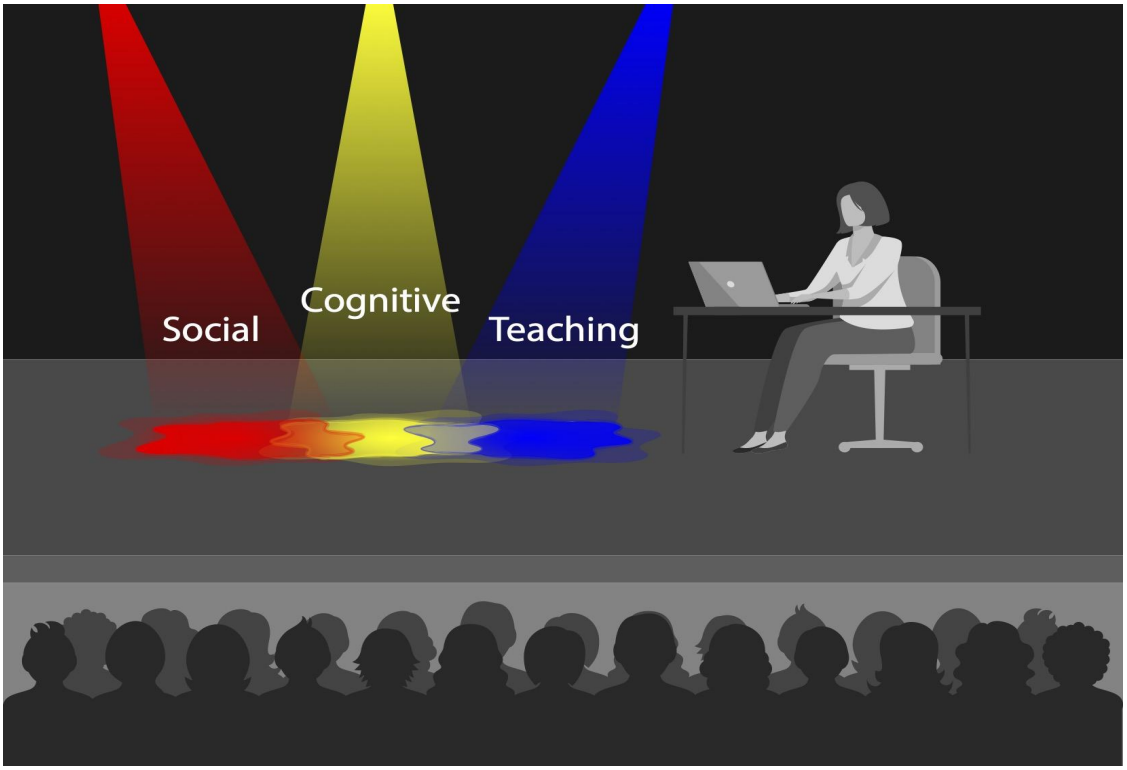
While in a face-to-face school, the front-and-backstage can be simple to identify, the online experience muddies the lens. “The Internet blurs the line between frontstage and backstage, and thus problematizes it” (Mediatexthack, 2018, p. 124). Positioning the virtual school experience within dramaturgy is also complicated by the fact that while, as Marshall (2013) states, “the frontstage is not an improvisation, rather a carefully crafted representation of the self to others”, K-12 virtual schools during the COVID-19 pandemic were almost entirely improvised. However, like other improvisational performances, they can still be viewed dramaturgically, albeit with a blurring of the front and backstage spaces.

This blurriness, while difficult to represent visually, is reflected in the way that the stage lights, representing the three aspects of the Community of Inquiry (COI) framework (Garrison et al., 2000), pool on the surface of the stage. The lights blend together and then pool like paint, flowing into each other and across the surface of the stage. The project of virtual school is messy; like improvisation, it resists containment and definition (Paxton, 2001). The COI is still there but it is no longer neat and tidy; it does not look the way it usually does, it is half-formed, under-rehearsed, thrust to centre stage before its time.

In this conceptual framework, the frontstage and backstage overlap, as in a Venn diagram, as do the performance and audience spaces. In the image, the audience is represented only vaguely, outlined, not defined, while the teacher is alone onstage, solitary. This is difficult to represent visually so the viewer will have to bring their own imagination to bear. It may help to watch this short video clip from the Bridge Theatre's production of Shakespeare's Midsummer Night's Dream which has the same backstage/frontstage fluidity and lack of definition between the audience and the actors (National Theatre, 2020). These overlapping spaces speak to the fluidity of the improvisational space and the lack of clear boundaries between teachers, parents, and students, a fluidity which learning from home promoted. While we were no longer in the same physical space as our students, we were also more intimately connected, seeing the inside of families' homes (and them seeing ours, on occasion), observing their unvarnished interactions with their children, and hearing the opinions of family members on what and how teachers were teaching.

Figure 1

Conceptual Framework



Note: image credit, S. Hamilton and 1 Hour Signs, Sudbury

It has been difficult to represent my conceptual framework in a two-dimensional illustration because it is complex and fluid, with a number of moving pieces (students, parents, teachers, distance education theory, emotion, aesthetics, dramaturgy). Therefore, in addition to Figure 1, which attempts to capture as many of those elements as possible without becoming visually cluttered, I've also included a video framework that I hope provides a clearer picture of the concepts that inform this dissertation. The music accompanying this piece is titled *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* by Phil Collins (1989).

In theatrical terms, this was a postmodern, audience participation version of a school performance. The usual rules about how and when parents accessed teachers

and schools were made moot and new practices emerged. Some parents also became teachers as they moved to fill in gaps that virtual school created, especially for students with academic vulnerabilities. In a similar way, postmodern dance and theatre blur the lines of performance with an “aesthetic of impurity” (Copeland, 1983, p. 36) that supports the “sensation that the distance between spectator and spectacle is in a state of continual fluctuation” (Copeland, 1983, p. 35).

The rules that the provincial government described in PPM 164 were the equivalent of a non-negotiable bricks-and-mortar space that every member of the virtual school community had to work within. All of the professional influences that teachers and administrators came to the virtual school with, be they pedagogical and administrative repertoire they had used successfully for years, or their beliefs about students and families, or their own experience of distance education as adult learners, were carved out by PPM 164 and only those practices, techniques, and tools that fit into the space the policy created made it onstage.

In the second chapter of this dissertation, I will outline how the relevant literature informs the context and creation of these schools and where the literature is silent or only whispers about the issues we faced as pandemic era online educators in K-12.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

"We're all navigating in virgin snow right now." (Morissette, 2021)

In this chapter, I will outline the gap in distance education research particularly as it relates to the practicalities of teaching younger students online. I will explore the gap that exists in the literature where distance education meets improvisation and theorise about why education broadly has an affinity to analogies with improvisational practice that distance education doesn't share. I will also outline the relevant literature in organizational improvisation, disaster management, and school culture that speaks to the phenomenon of virtual schools created during a global pandemic.

K-12 Online Learning

As mentioned in chapter 1, the literature on K-12 online education is still in a nascent stage. In Arneson et. al.'s 2019 review of the literature, only 356 relevant articles (16% of which were written by one author, Michael Barbour, who also co-authored Arneson's review) were identified over an 18-year period. The field of distance or online education remains dominated by the post-secondary sector (Dell, 2021) and the specific needs of K-12 students and teachers, particularly as they relate to child development, have yet to be fully explored.

The authors that Arneson et. al. identified in their review are primarily based in the field of distance education and have been working in the K-12 field as an offshoot of their distance education work. While the authors of the review believe that "the field of K-12 online learning is populated with high quality scholars who also have great

influence in the larger fields of distance learning and educational technology" (Arneson et. al., 2019, p. 40), I would argue that this trajectory is very problematic for the relevance of their research to K-12 educators. There is a disconnect between the real world of teaching children and teenagers and the world of these scholars whose background is in post-secondary distance education with adults and who are trying to investigate how to apply their work to the K-12 context. As Dron (2021) points out "The people who originally designed LMSs back in the 90s based their designs on the functions and entities found in a traditional university because that was their context, and that was where they had to fit" (para 7).

Anyone who has been in both an elementary school and a university can attest that they are very different learning environments and that replicating one for use with the students of the other would be ill-advised. Dron (2021) also points out that while these systems seek to replicate the classroom, they leave out other important learning environments entirely, like hallways, cafeterias and shared library tables where important social and cognitive connections happen. While Dron is discussing the problems with post-secondary LMSs, it might be argued that these non-classroom spaces are even more important in elementary and secondary schools where so much of what students are learning is social in nature. For instance, half of the content in Ontario's Kindergarten program document is focused on social and emotional learning with strands titled "Belonging and Contributing" and "Self-Regulation and Well-Being" (Government of Ontario, 2016).

This disconnect between educational sectors is evident in some of Arneson et. al's findings. More than 40% of the articles they reviewed were categorised as

theoretical (2019, p. 49), suggesting that their application to the K-12 classroom is tenuous at best. The authors themselves acknowledge the problem when they recommend that moving forward scholars focus on "grow[ing] research evidence about effective practice unique to K-12 environments and not simply rely[ing] on broader distance learning findings" (Arneson et. al., 2019, p. 49). A significant challenge that goes unaddressed in their literature review and, it follows, in the corpus of K-12 distance education research, is a practical one: how can we effectively supervise very young children while implementing effective pedagogical practices?

To illustrate this problem, we will examine one common pedagogical tool and problematize its use in online learning. In Ontario's *Guide to Effective Instruction*, one of the four pillars of an effective reading program is called guided reading. This instructional technique involves the "teacher support[ing] a small group of students as they talk, read, and think their way through a carefully selected text, using, practising, and consolidating effective reading strategies" (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2003, p.6.3). The use of this instructional technique presupposes that the teacher can work with small groups of students while *simultaneously* monitoring the rest of the class (p. 6.23 - p. 6.26). However, when teaching online, the video conferencing software only allows the teacher to see one group of students at time. This technological binary creates a safety problem when a group of young students is left unsupervised during guided reading. It is a problem that becomes evident almost immediately when elementary students begin learning online but, because the technology was developed to support adult learning and because the majority of distance education researchers come from the post-secondary sector, supervision is a problem that is completely

unaddressed in the literature. It is but one of many issues that K-12 educators face when teaching online for which the literature provides no guidance.

Mind the Gap

There is no way to write a literature review on improvisation in distance education because the literature has not been written yet. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, distance education was characterised by a highly scripted instructional approach, which is still by far the dominant instructional style. The medium of instruction (learning management systems, slide shows, drop boxes, modules) dictated a tightly planned learning environment. Distance education courses even include carefully planned social interaction as students are often required to interact with each other on message boards and forums at a prescribed rate. While there may be individual distance education teachers who improvise as part of their practice, researchers are not yet researching and publishing about it.

Although the following sources are less current and, in some cases, pre-date the transition to computer-based learning, they speak to the instructional prototype of distance education that continues to influence the field even to the present day. In Moore's (1993) model of transactional distance (the distance between student and instructor, student and student, and student and content), structure and dialogue are positioned as two sides of an instructional design coin. A distance education program with more structure will have less dialogue and vice versa. Dron (2004) proposes that course designers might be able to work around this dichotomy by enabling the structure of a course to emerge from its dialogue. Benson and Samarawickrema (2009) identify

that context is a key factor in making instructional design decisions relative to the balancing of structure, dialogue, and student autonomy and that a student's familiarity with technology and their level of study (e.g. undergraduate versus doctoral) are key factors in making those choices. Benson and Samarawickrema's (2009) claim would suggest that students in K-12 would require extensive structure in their online classes. Paul et al. (2022) conclude that "given everything being the same, students in OL classes were less satisfied with their learning than students in F2F classes" (p.94) suggesting that online teachers in a K-12 online school would have a particularly steep uphill climb to create effective classroom contexts.

Scholars have touched on many aspects of the pivot to emergency remote learning (ERL) from student engagement (Khalif et al., 2021) to the renewed importance of social presence in the online classroom (Ensmann et al., 2021), learning loss (Skar et al., 2021), inequities related to socioeconomic status, first language and other factors (Orit et al., 2021), and parent mental health (McGoron, et al., 2021). This body of research tends to focus on the period of emergency pivoting between face-to-face and online modes of teaching and learning, not on the type of pandemic-era virtual school that was created in Ontario during the 2020-22 school years. Ontario's COVID-19 era virtual schools occupied a middle ground between emergency pivots and well-established distance education programs. They were an island of stability within the perpetual pivoting that beset face-to-face schools during those years (i.e. virtual schools were the calm eye of the roaring storm) but they also did not have the assurance of a continued existence beyond the pandemic. They were unique in the liminal space they occupied.

The style of teaching that developed because of the confines of PPM 164 (180 or 225 synchronous minutes per day, depending on the grade), dominated by direct-to-camera instruction and guided by the developmental needs of students from Kindergarten to Grade 12, is unique. This almost exclusively synchronous style has more in common with educational children's television shows like *Mr. Dressup* or *Reading Rainbow* than with a postsecondary distance education course. Situating this instructional practice within the distance education literature is difficult, because of these unprecedented and unanticipated factors. The pedagogy of pandemic era virtual schools is a transgression against most of what has been practised in distance learning (Anrneson et. al, 2019; Barbour, 2013; Barbour, 2018; Barbour, LaBonte & Nagel, 2021; Clark, 2013; Kennedy & Ferdig, 2018; Rice, 2006) but in that transgression there are lessons that may offer a different perspective of learning online.

Since the pandemic, some researchers have written about the improvisation involved in pivoting from face-to-face to online learning (Bryson & Andres, 2020, Schaefer, 2020, Thomas & Bryson, 2021) but those scholars have used the word informally to indicate the process of making things up as you go along, not as a reference to improvisational practice as it exists in several arts domains such as theatre, comedy, modern dance and jazz music.

Other authors have explored the influence that pandemic-era virtual schools may have on the K-12 education system as a whole. Arnett (2021) speculates that "just as learning new tools can be the starting point for major innovations in teachers' practices, new district virtual schools can be laboratories for innovation in districts' offerings" (p. 15). He argues that because they disrupt many of the traditional modes of teaching and

learning “these schools can be catalysts for innovation within a district” (p. 16), although that may be wishful thinking (Mikiewicz & Jurczak-Morris, 2023).

Alphonso (2022) has reported on the diversity of experiences that students have had in Ontario’s virtual learning programs which includes students who had greater success in their online classes than they did in traditional schools.

> Many students and parents complained about the hardship of learning at home, from technological glitches to little ones dissolving into tears having to stare at a screen all day. But some students thrived. For them, learning online carried unexpected benefits. This was especially true for children who had felt excluded or uncomfortable in their schools prior to the pandemic – those who had experienced racism or bullying in their classrooms, or have anxiety or learning disabilities (Alphonso, 2022, para. 5).

This range of experiences speaks to the potential demand for a long-term virtual school option for those students and families who have found promise and potential in continuing their learning journeys online.

The Stage Factor

Although little, if anything, has been written to draw connections between improvisation and distance education, the opposite is true of the connections in the literature between face-to-face teaching and improvisation. Describing skilled teachers and administrators as jazz musicians or theatre improvisers is a popular metaphor amongst education scholars (Breault, 2006; Becker & Jacobsen, 2021; Dennis, 2015; Haidet, et. al., 2017; Tomlinson, 2007; Shem-Tov, 2014; Skalican, 2018).

Scholars of improvisation and of education have written extensively on the relationship between improvisational practice in drama (Dahn et al., 2021; Sawyer, 2004; Shem-Tov, 2014,) and music (Haidet et al., 2017; Holdhus et al., 2016) and face-to-face teaching and educational leadership (Kleinschmidt, 2001; Newton, 2004; Skalican, J. 2018), including using instruction in improvisation as an effective form of pre-service and in-service training for teachers and administrators. Comparing teachers and school administrators to jazz musicians is a common analogy that has been explored by several researchers (Breault, 2006; Tomlinson, 2007; Dennis, 2015; Becker & Jacobsen, 2021). Dance improvisation, however, has yet to be included in this metaphorical interplay to any great extent, perhaps owing to the academic hierarchy which places dance at the very bottom of the pyramid of subjects as Ken Robinson points out in his infamous TED Talk "*Do Schools Kill Creativity?*" (2006). In spite of the 71 million views this lecture has accrued, that hierarchy remains firmly in place.

The absence of dance improvisation from this metaphorical space may also be due to the niche status of contemporary dance in North American and Western culture. Sussman (1998) describes a failed research attempt by the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) in the United States when an audience survey question about attendance at modern dance performances had to be dropped when it became clear that audiences did not understand the question and misinterpreted it to be about musical theatre or hip-hop performances. Sussman writes that

> [t]his research experience tells us something. A large majority of the U.S. adult population does not 'correctly' recognize the phrase 'modern dance.' Modern

> dance is not and probably never has been, a broadly familiar art. Its audience has always been small (p. 57).

This lack of popular understanding about modern dance, the genre from which dance improvisation springs, contributes to it being under-used as a metaphor in academic writing about the relationship between improvisation and teaching. You cannot write about something when you do not realise it exists.

A Layered Gap

Given the rich vein of research connecting face-to-face teaching to improvisation, why has no one written about *distance* education from the perspective of training in improvisational practice (music, drama or dance) and the theoretical and practical foundations of that artistic practice? This gap is likely due to the heavily scripted nature of distance education prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. There was little provocation to push distance educators to improvise; the tools available to them supported the dominant instructional style. Each LMS has a set of tools available for course creators to plug into their syllabus and that repertoire creates the boundaries within which the course is shaped. The learning management systems (LMS) that most distance education courses use create a McLuhan-esque predestination that guides the teaching practice. The LMS is inflexible and therefore the teaching is scripted; the medium has a significant impact on the message. An LMS, like “any medium, has the power of imposing its own assumption on the unwary” (McLuhan, 1964, p. 6).

The gap in literature between face-to-face education and distance education using improvisation as a metaphor for teaching may also be due to the lack of a stage in

the distance education context. In a face-to-face classroom setting, it is easy to see the teacher as a performer. Everyone is looking at them, they do the most talking, and, without them, it would not be a class. It is easy to imagine a stage in the classroom and therefore easy to metaphorically connect face-to-face teaching to performing. In the distance education classroom, that metaphorical positioning is harder. The stage and the performer float in the Internet ether, as do the audience members. Not only are they not all in the same place, they're not even all present at the same time; it is harder to notice the curtain rising.

You Are Here: Locating Myself in the Literature

It occurs to me to draw a link between two areas in the literature that, up to now, have remained apart because of the experiences that have brought me to this point in my career, both as an artist and as an educator. My positionality is standing astride these two worlds and I tend to see my own experiences through dual lenses, like a set of binoculars that coalesce into a single image, if only in my own perception. As a young person, I trained intensively in several dance styles, including ballet and modern dance and pursued a professional performance career for a short time. This training led me to major in Dance as an undergraduate and in Dance Education as a graduate student. These programs of study included extensive work in improvisation both as an artistic practice and in performance contexts. I've also dabbled in drama improvisation as a teacher of drama in K-8 schools.

My transition from dancer/choreographer to teacher to administrator is fairly unusual in Ontario's public education system where most teachers come from

backgrounds in the humanities, social sciences and sciences. Of the 30 most popular Additional Qualifications registered by members of the Ontario College of Teachers (Ontario's teacher regulatory and licensing body) in 2020 none of them are Arts-based qualifications (Ontario College of Teachers, 2020). My unusual background grants me an outsider perspective on education that has been valuable throughout my career and which undoubtedly informed the improvisational choices I made as an administrator of a pandemic-era virtual school.

While training in dance improvisation and contact improvisation at Bennington College and York University, I learned from teachers of improvisation such as Agnès Benoit-Nader, Susan Sgorbati, Peggy Florin, Dana Reitz, Lionel Popkin and Donna Krasnow. My graduate school thesis advisor at the University of North Carolina, Greensboro, Sue Stinson, has written extensively about improvisation in K-12 dance pedagogy (Stinson, 2003) and Anne Green Gilbert, another of my graduate teachers, uses improvisation techniques extensively in her dance pedagogy (Green Gilbert, 2006; Green Gilbert, 2015).

Many of these teachers, although working in an academic context, have few, if any, publications to their name. Dance has a strong oral and physical tradition wherein knowledge is passed from teacher to student in an embodied context, existing in the ephemeral spaces of rehearsal and performance. That wisdom doesn't always translate to writing and publication. Performance substitutes for publication but leaves few traces behind, save in the minds of the performers and the audience.

There are notation systems in dance (namely Laban Notation and Benesh Notation) but those are used almost exclusively to record the scores of significant

repertoire or set exercises in a syllabus. Dance, generally, and dance improvisation, in particular, is a performative and lived experience. The hierarchy of subjects which favours art forms that can be represented on paper (which Ken Robinson describes so entertainingly in his famous 2006 TED Talk, *Do Schools Kill Creativity?*) is evident even in publications that support arts-based research (ABR) practices. For instance, in her chapter on ABR, Leavy (2023) describes dramatic arts, collage, dialogue, photography and several other forms of artistic representation that researchers might use but leaves dance out entirely. Although there is almost an entire page devoted to embodiment theories (p. 211), dance, the most embodied of the arts, is excluded; it does not appear even once in the subject index. The body as a site of inquiry and intelligence is still contested ground (Snowber, 2016; Welch, 2022); dance remains at the bottom of the academic barrel.

History Lesson

All improvisational arts practice in theatre, comedy and dance stems from the work of Viola Spolin, whose seminal book, *Improvisation for the Theatre* (first published in 1963), created “a kind of improvisation training that was rigorous and exacting, and that slowly built in actors the ability to connect with one another spontaneously” (Alda, 2017, p. 8). This book describes many games and structures that have come to be ubiquitous in theatre, movement and dance classes. Many of these structures are non-verbal and involve movement, sounds or speaking in gibberish in order to promote what Spolin calls “physicalization”.

> ‘Physicalization’ provides the student with a personal concrete experience (which can be grasped) on which further development depends; and it gives the teacher and student a working vocabulary necessary to an objective relationship. Our first concern with students is to encourage freedom of physical expression, because the physical and sensory relationship of the art form opens the door for insight (Spolin, 1999, p. 16).

As opposed to language which is always the representation of a thought, idea or object, physicalization “alerts the whole organism” (Spolin, 1999, p. 17) and creates communication that is direct and clear.

Spolin’s (1999) games are the same ones that I played during many years of dance improvisation classes: Mirror (p. 61), Space Walk (p. 80), and Part of a Whole (p. 73), among others. While we also used other structures that had been developed specifically for dancers, the Spolin games were foundational and, as a student, it never occurred to me that they hadn’t been created specifically for dancers.

These games and structures, which began as training tools for actors, have been studied by researchers interested in individuality and togetherness (Hart et. al., 2014), attachment (Feniger-Schaal et. al., 2016) empathy and theory of mind (Goldstein & Winner, 2012), emotional suppression (Goldstein et. al., 2016), educational development (Rossing & Hoffmann-Longtin, 2016), leadership development (Gagnon, Vough & Nickerson, 2012), and the training of medical professionals (Hoffmann-Longtin, 2018; Kaplan-Liss et. al., 2018; Fessell et. al., 2019; Fu, 2019). The Alda Centre for Communicating Science at Stony Brook University (founded in part by actor and activist Alan Alda) is focused on using the Spolin games and structures to teach scientists to

communicate their research findings “through active listening and close attention to non-verbal communication” (Stony Brook University, 2022, 2nd paragraph).

However, in all of this work, the focus is on theatre improvisation and the previously described publication gap around dance persists. For instance, in Winner et. al.’s 2013 book *Art for Art’s Sake: The Impact of Art Education*, written for the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), the research on the impact of Arts Education is divided into chapters, with a chapter for each arts discipline. The chapter on theatre education is 21 pages long and includes 7 pages of citations, the chapter on visual arts education is 20 pages long and includes 3 pages of citations, the chapter on music education is 50 pages long and includes 11 pages of citations, while the chapter on dance education is only 10 pages long and includes only 1 and a half pages of citations (Winner et. al, 2013). The empty space where dance-based research could be means that there is silence regarding important features of dance improvisation which are unique to the art form, such as touch, balance, weight sharing, and partnering. If, as Hermans (2021) suggests, touch (alone) is ”social bonding, coordinated empathic understanding, affect regulation, and a shared expressivity” (p.3), then how much information is arts-based research lacking by focusing on other arts disciplines and neglecting dance?

Culture Dis-placed

In his 1994 book, *The Jew in the Lotus*, author Rodger Kamenetz tells the story of a group of high-profile Jewish leaders, from every stream of Judaism, who are invited by the Dalai Lama to visit him in exile in Daramshala, India. “Faced with the destruction of his people and their tradition of Buddhism, […] the Dalai Lama turned for the first time

to the Jewish people for help. ‘Tell me your secret,’ he said, ‘the secret of Jewish spiritual survival in exile.’” (p. 2).

The rabbis and scholars who travelled to his mountaintop temple offer various cultural anchors that were either emphasized or “developed in response to the loss of the Temple” (Kamenetz, 1994, p. 211) in Jerusalem. These include the synagogue (a structure that was created in the diaspora), the family, and the evolution of a shared symbolism. The family, in particular was highlighted as being the “carrier of the covenant” and the “wheel of life,” (Greenberg quoted in Kamenetz, 1994, p. 212) centrally important for the survival of Jewish communities in exile. The Buddhist leaders, all celibate monks, struggled to connect with this idea.

The exile of students and teachers from schools during the COVID-19 pandemic offers a parallel journey away from the foundations of the culture of school and towards an uncharted future in an educational diaspora. What aspects of school culture can survive in exile and what needs to be created anew for this online context? When so much of what has traditionally framed school culture is unavailable, how does school culture need to change for an online school to succeed?

Peterson and Deal in their frequently cited book, *Shaping School Culture* (2016) identify 7 elements of school culture: “deep ties among people” (p. 35) which they label as tribes, common symbols (artifacts, architecture and routines), history, vision and values, stories and tales, rituals, and ceremonies and traditions. Throughout their work there are frequent references to how these elements manifest in the physical attributes of a school including the way that student work is shared on the walls, the school’s mascot, the architecture of the school building and the rituals (assemblies, school

teams, awards) that anchor the school year. Many of these elements do not have an analogous practice in the online school. Existing structures have to evolve and new practices need to be created in order to build a school culture online, but what?

Ackley (2021) found a negative correlation between the length of time that middle school teachers spent teaching online during the 2020-21 school year and their perception of successful school culture. The more time they spent teaching online, the less successfully they rated their school culture. Tawfik et al. (2021) identified that teachers who taught online during pandemic school closures "worried that they were not supporting the cognitive and affective needs of students, which was especially important for the culture of this school setting" (p. 936). Koç and Koç (2021) found that without the extracurricular activities offered by their face-to-face schools, students have "deficiencies adopting school culture, committing to school, knowing values, and living their lives in accordance with values" (p. 5).

The problem with applying this research, which points to a negative relationship between online teaching and school culture, to the context of Ontario's virtual schools is that, like almost all of the research related to online K-12 learning during the COVID-19 pandemic, it is focused on the teaching that took place during emergency closures of schools for short periods of time. This is a very different context than a virtual school that enrolled students, by choice, for years at a time. How to establish a successful school culture in an online school remains an open question for which the literature has no answers. We are still waiting, at the time of this writing, for a thought leader to examine the lessons that the pandemic, and its virtual schools, might hold for school culture in the future.

Lighting the Way

Throughout this chapter, I have mapped the research that speaks to online education in K-12 (much, but not all of which comes from the field of distance education), dance, arts improvisation, and school culture. In the next chapter, I will position my research within the domains of disaster management, organizational improvisation, cultural-historical action theory (CHAT) and dramaturgy. The multitude of subjects that inform this work echoes the stage lights shining on the performer/teacher in my conceptual framework. While adding many colours together, as many people have done while playing with paint in primary school, creates a muddy brown or nearly black colour (subtractive colour mixing), adding colours of light together (additive colour mixing), the way lighting designers do on a stage, creates a clear, white light (Schwartz & Krantz, 2016). By adding together knowledge from all of these domains, like those many colours of light, I hope to provide clarity on the experience of creating a K-12 virtual school during a global crisis and to illuminate the lessons of that experience.

Chapter 3: Theoretical Positioning

Buildings and bridges

Are made to bend in the wind

To withstand the world

That's what it takes

All that steel and stone

Are no match for the air, my friend

What doesn't bend breaks

What doesn't bend breaks (DiFranco, 1994)

In this chapter, I will review the available theory, definitions and literature related to improvisation as a creative and organisational practice and explore its relationship to K-12 online education. I will also explore how school administration can be positioned as an artistic practice and how that positioning can inform the practice of improvisation through the application of repertoire and risk-taking. I will examine the evolving science of improvisation as neuroscience seeks to understand how improvisation differs from planned action and what those differences suggest about how to apply improvisation to the educational context. Finally, I will present ideas from disaster management research that support the contention that improvisation, particularly in moments of stress, can create pockets of promise.

Definitions

Because improvisation is a word that has both a vernacular and a domain-specific meaning, it is important to define what it means in the context of this research. In the vernacular we use it to mean the action of making something up without pre-planning, creating something in the moment or inventing something unexpected. You might improvise a batch of cookies or a Halloween costume. However, in the arts domains that centre improvisational practice the word has a different meaning, one that often is not well understood outside of the domain itself.

Savrami (2017) describes improvisation as "a highly skilled and learned performance act [that] emerges largely from the dancers' individual kinesthetic experience, dance movement habits, physical restraints, training and memory. (p.276). Luckznik (2015) emphasises that improvisation is *embodied thinking*.

> Dancers use their bodies as tools to think with. They hardly differentiate between thinking and moving while creating. Moreover, the process is highly distributed between groups of dancers, as they communicate with each other mostly in a non-verbal way, and nonetheless successfully create work together which may have the appearance of choreographed, mapped or planned activity. (p.302).

Dance improvisation is also unique in its performance context in that it is often more meaningful to the performers than it is to the audience. Unlike its improvisational counterparts in theatre and music where bursts of improvisation are met with applause mid-riff, dance improvisation is not positioned as being *only* for the audience. The internal perspective on the act of performance matters as much as the gaze from the

spectators and movement often lacks the virtuosity associated with other dance styles. In the same way, the pedagogical and administrative practices that were improvised during pandemic distance education seem to matter very little to many audience members whose stakeholder groups (education unions, senior administrators, face-to-face teachers) are invested in a rapid return to the status quo. “Most teachers – as well as educational leaders – think of schooling in post-COVID times simply as ‘business as usual’, putting the experience of distance education far behind, and with a deep sigh of relief” (Mikiewicz & Jurczak-Morris, 2023, p. 17).

Further, I have tended to use the terms K-12 online education and virtual school interchangeably during this dissertation to distinguish the educational practice that developed in Ontario during the pandemic from more typical and formal forms of distance education and from the post-secondary sector broadly. However, I have avoided using terms such as emergency remote learning (which other authors have used to describe pandemic online programs) because Ontario’s virtual schools were not created as temporary stop-gaps during school closures but rather were programs that parents and students opted to enrol in for several months or years.

Defining Improvisation

There are as many different definitions of improvisation as there are dancers writing about it. Kaplan (2003) defines improvisation as a “moment in time unfurling” (p.216). Webb (2003) writes that when we improvise “we allow something unexpected to intrude” and that “this element of unpredictability changes everything. For the better” (p.241). Foster (2003), leans into the idea of *unpredictability*. She writes that

"improvisation presses us to extend into, expand beyond, extricate ourselves from that which was known. It encourages us or even forces us to be taken by surprise" (p.4). Spolin (1999), perhaps tellingly, does not attempt a definition of improvisation.

Disciplines that have a stronger connection to language and written notation are more likely to have a greater body of published research. We see this imbalance in the literature as searches for music and theatre improvisation yield far greater results than searches for publications related to dance improvisation. Improvisation also occupies a place in the popular culture on such television shows as *Whose Line is it Anyway?* (Leveson & Patterson, 2013-present) and *Curb Your Enthusiasm* (David, 2000-present) and films such as *Waiting for Guffman* (Guest, 1996) and *Best in Show* (Guest, 2000) which were partially or completely improvised.

Popular authors have also written about improvisation, including Saturday Night Live alumna Tina Fey, who was also part of the legendary improvisational comedy group The Second City. Fey (2011) writes that there are 4 rules to improvisation.

> The first rule of improvisation is AGREE. Always agree and SAY YES. [...] Now, obviously in real life you're not always going to agree with everything everyone says. But the Rule of Agreement reminds you to "respect what your partner has created" and to at least start from an open-minded place. [...]
>
> The second rule of improvisation is not only to say yes, but YES, AND. You are supposed to agree and then add something of your own. [...] It's your responsibility to contribute. Always make sure you're adding something to the discussion. Your initiations are worthwhile.

> The next rule is MAKE STATEMENTS. This is a positive way of saying "Don't ask questions all the time." [...] In other words: Whatever the problem, be part of the solution. [...]
>
> [T]his leads us to the best rule: THERE ARE NO MISTAKES, only opportunities. (pp. 84-85)

Fey's four rules are similar to experimental composer John Cage's *Rules for Teachers and Students* recorded by Sister Corita Kent and posted on the door of choreographer Merce Cunningham's studio in New York City[3]. Both Cage and Cunningham's work was based partly on principles of chance and relied heavily on improvisation as both a wellspring of ideas for composition and as a performance in itself. While some of Cage's rules are particular to the student-teacher relationship, several of the 10 rules overlap with the rules that Fey (2011) describes.

> Rule 4: Consider everything an experiment
>
> Rule 6: Follow the leader. Nothing is a mistake. There is no win and no fail. *There is only make*.
>
> Rule 7: The only rule is work. If you work it will lead to something. It is the people who do all the work all the time who eventually catch onto things. You can fool the fans - but not the players.
>
> Rule 8: Do not try to create and analyze at the same time. They are different processes.

[3] The origin of this list is contested but most sources agree that it came out of the teaching that John Cage did at the Cunningham studio in the 1960's.

> Rule 9: Be happy whenever you can manage it. Enjoy yourself. It is lighter than you think.
>
> Rule 10: We are breaking all the rules, even our own rules and how do we do that? By leaving plenty of room for “X” qualities. (Cage, N.D.)

Similarly, improvisation teacher Dave Morris, in his TedX Talk *The Way of Improvisation* (2012), presents seven skills of improvisation:

1. play
2. let yourself fail
3. listen
4. say yes
5. say and
6. play the game
7. relax and have fun

His explanation of rule number 6 “play the game” is particularly relevant to the context of creating a virtual school within the confines of PPM 164. He explains that the word game, in the context of an improvisation, does not refer to playground antics.

> What I mean by game is anything that has rules to it. I consider it a game. Monopoly? That’s a game. Filling out a job application? To me, that’s a game. There are rules that I am following and what rules do is they free us up to improvise. By giving ourselves these constrictions, that guide our impulses, it funnels our creative process into some kind of product. (Morris, 2012)

Referring to school as a game is not new. The term is used sometimes derisively (Fried, 2005) and sometimes strategically (Cain, 2017; Jorgensen, 2016). Performers are also playing a game, one whose goal is to engage an audience from when the theatre curtain goes up to when it comes down after the final curtain call. But what happens when all of the rules of the game change? What happens when school as usual is not any more? How do teachers and administrators cope with such a sudden change in how the game is played? How do they adapt? What do they learn from those adaptations?

Putting the I in Improvise

And what about me? What are my rules of improvisation?

One of the things I experience most often when improvising is the time it takes to get outside of my own patterns. When I improvise in a studio or on stage, it takes me a long time to let go of my well-trained movements and to release into a place of discovery and curiosity. The movements that come to me first are the ones I've already perfected; I always make the safe moves first. So, while I agree with the rules as described by Fey (2011), Cage (N.D.), and Morris (2012), I would add that having patience should be an additional rule of improvisation. Your best improvised decision-making will happen when you settle into your instincts and lose yourself in the movement, a process which takes time.

The Role of Improvisation in Dance Creation

While improvisation has probably always been a part of the process of dance creation, it became a force in dance history in the 1960s with the advent of a democratised dance practice that centred the individual body and attempted to approach movement from a functional, rather than an aesthetic perspective. Writing about the choreographer Anna Halprin, Jowitt (1988) states that

> …she utilised improvisation to get past dance clichés to more basic human responses. Such improvisations - "tasks" - whether complex or as simple as the one described above [moving in a circle as a group, accelerating and decelerating spontaneously], had a forthrightness that helped set the tone of the sixties; by casting the dancer as a decision-maker, intent on solving a particular problem. (p.317)

Steve Paxton, one of the founders of the Judson Church movement of experimental, cross-disciplinary, improvisational dance (and a fellow alumnus of Bennington College) writes about the inadequacy of language to describe improvisation. "Improvisation is a word for something which cannot keep a name; if it does stick around long enough to acquire a name, it has begun to move toward fixity" (2001, p.426). He also writes about the value of being lost and how becoming lost is an essential part of invention and creative work.

> Getting lost is possibly the first step toward finding new systems. Finding parts of new systems can be one of the rewards for getting lost. With a few new systems we discover we are oriented again, and can begin to use the cross pollination of one system with another to construct ways to move on.

> Getting lost is proceeding into the unknown. To reject the familiar, so rooted in our nervous system and minds, requires discipline. The difficulty is that we have to know so much to understand what it is we do and why we do it, in order to know what to avoid (Paxton, 2001, p. 425).

Since those first experimental days, the practice of dance improvisation has evolved to the point that it is now a genre that is taught in virtually every post-secondary dance program as well as many elite professional training programs. Canada's National Ballet School, for instance, has improvisation classes on the timetable of every young dancer in their professional training program. One of my teachers, Sarah Rudner, used to tell stories of marathon improvisation sessions with the choreographer Twyla Tharpe wherein Tharpe would pull snippets of her dancers' improvisational movements to use as building blocks for her choreography. This practice has become mainstream as many choreographers now expect dancers to be able to improvise as part of the choreographic process (sometimes called bodystorming).

> Improvisation is a valuable process for improving dancers' embodied sense of self and awareness, by stimulating divergent thinking during decision-making. Decision-making is a cognitive process for dancers and forms a fundamental part of improvisation where the individual aesthetic choices and identity is revealed (Savrami 2020, p. 280).

Whereas dancers of a previous era were expected to be passive instruments of a choreographer's creative brilliance, today's dancers are more often positioned as co-creators whose unique movement vocabularies inform the choreographer's aesthetic and functional choices.

Similarly, during the career of a principal or a teacher there is a significant amount of time when the role is to be a vessel for curriculum or policy that is dictated to you. Autonomy is not always at the forefront of educator practice. During the development of pandemic-era virtual schools, however, teachers and principals were afforded a great deal of autonomy in creating structures, routines and pedagogy to support this new way of teaching and learning within the confines of PPM 164. We were in the position of co-creators, members of an improvisational ensemble who are building a scene as the audience watches them problem-solve. The theatre curtain became transparent (see Figure 1) and we were unprotected by the usual conventions and brick walls that traditionally separate the players on the educational stage. In the next section, I will examine how the elements of that performance related to each other using activity theory.

Activity Theory and the COI

Schools are institutions that we all have a basic understanding of because almost everyone attends a school for over a decade of their lives. This familiarity might lead us to be a little flippant about the interplay of factors at work in a school context. How complicated can it be? There are teachers and students; teachers teach, students learn… voila! Cultural-historical activity theory (CHAT) (Foot, 2014) suggests that this familiar context is in fact much more complicated than it might initially appear.

> CHAT centres on three core ideas: 1) humans act collectively, learn by doing, and communicate in and via their actions; 2) humans make, employ, and adapt tools of all kinds to learn and communicate; and 3) community is central to the

> process of making and interpreting meaning—and thus to all forms of learning, communicating, and acting (Foot, 2014).

Viewing pandemic-era virtual schools through the lens of CHAT invites us to think about how the actions of students and parents relative to enrolment in the virtual school and participation (or non-participation) in the virtual classroom communicates their ideas, opinions and feelings about schools and education. A CHAT lens also opens the door to considering the contradictions and instabilities within virtual schools as an asset. A CHAT paradigm posits that "learning occurs when a constellation of contradictions within and between activity systems emerges and then is creatively but partially resolved" (Ke, et. al, 2023, p. 2). A Creatively Resolved Constellation of Contradictions could be an alternative title for this dissertation.

As Willocks (2023) writes, "systemic contradictions manifest as disturbances in practice but also stimulate innovation and change" (p. 30). This notion of contradiction and disturbance within the activity system is echoed by Engeström (2008), one of the key scholars of CHAT, who states that "activity systems are in constant instability. Systemic contradictions manifest as disturbances in practice but also stimulate innovation and change" (p. 206). He also suggests that, because of rapid growth in technology, deconstruction of hierarchies, and a rapidly changing marketplace, teams of employees and managers (and students) look "like a temporary and patched-up tent in a windy landscape – or a web on the wind" (p. 194). A similar deconstruction of hierarchies and rapid change occurred during virtual schools with experienced teachers

being mentored by new teachers who were more technologically savvy and experienced with video conferencing software.

This idea of a windy landscape speaks to the power of dances and dancers “to create special worlds” (Benzwie, 2019, p.524). Dancers can make something from what many would perceive to be nothing: the human body in space, something so common as to appear inconsequential and yet so full of potential for surprise and possibility. Dance philosopher Kimerer LaMothe positions culture as emerging from this creative movement, these creative moments.

> Culture consists of these bodily movements – of movement patterns that have been discovered, remembered, and passed on for their ability to help humans cultivate life-enabling relationships with sources of sustenance present in their natural and social environments (2019, p. 119).

In the context of the virtual school, I find LaMothe’s definition of culture to be more informative than the ways we often talk about the culture of schools. Many of the elements of school culture that are foregrounded in public schools relate to sharing a physical space (assemblies, bulletin boards, school rituals, sports teams, mascots concerts, and playgrounds) and do not have an analogous practice or place in an online context. The culture of face-to-face schools is remarkably durable and slow to change and has largely reverted back to its pre-COVID state in the aftermath of the pandemic (Mikiewicz & Jurczak-Morris, 2023).

The many classrooms of each Ontario virtual school operated, by and large, unaware of each other. They didn’t pass each other in the hallway, they didn’t rub

shoulders on the school yard and they didn't sit together at the Remembrance Day assembly. Often, even their teachers weren't in the same physical space, making the creation of a school culture much more dependent on the decisions of the one person all students and staff and parents interacted with: the principal.

LaMothe's (2019) definition of culture is based in dance but it is also rooted in relationship and the power of those relationships to create and sustain each other in a social web. It was the interconnectedness of the people within the virtual school and the strength of those connections (teacher/students, teacher/parents, parents/students, principal/everyone) that supported student success. When any of those relationships was weak or absent, our windy web of socially distanced connections fell apart. The next section will describe those relationships in a visual model.

Muddy Puddles[4] – CHAT Visualized

Researchers using CHAT as a theoretical framework often create geometric models of their activity systems that identify the dyadic or triadic relations that are at play within an activity system. The nodes of intersection between the members of a system "makes possible the analysis of multiple relationships within an activity system at a particular point in time and over time" (Foot, 2014, p. 27). Figure 2 provides a general example of such a model.

[4] A reference to Peppa Pig and a nod to all of the children who watched too much television during the pandemic, so much so that they developed British accents (Yang, 2021).

Figure 2

Engeström's Model of Cultural Historical Activity Theory (CHAT)

(1987, p.78)

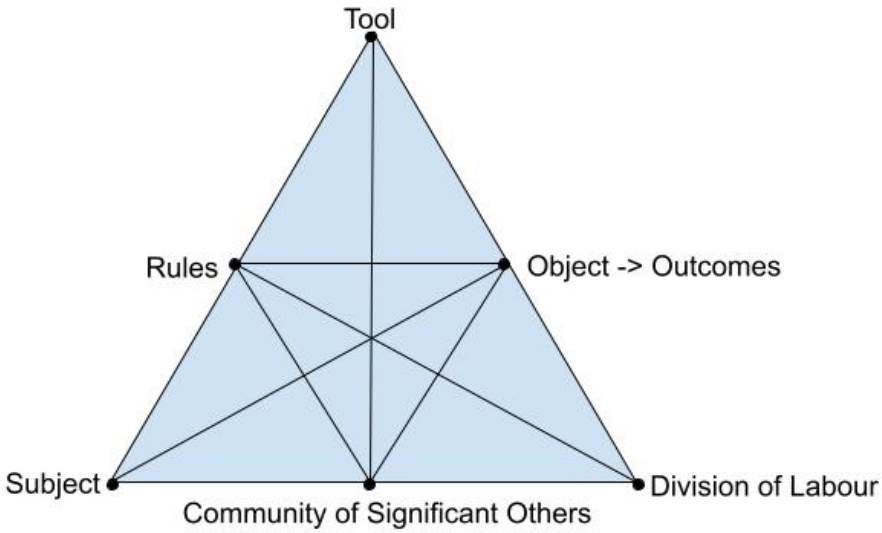
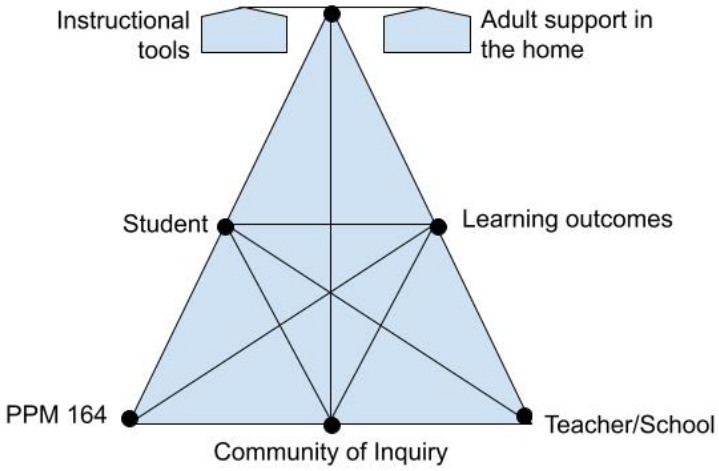


Figure 3 is a visual model of how I would conceptualise pandemic-era virtual schools via a CHAT framework.

Figure 3

A CHAT Model of Pandemic-era Virtual Schools



Note: This figure demonstrates the precarious balancing act between guardian support in the home and effective instructional tools used by the teacher. If one is present and the other is absent, the top of the figure will topple.

In the virtual school, the usual dyadic relationship between students and teachers was made triadic by the presence (or absence) and availability of the adult(s) in the home. That relationship, in turn, significantly impacted the outcomes of the instruction that was provided. While in the activity system of a face-to-face school, parent involvement is an important factor, it does not impact on the learning environment of students in the same direct way. In the model above, the effectiveness of a teacher's interaction with students in the online classroom, can be tipped, either positively or negatively, by the supportive or unsupportive involvement of adults in the home. The adults' involvement appears both at the top of the figure as well as being embedded in the Community of Inquiry (Garrison et al., 2000) at the base of the figure since a student

working in an unstable or unsupportive home environment would find it difficult if not impossible to maintain cognitive and social presence in the online classroom.

The Community of Inquiry Framework (Garrison et al., 2000) is the base of the CHAT triangle pictured above (in Figure 3) for a reason. The pooled and blurry paint in my conceptual framework, the coloured paint that blends together and becomes messy while the coloured lights combine to clarity, forms the slippery base on which online instruction, even in a novel context like the virtual school, rests. The COI remains foundational to teaching at a distance, although in this context its lines are blurred by uncertainty, like the line between frontstage and backstage becomes blurred in the teaching and administrative performance of a virtual school. It is no longer crisp and defined. It has to shape shift and stretch to accommodate students and programming that it was never designed to frame.

Administration as Art

Because this research will focus on improvisation within an organisation, namely a school, merely examining an arts definition is not adequate. Organisational improvisation (OI) is an emerging area of research within the field of Management that examines the role of improvisation in the behaviour of organisations. In their review of the OI literature, Hadida, Tarvainen and Rose (2015) define organisational improvisation as

> the conception of unhindered action as it unfolds, by an organisation or its members, often (yet not exclusively) in response to an unexpected interruption or change of activity. This definition foregoes additional qualifiers, since its

> austerity already obliges organisations and organisational actor(s) to act extemporaneously, spontaneously, intuitively and ad hoc in an emergent manner. The convergence of planning and action is also not used in this definition, since it seems to imply that any rapid decision-making, due to a degree of convergence, is improvisational. Yet, improvisation is not deciding *just before* acting, but *while* acting (p.440).

This distinction, deciding *while* acting versus deciding *before* acting, implies that in order to improvise, organisations and the people within them, need to have at their immediate disposal a repertoire of moves that they can put in place, using intuition and inspiration, during the improvisational process. This idea of repertoire speaks to the distinction between art and craft. “The craftsperson knows [...] what he will make before he begins his work” (Harris, 2006, p. 49). The artist does not. However, the artist without technique, without craft, has no repertoire. “The better the technique of the artist (student, teacher, or administrator), and the richer the knowledge base from which he can draw, the richer will be the work of the imagination” (Harris, 2006, p. 58).

In my research context as a relatively new school administrator tasked with developing a virtual school in a compressed period of time, I drew as heavily on everything I had learned about schools and teaching in my proceeding 18 years of work in education as I did on my experiences as an improviser and choreographer, a maker of art who was now making a school. I also drew on my experiences as a parent of two children. This relationship of craft to art harkens back to Paxton (2001) who identified that the difficulty for dance improvisers “is that we have to know so much to understand

what it is we do and why we do it, in order to know what to avoid" (p. 425). Paxton's contention is that through understanding the craft of a dancer, the improviser knows what not to do and that knowing what not to do opens the window for choice-making in the moment. Equally, it was through understanding the system of public education and how its many pieces fit together that I was able to improvise a school.

Harris connects this idea of technique in the service of art-making to school administration, writing that at best, a school leader's action involves both art and craft. While there are occasions when principals or school teachers must fashion their action (means) to a pre-designed end, there are many other times when they act intuitively. Many take risks, well-considered risks, granted, but risks nonetheless (Harris, 2006, p. 51).

The risk-taking that Harris identifies occurs in traditional brick-and-mortar school settings. Unsurprisingly, it is an even more prominent feature of administering a pandemic-era virtual school, a setting in which the well-worn structures of school were stripped away and a yawning gulf of unknowns was left in their stead. In this setting, everything felt like a risk, a step off the proscenium arch and into the unlit void.

In teacher and administrator preparation programs all of our time is spent acquiring a beginner's repertoire of moves. No time is spent learning how to improvise, how to make those in-the-moment choices well, but as a person who has studied improvisation as an artistic practice, I know it is something you *can* learn and improve with practice. Most of the moves in a teacher's or administrator's repertoire are learnt on-the-job by watching other teachers and administrators and through in-service training and professional development. Where and when are we supposed to learn how to

improvise? As the world becomes more uncertain, improvisational skills become increasingly critical.

This research does not cover a period of time when public schools, whether online or face-to-face, were operating within their usual, rehearsed framework of instructional and leadership practices. Virtual schools that were created during the COVID-19 pandemic were not business as usual; they were “business unusual” (Tint et al., 2015, p.75). The literature on disaster management, therefore, is informative in providing us with a definition of applied improvisation that corresponds with the highly-charged, ever-changing context of school administration and teaching during the pandemic. This literature will be explored in greater detail later in this chapter.

Tint et al. (2015) describe applied improvisation during humanitarian disasters as using “existing skills and knowledge with available resources to respond in the moment” (p. 81).

> Applied improvisation enhances experiential training by providing skill building for agile leadership. This includes cultivating skills in awareness, mental agility, decision making; adaptability, flexibility, comfort with ambiguity, focus and confidence. (p.81)

All of the skills listed above were critical for teacher and administrator success during the development of virtual school programming; without them, I would have remained stuck, trying in vain to replicate a classroom context that had suddenly vanished.

Bound and Free[5]

The very boundaries that were imposed by the government and the rules that were already in place (collective agreements, assessment guidelines, the attention span of 5-year-olds) forced teachers to be creative as they improvised a workable pedagogy. While there was frustration related to the constraints that were imposed, they also forced a creativity that might otherwise not have been discovered. Sir Ken Robinson (2001) writes that "great work often comes from working within formal constraints" (p.133) and that, while we might think that creativity is the product of a completely blank slate, in fact that creative achievement comes from "using standard forms to achieve unique effects and original insights" (p.133).

Sawyer (2011) focuses on this interplay between structure and flow in teaching and contends that "the best teaching is disciplined improvisation" and that the "most effective classroom interaction balances structure and script with flexibility and improvisation" (p.2). He also emphasizes the collaborative aspect of teaching as shared creation between teachers and students who "are collectively generating the classroom performance" (p.5).

If the boundaries of policy and procedure provided structure, then the value of surprise pushed us to experiment. Because of my training in improvisation, I, as the leader of the school, valued surprise, uncertainty, and subjectivity and those values gave the teachers permission to push boundaries, to try, even if it meant we might fail.

Peter Moss (2014), writing about early childhood education, states that uncertainty and subjectivity "mean taking on responsibility, for making choices that there

[5] This subtitle is a reference to movement dynamics.

is not and cannot be certainty, universal truth, or an objective yardstick" (p.110). Surprise, he writes, "is about the importance attached to the not predicted, the not expected, the truly new and original" (p. 110). Valuing these qualities and giving teachers permission to dwell in them is a difficult, liminal space for an administrator to settle in but that uncomfortable feeling of being in neither one space or another is very familiar to those trained in improvisation. As an improviser, I became accustomed to not knowing and I learned to trust that solutions will arise where none are immediately obvious.

For instance, students in Grades four to eight are required to take French as a Second Language in Ontario's schools (Native languages are an alternative option) (Government of Ontario, 2021). How could teachers deliver this second-language learning in a virtual classroom without being disruptive to the classroom teacher and creating a scheduling nightmare? I also had to think about the number of minutes allocated to all of the other subjects and the technical problems associated with host controls of synchronous video links (who could mute students, screen share, etc…) if teachers were to come in and out of meetings. In order to avoid all of those problems and maximize our staffing, Core French was delivered asynchronously with pre-recorded lessons and activities posted in the Google Classroom. This approach allowed us to provide the required content without disrupting or creating more problems for the classroom teacher; it was a successful improvisation, at least at a logistical level.

This is Your Brain on Improv

Improvisation has increasingly become an area of interest for neuroscience researchers as they attempt to distinguish between the brain activity when rehearsed tasks are performed versus what happens in the brain when an artist is improvising. For the purposes of compatibility with the functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) technology that neuroscientists use to image the brain, experimental subjects for this research are exclusively musicians (piano and freestyle rap). fMRI uses increases or decreases in blood flow to different parts of the brain to infer activity in those areas while subjects perform various tasks (Limb, 2010; Landau & Limb, 2017).

What Limb and his colleagues have found is that improvisation recruits activity from different parts of the brain than learned or rote playing/rapping; the researchers saw more activity in areas of the brain related to self-expression and less in the areas related to self-monitoring. While trading fours (a jazz term that describes the back-and-forth between musicians every four bars of music), jazz musicians were observed to have more activity in Broca's area which is thought to be involved in expressive communication. The motor and visual areas of the rappers' brains were active during freestyling which was not the case when they rapped something memorized (Limb, 2010; Landau & Limb, 2017). While the science is still preliminary, it speaks to there being fundamental differences between performing a rehearsed task and improvising, even at a neurological level.

My formative experiences as a dancer trained in improvisation and choreography prepared me to lead in ways that were well suited to the chaotic circumstances during the COVID-19 pandemic. These experiences have given me a very different perspective

than many teachers and administrators who most often come from non-artistic academic backgrounds. While it is unlikely that brain imaging will be able to compare brain activity in improvised versus rehearsed dance or school administration in the foreseeable future, my lived experience is that the two feel very different and that the skill set for one does not necessarily transfer to the other. In both cases, “since there is no time to escape the precarious situation, the experience is immersive and unmediated” (Savrami, 2017, p,280).

No Time to Think

I’ve always thought of myself as a reflective practitioner, someone who cared about thinking and who valued quiet moments to think deeply about the pedagogical choices I’d made during the course of the day and how I might approach them differently the next time. At one stage in my career, I did a lot of driving across our school board (an area with roughly the same number of square kilometres as the country of Albania) which gave me built-in time for reflection every day; it was a gift. I would have agreed with Rose (2013) that “reflective time is necessarily slow” (p.3) and that reflection is “a form of deep thought that takes place in conditions of quietude and slowness” (p.16).

However, my experience administering a virtual school that had to be created in less than a month and observing the teachers in that school as they improvised a workable pedagogy within the confines of their circumstances, using their existing repertoire of pedagogical moves and while “professionally naked” (Hargreaves, 2021, p. 1853) has changed my perspective on reflective teaching. Words like “quietude” and

"slowness" became comical during the 2020-22 school years as they were replaced by words like "vortex" and "chaos" (Caruso Parnell, 2021). There wasn't time for reflection, as traditionally defined, but we were, through improvisation, building a school in an iterative creative process that suggested reflection was still taking place, somehow.

Walker and Russ (2010) suggest a very different, more action-oriented definition of reflective practice.

> The 'reflective practitioner' is somebody capable of thinking on his or her feet, essentially developing a new understanding in response to every professional situation. It is this concept of professionalism that seems very compatible with humanitarian work, where in the midst of an emergency the clear-headed humanitarian is expected to respond calmly and intuitively in a situation that may be totally new and unexpected (p.7).

If we replace "humanitarian" with "teacher" or "school administrator" we have a more accurate description of the moment-to-moment reflection and improvised decision-making that was happening in pandemic-era virtual schools.

The disaster experience has more to tell us about what happened during the creation of these virtual schools. Rebecca Solnit, in her book *A Paradise Built in Hell: The Extraordinary Communities That Arise in Disaster* (2009), writes extensively about the beauty, creativity and joy that, in spite of difficult circumstances, arise during moments of crisis. "You wake up in a society suddenly transformed, and chances are good you will be part of that transformation in what you do, in whom you connect to, in how you feel. Something changes" (p.21).

As during many more violent disasters, the pandemic upended the usual rules about school. Teachers who had never worked together were suddenly colleagues, new teachers (who had more comfort with technology) were suddenly the experts and seasoned teachers were the novices, and they were teaching from different spaces, using different tools and for different students. Nothing was status quo. We all "felt liberated by the lifting of all those rules, as do people in most disasters when the boundaries fall away, and every stranger can be spoken to and all share the experience" (Solnit, 2009, p.32).

COVID is a "long disaster" (Solnit, 2009, p. 69) and "a constant emergency" (MacLennan, 1958) but like its more dramatic, faster-moving cousins, it presents the school system with a rare opportunity for profound change. As Prince writes in his 1920 dissertation, one of the first academic works that focuses on the aftermath of a disaster (in this case the 1917 Halifax Explosion), "disasters open up societies to change, accelerate change that was under way or break the hold of whatever was preventing change" (p. i). I contend that the distance learning that took place during the COVID-19 pandemic is just the beginning of K-12 distance education in the Ontario public school system (and perhaps beyond) and that by examining the improvisation that took place during the period of the pandemic, we can learn lessons about how to proceed with implementing these changes in a way that respects both teachers and students.

I feel compelled to explore this period of my career formally, through research, because it is so singular. I am afraid of losing the stories from this period as the pandemic ebbs and we return to the normal life of schools. I also know that, as I pointed out in the introduction, there will be an ongoing stream of research flowing out of the

pandemic that examines and analyses the quantitative data of learning loss, mental health problems, teacher burnout and many other issues. In that glut of predictable data I worry that the stories of what it was like to live through this period of history as an educator will be overwhelmed and that the points of light will get lost in the darkness. I want to render my experience, to toss my “voice into the confusion” (Bochner & Ellis, 2016, p. 117) and to give something back to an experience that has shaped me. In the next chapter I will describe how I plan on going about that reflexive process and how the process itself remains somewhat improvisational.

Chapter 4: Methods

> To think in narrative terms one must enter the realm of meaning. Passing through the portal of desire for objective truth and the forsaking the need for details devoid of judgement (an empirical approach) we ask -- what does it mean? (Speir, 2000, p.6-7)

Perplexology

In this section I will explore the methodology I will employ in my research and how my experience as a Kindergarten teacher within the framework of Ontario's Full-Day Kindergarten program (which is heavily influenced by the pedagogies of the Preschools and Early Childhood Centres of Reggio Emilia, Italy) has informed my perspective on research in education. I will also outline how the process of writing about improvisation is, itself, improvisational.

I find it challenging to identify an affiliation with a particular axiology, epistemology, or ontology in the context of this period of educational history that's required me to be endlessly flexible. I chafe at having to declare my allegiance one way or the other; it seems unnecessarily prescriptive and I have a reflexive (perhaps Jewish) reaction against declarations of ideological allegiance. I find myself having a *machlochet l'shem shamayim* (an argument for the sake of heaven or, in some readings, for the sake of truth) with myself. More importantly, as an educator working in the field, the terms seem remote to me, detached from my reality; I have a hard time scaffolding them onto my practice. What kind of an ology is that? A perplexology, perhaps?

What I care about when it comes to my philosophical paradigm is the impact that stance has on my practice as an educator and a leader. If I believe that everything is knowable, that truth is objective and measurable, then I'm going to approach my practice from that stance. I will expect teachers to test children in a way that provides numerical scores and to compare their scores to those of other students. I might compare the teachers' performance to the performance of other teachers and I would encourage my staff to use methods of assessment that offer standardization, objectivity, and clear definitions of learning. If, on the other hand, I believe that nothing is truly knowable, that everything is subjective and that truth exists only in the eye of the postmodern beholder, then I would expect students to be assessed anecdotally, descriptively, and holistically. I would not want to assess students or teachers against a benchmark.

As a classroom teacher, I spent many years working on the implementation of Ontario's Kindergarten Program which emphasizes exactly this interpretivist type of assessment. As an undergraduate, I attended Bennington College, where all assessment is narrative. However, the reality is that I work in a system that tests students against benchmarks and being categorically opposed to an instructionist paradigm is not going to be professionally productive or practical.

While I believe that it is important to recognize the subjectivity of standardized assessments, they're also, frankly, useful. Using the Fountas and Pinnel (2017) Literacy Continuum benchmarks for reading assessment or the Key Math (Connolly, 2008) evaluation tool or even looking at a gap analysis of Education Quality and Accountability

Office (EQAO)[6] scores in a school, can give us important insight into students' learning in a more concise, action-oriented way than descriptive assessments ever could. So, I hesitate to align myself absolutely with one camp or the other.

As an administrator, I also find myself pulling from a number of schools of thought in order to effectively support my staff members. Some teachers work well within a constructivist paradigm and are able to allow for ambiguity and subjectivity in their practice. Other teachers need a more instructivist approach to modifying their practice and require me to be more direct in my leadership. Being effective in any of these applied contexts is about best fit, not perfect philosophical alignment.

Evidence-based Practice in Public Education

Public education is often a safe harbour for positivism; we like to persuade ourselves through the use of standardised tests, diagnostic assessments and percentage grades we can accurately measure what students are learning and how much they're retaining. This bias towards positivism can be clearly identified in Ontario's assessment policy document, Growing Success (Government of Ontario, 2010). We tell ourselves that our practices are evidence-based, although our connection to that evidence is at best second-hand (Hattie, 2009; Hattie & Yates, 2014) and at worst, wrong (Bergeron & Rivard, 2017; Ontario Human Rights Commission, 2019).

This positivist discourse of standardisation and measurement contributes to the discomfort that I've observed amongst many teachers with any suggestion that there

[6] EQAO organizes the provincial standardized testing regime in Ontario's publicly funded schools (grade 3 and 6 literacy and numeracy, grade 9 mathematics, grade 10 literacy). The tests are referred to colloquially by teachers and administrators as EQAO tests.

are significant and important aspects of learning and teaching that we cannot measure. It is difficult in a positivist system to be a person who questions “the restructuring of schools according to the neo-liberal, neo-positivist and market ideologies of the day” (Harris, 2006, p. 46). Therefore, while I disagree with the dominant positivist stance, I am at heart a realist and I know that the systemic changes needed to shift that paradigm are likely beyond my reach. It therefore becomes important to learn to live within positivism and to carve out niches of sanctuary where a divergent discourse can germinate. For many years of my career, that protective niche was Kindergarten.

All I Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten (Fulgham, 2003)

The Growing Success addendum for Ontario’s Kindergarten program describes a very different set of underlying principles compared to the original document which covers Grades 1-12. Prior to the document being released in 2016 (with minor updates in 2018), I and other Kindergarten teachers participated in intense debates with Ministry of Education staff regarding the use of tools like success criteria and learning goals which, while described in the Grade 1-12 document as best practises, were both, we felt, inappropriate for use with Kindergarten students and contradicted the interpretivist stance of the Kindergarten Program Document (Government of Ontario, 2016).

At a very early meeting in the Spring of 2010, prior to the implementation of the Kindergarten program in September of that year, our board team of educators put up a blank sheet of chart paper titled *Kindergarten Timetable by John Cage* when asked to create a proposal for a Kindergarten day plan. We were trying to send the message, by

referring to Cage's chance composition *4'33"*[7], that Ministry of Education officials were asking us to create the unknowable, that the flow of the day would arise from our lived experience with children and that we wanted to leave space for serendipity without the confines of a predetermined structure. Some officials were not amused by our cheek.

This push and pull between the dominant positivist discourse and the counter discourse of interpretivist, constructivist pedagogy is alive and well within the Kindergarten Addendum to Growing Success (2018). The document describes that learning goals and success criteria from the Grade 1-12 document have morphed into "noticing and naming the learning" (p. 7) in Kindergarten, represented by documentation that educators gather on a regular basis while observing and interacting with children.

While the assessment document tries to stand astride the positivist/interpretive paradigm gap, the Kindergarten program document itself (2016) is planted firmly on the side of interpretivism.

> Young children reveal their understanding in what they *say*, what they *do*, and what they depict, or *represent*. Educators observe, listen, and ask probing questions in order to document and interpret the children's thinking and learning and, in their interactions with the children, to develop a shared understanding of what they are learning and what the next steps in their learning should be. (p.36)

The program document even quotes Carla Rinaldi, one of the most prominent authors from and proponents of the Preschools and Early Childhood Centres of Reggio Emilia, widely considered to be the gold standard of early childhood education and a

[7] This composition in 3 movements can be performed on any instrument and involves the performer not playing the instrument for 4 minutes and 33 seconds while whatever ambient noise occurs (which changes every performance) is the only sound in the venue (Schwarm, 2013).

pedagogical approach with a strongly anti-positivist stance. Ontario's Kindergarten program draws inspiration from the Reggio Emilia approach throughout the document but nowhere is the link stronger than in the use of pedagogical documentation as a reflective research tool for educators.

Pedagogical Documentation

Pedagogical documentation is a reflective research practice that developed in Reggio Emilia and is deeply tied to the democratic pedagogy of that program. The Ontario Kindergarten Program document describes it as a

> process of gathering and analyzing a wide range of evidence of a child's thinking and learning over time and using the insights gained to *make the child's thinking and learning visible* to the child and the child's family. The process enables educators to support further learning for each child in the most effective way possible" (Government of Ontario, 2016, p. 36).

Carla Rinaldi of Reggio Emilia characterizes pedagogical documentation as "visible listening" (in Fraser, 2006, p. 68). Carol Ann Wein, who was heavily involved in the pedagogical positioning of the Full Day Kindergarten (FDK) program, describes it as a "form of conscious teacher research" that makes "children's thinking, their theories about the world visible to others" (2008, p. 10). Wein identifies "going public" (2013, p. 3) as an essential part of the process of pedagogical documentation.

> Educators "go public", willing to show others their documentation and to be interested in others' responses to it. We hold onto this stance of curiosity. What does this experience mean to this child? To other children? To parents/caregivers?

> To other educators? As we widen our frame of reference for reflecting on experiences, and share our practice with children, families, and colleagues, we strengthen partnerships, and open ourselves to new understandings. (Wein, 2013, p. 3)

For me and for many other FDK educators, blogging was one of the ways we chose to go public as it opened us up to input and feedback from like-minded educators in the province and beyond. It also allowed us to connect with the families of our students in a way that paper newsletters and bulletin boards could not; parents could read about what was happening in their child's class on their smartphones or laptops whenever and wherever it was convenient. They could also comment and share the posts with friends and grandparents. The community of Kindergarten bloggers in Ontario exploded in the early part of the 2010s and, while my own blog evolved and slowly ended as my role changed, many of those blogs have continued throughout the decade, remaining focused on the learning experiences of teachers, early childhood educators, students, and families in FDK.

I have published in the past using pedagogical documentation as a research method (Wood et al., 2015; Shawana et al., 2017) and appreciate the way that method captures a learning experience in an authentically complex and messy way. It is also the method that I have used to analyse and problematize my own teaching practice as a classroom teacher and curriculum consultant, as archived on my blog from 2012 to 2019[8]. The tools of pedagogical documentation are, after so many years, baked into my

[8] www.teachingontheverge.com

practice such that when I started auditioning research methods for this dissertation, I inevitably looked for alignment with that perspective.

Applications to the Context

While pedagogical documentation is not listed as a research method in any graduate-level textbooks, it is increasingly making inroads as an accepted methodology in the academy (Richard, 2013). It shares many of the same practices and perspectives as other qualitative and arts-based research (ABR) methods as it tries to authentically represent a learning experience using artefacts, video, photography, transcripts and other traces of learning. However, in pedagogical documentation, the traces are gathered in the learning moment and in the research I will describe in chapters 5 and 6, I am engaging with material in the past tense.

In terms of best fit to this research context, there are some important considerations in choosing an appropriate research method. There will be plenty of researchers who will compare the learning outcomes of virtual classrooms versus face-to-face classrooms and who will dissect the many ways in which students struggled to learn during the COVID-19 pandemic; that work has already begun. My interest, and what I feel I'm best placed to investigate, is what it was like to be, "building a plane while flying" (p.1) as Farhadi and Winton (2021) so aptly labelled the process.

I want to maintain all of the messiness of that process: the tangents, the false starts and the tangles. I want to capture my own lived experience as the person directing the building-while-flying crew. Therefore, a qualitative and interpretive methodology is called for, one that will allow me to gain insight into how pandemic pedagogy and administrative practice developed and what I experienced as a

professional and as a person in that unprecedented process. I also want to draw on all the skills I've acquired in becoming a close observer of my own learning experiences through the pedagogical documentation process.

I also want a methodology that will enable me to capture the emotional highs and lows of this experience and that will evoke them for the reader so that they can feel some of what I felt. School administration is, in my experience, always emotionally charged. A principal or vice principal is frequently managing situations that are, or have the potential to become, dangerous and difficult but that are also frequently sad, frustrating or hilarious. During the COVID-19 pandemic, those situations were made all the more challenging because of the distance between teachers, students, and administrators. It is important for me to be able to communicate those emotions in the context of my research.

Pedagogical Documentation in the Rear-view Mirror

Pedagogical documentation, like many other qualitative research methods, accepts the "embrace of uncertain possibilities" (Wein, 2008, p.157). As Peter Moss (2014) writes,

> *uncertainty* and *subjectivity* are two values whose importance lies in their recognition of, indeed welcome for, irreducible diversity and, therefore, for there being other perspectives and knowledges, other ways of thinking and acting. These values support an open-endedness, an obligation that keeps the questions of meaning open as a locus of debate, which is the opposite of the closure that comes from a will to know and the certainty that there is one true

> answer to any question discernible by objective observation and reason (2014, p. 110).

In addition to my teaching blog, I have been writing about my personal experiences as a parent, teacher, community leader and spouse since the fall of 2015 when began writing personal essays for a variety of publications[9]. It was both a welcome secondary income stream and an opportunity to refine my writing. I had the opportunity to work with some excellent editors who helped me to clarify my ideas and strengthen my voice.

All of these experiences have made evocative autoethnography (Bochner & Ellis, 2016) a logical choice for a research method as I try to make sense of my experience as the leader of a pandemic-era virtual school and to draw meaning from that experience that other school leaders might be able to apply to their own contexts. This sense and meaning-making will be, by definition, highly subjective, as autoethnography eschews the objective and instead "celebrates the researcher's voice" (Cohen, et al., 2018, p. 298).

> Autoethnography recognizes the unavoidable influence of the researcher on the research process, and raises reflexivity, subjectivity, emotionality, personal characteristics of the researcher and autobiography to new prominence in the research (Cohen, et al., 2018, p. 298).

[9] kveller.com, thecjn.ca, forward.com

It is also an obvious choice from a professional point of view as it provides a context within which I can explore my professional praxis as a leader and administrator and the tension between those roles. As Lyle (2017) writes,

> as a framework, autoethnography allows scholar-practitioners to interrogate self in concert with professional practice while locating self-study relationally across various contexts within which they live and teach. As such, autoethnography allows us to understand professional practice as grounded in personal history and becomes the storied account of praxis development (p. x).

Specifically, I am proposing the use of Evocative Autoethnography as described by Bochner and Ellis (2016). This methodology embraces a writing style that "artfully arrange[s] life in ways that enable readers to enter into dialogue with our lives as well as with their understanding of their own" (p. 79) and avoids the pitfalls of what Billing (2013) refers to as the "academic dialect" that makes so much social science writing impossible for non-academic audiences to understand. The pandemic and the ways that it upended many aspects of public education are a common lived experience; the writing about it should be accessible to those who lived through it: parents, students, teachers and administrators alike.

Autoethnography, as an artistic practice, also has a rich history, although it may not have been labelled that way by the artists who mine their own lived experience for inspiration and material. Art has always been able to transform personal experience into shared experience. When I stand on stage and dance, what starts as my own private process becomes public and common, open to interpretation and analysis. In this

research, “the artistic practice is both the method of inquiry and the content” (Leavy, 2023, p. 213) therefore “a sound methodology includes attention to craft, and the aesthetic power of the piece impacts audience response and thus usefulness” (Leavy, 2023, p. 228). The work goes out into the world, like children who grow up, and the artist has to let go of the meaning-making process as a casualty of sharing it with an audience; they will make their own meaning.

Culturing a School: The Petri Dish of Virtual School Culture

School cultures usually evolve over long periods of time; they are the product of all of the people who have passed through the hallways, their values and their rituals. What is left of a school culture when there aren’t any shared physical spaces and when the students and the staff have been hastily thrown together from more than 30 different schools? During the period of emergency pandemic online learning “the learning process [was] detached from the mechanisms of regionalisation and rituals hitherto associated with ‘going to school’” (Mikiewicz & Jurczak-Morris, 2023, p. 84) but in Ontario’s virtual schools, there was an opportunity to develop new rituals and to think about what we wanted to keep or jettison from our existing school cultures.

Principals in face-to-face schools have been metaphorically positioned as ambassadors and bridge builders (Johnson, 2017) orchestra conductors and ship’s captains (Hernández-Amorós & Martinez Ruiz, 2018), and landscape architects (Pushor & Maeers, 2022). These metaphors imply that school leaders are able to exert a certain measure of control or at least influence over their environment and the people in it, whether they choose to exert that control directly or indirectly.

However, school leadership during the pandemic evokes very different metaphors. Da'as et al. (2023) report that during the pandemic principals thought of themselves as fire fighters, army commanders, jugglers, acrobats, the spine of the school, a lighthouse and the official school parent (the person everyone turns to for comfort and guidance). These metaphors suggest that school cultures during the COVID-19 pandemic differed from the norm and that the principal's primary role was to manage the rapid pace of change for their staff and students, buffering the extremes for everyone else while trying to stay balanced themselves.

Once again, Ontario's virtual schools occupy a liminal space between these two polarities as they were insulated from some of the most extreme changes that impacted face-to-face schools such as perpetual pivoting to and from online learning, cancelled classes due to staff illness, and ever-evolving public health guidelines, while also being constantly in the process of trying to create something new. They were also made up of staff who came from many different schools, bringing the cultures of their schools with them into this new amalgamation. These differences create a new possibility for metaphor: school principal as stage manager of an improvisational performance.

Falling in Love or Just Falling[10]: Process over Product

Using autoethnography as an arts-based practice means focussing on process over product. One of my favourite dance teachers, Suzette Sherman of the Toronto Dance Theatre, used to caution us, as young aspiring dancers, that we had better "*fall in love with the process*" of learning and rehearsing repertoire because if we were only

[10] This is a reference to the Ani Difranco song *Falling is Like This* from the album *Out of Range* (1994).

in love with the product (performing) we would find ourselves very dissatisfied with a career in dance. It is advice that could be applied to any field but is especially true of improvisational art practices.

Improvisation as an art form is entirely focused on process. It is the process of improvisation that is shared with an audience; the product *is* the process. In the same way, the design of this research and the design of the virtual school itself are processes in performance. They are not "fixed upfront" (Leavy, 2017, p. 194) and I want to allow space for the uncertainty, the curiosity and the serendipity that may arise along the way in this research process. Dancers learn to fall, and rise, and fall again. In improvisation you do not know when the fall will happen so you have to train your reflexes to respond to the unexpected in a way that allows you to meet the ground and rebound (Nelson, 2015). Resiliency is key when you are performing a process. Improvisation takes the idea of going public (Wein, 2008) and positions it as both the subject of inquiry and its product. Like pedagogical documentation, which is a representation of a learning moment for children that, as part of the process, becomes a learning moment for the adults who work with them, the representation of an improvisational creative process will become its own improvisational creative process.

These experiences: the writing, the improvising, and the administering, are also embodied as they live in my physicality. As a person trained to notice small changes and shifts in my body, to pay attention to what improviser and teacher Steve Paxton calls "the small dance," (quoted in Nelson, 2015, p. 37) I experienced improvising a virtual school as an embodied process. I was aware of how it impacted my body and of how those impacts rippled through my choices and decisions. That bodily knowledge

also has a place in this research. The power of sense-based experience to evoke memory and reflection is powerful (Leavy, 2023) and an examination of my experience during this period that excluded the physical would be woefully incomplete. In the next section I will outline how that physical expression supports the reflexivity of my work.

Reflexivity

As in all forms of qualitative research, reflexivity will play a significant role in establishing the validity of this research. As described in Cohen et al. (2018), “reflexivity recognizes that researchers are inescapably part of the social world that they are researching” (p.302). This becomes even more important when the social world in question is one that I created within an institution that has been my workplace for nearly 20 years.

As the Israeli author Amos Oz once said, “each time I agree with myself, I write an essay. When I disagree with myself, I know that I’m pregnant with a short story or a novel” (quoted in Miron, 2018, para 5). As this dissertation is both, essay and fiction, choreographed together like variations in a ballet, it is important that I make both the disagreements and the agreements explicit. I am undoubtedly biased but I am trying, throughout, to challenge my own position, to see the experience from other sides, and to make my positionality obvious to the reader.

Using letters as a structure for this methodology encourages and bolsters reflexivity as this structure parallels what Collins (2017) writes about structuring his autoethnographic research in narrative vignettes.

> Narrative vignettes use representation and reflexivity as an alternative approach to qualitative research. I attempt to create a window in my autoethnography where the reader can view my pleasure and pain—connecting me to the reader as both writer and subject. […] Narrative vignettes comprise the spaces, the layers of the layered account— strengthening each as they build upon or against each other (p. 218).

The dances that are paired with each letter provide an additional layer of reflexivity that both contrasts (in medium) and buttresses (in content) the reflexivity of the work. By transmediating my creative, autoethnographic expression I provide multiple perspectives on the experience and therefore render it more fully as I focus on "moments of existential crisis, turning points ('epiphanies') and life-changing moments" (Cohen et al., 2018, p. 298). I am revisiting the themes of each letter twice, rendering them, reflexively, in two expressive languages. Representing the same emotional material twice emphasizes the subjectivity of each representation, enhancing the reflexivity of both.

Data Sources

The data to support these autoethnographic reflections will come from analyzing some artefacts from the 2020/21 and 2021/22 school years as well as from my own recollections of what it was like to live through the many ups and downs of those two school years. These artefacts may include staff meeting recordings, emails, slide decks, video messages, and other non-confidential correspondence that illustrates my own improvisational practice as an administrator during the development period of a

pandemic-era virtual public school. I will also closely review my notes and call logs, which every principal is required to keep, to remind myself of the broad context of the period, what problems reoccurred and what conversations kept me awake.

I propose to embark on this process by creating vignettes that centre around artefacts and that tell the story of what it was like to improvise a virtual school during the COVID-19 pandemic. Using vignettes as a story-telling autoethnographic research structure follows the model of Doloriert and Sambrook (2013) who describe the process of developing a structure for Doloriert's 2009 PhD Thesis in Business and the challenges of having autoethnography taken seriously in a positivist academic culture. My vignettes will focus on my own experiences but will inevitably mention my interactions with my staff and others, all of which will remain anonymous and which will not include identifying details. These vignettes will be fictionalized as a way of maintaining privacy and confidentiality so that the sequencing of events and identifying characteristics of individuals has been changed to create an evocative autoethnographic narrative.

To Whom it Concerns: Audience

I propose that these vignettes are structured as a series of letters, creating an epistolary memoir of the time period from August 2020 to June 2022 with roughly 10 letters written over the course of the two school years (approximately one letter for every two months of school). The audience for these letters will be one of my oldest friends, Alexis Milligan, who is, among many things, the resident movement director at the Shaw Festival in Niagara-on-the-Lake, Ontario. Alexis and I grew up dancing together and had very similar experiences training as young dancers and

choreographers. Her pathway has included more direct involvement in performance whereas mine has veered away from those worlds and into education, but both of us have had to apply our movement training to offstage contexts.

At the same time as I was working through my doctorate, Alexis was in the process of writing her Master's thesis in Interdisciplinary Studies at the University of New Brunswick with a focus on the work that she has been doing for many years supporting health professionals in developing their non-verbal, whole-body communication and observation skills, called Speaking in Silence (Milligan, 2022). We were both trying to figure out how the pieces of ourselves, collected on stages and in dance studios all over the world, fit together to inform our current work. This common geometry gave us a language through which we could try to understand each other's pandemic experiences so, while these letters will be written as memoir, after the fact, they will reflect many of the topics that Alexis and I actually did discuss at the time.

Using an epistolary structure in academic work is well recognized and has been used to interrogate pedagogy within a fictionalised romantic/research relationship (Sameshima, 2007), to talk back to an inscrutable granting agency (McGinn et. al, 2019) and to support refusal within an Indigenous research framework (Cisneros, 2018). As Tanya Senk, the first Indigenous System Superintendent of Indigenous Education in the Toronto District School Board, proposes, it will not be a train of thought (direct, linear, scheduled) but a "canoe of thought" (July 12, 2022) (agile, darting, curvilinear) that these letters follow. Alexis and I, both mothers and partners, both working full-time, both graduate students, both living through a pandemic that upended us professionally, were

only able to communicate in fits and starts, in the little puddles of time that the deluge of our chaotic lives left behind.

Stories and Sissonnes: Speaking Bilingually

While systematically analysing artefacts will play a role in this epistolary research, the bulk of the writing will focus on my own reflection and self-interrogation, of telling the story of this experience and capturing what it was like to live through it. Young (2012) calls this “Narrative as Research” (NAR) and distinguishes it from Narrative Inquiry. He suggests that this research method is particularly suited “for educational researchers with a creative writing background, given that they would be more likely to have developed the fiction composition skills that are key in fulfilling the promise of NAR” (p. 9). It is through the lenses of my experiences as a writer of personal memoir and pedagogical documentation, as well as my background as an improviser, that I will approach this storytelling process. While it will not be The Story of the virtual school (authoritative, unassailable, and objective) it will be My Story of the art of creating and administering a virtual school. As Leavy (2023) describes,

> all arts practices are crafts, and therefore three are no cookie-cutter models, rather each practitioner brings him/herself to the project. The personal fingerprint of the artist may be used to assess ABR. Artistic works have a voice. This research practice is about finding and expressing your voice (p.227).

Leah McLaren, in her memoir of her relationship with her own mother, writes that memoir “like memory itself, is inherently subjective and impressionistic, which is to say fallible” (2022, p. 6). I do not pretend to overcome this fallibility; objectivity is not my goal. I hope that through these autoethnographic letters, I can evoke the experience of

a principal improvising an online school into existence and that I can provide to the reader “an honest representation of my life and experience as I recall it” (McLaren, 2022, p. 6).

Evocative autoethnography is an ideal research method to draw together the artistic perspective of this dissertation that comes from improvisation theory and practice and the more traditional practices of research in the social sciences and education. In the same way that young children do not label their play by subject (Is that pattern art or math? Is this water play science or story?), the institutional binary between art and inquiry is a collective illusion that we can erase by shifting our perspective. Ellis et al. (2011) write that

> autoethnography, as method, attempts to disrupt the binary of science and art. Autoethnographers believe research can be rigorous, theoretical, and analytical *and* emotional, therapeutic, and inclusive of personal and social phenomena. Autoethnographers also value the need to write and represent research in evocative, aesthetic ways” (para. 39).

This bridging of the aesthetic and the empirical is more true to the way that artists and young children experience the world, as a fluid whole without the categories and classifications that institutions often impose on us (Malaguzzi, 2010).

Using these two complementary frames, improvisation and evocative autoethnography, will allow me to metaphorically dance through my experiences as an administrator during this tumultuous period in the history of education broadly and online education specifically. The interplay between social science research and arts-based research will provide the reader with a wide-angle view of this improvisational

process and will, hopefully, allow me to draw conclusions about improvisation as an untapped practice in distance education and what lessons the field might draw from this unusual and charged period in its history.

While the letters dance metaphorically, I will also insert my dancer-self literally into this research, embodying my epiphanies, wonderings, and ruminations as short improvisational dance pieces that are linked to each letter. This duality, writing and dancing, speaks to who I am and how I think; dance is as much a part of my thought process as writing is. Therefore, my research holds on to both expressive languages. As performance ethnographer Norman Denzin writes, “[o]ur research practices are performative, pedagogical, and political. Through our writing and our talk we enact the worlds we study. These performances are messy and pedagogical. They instruct our readers about this world and how we see it” (2006, p. 333). As I will outline in chapter 5, audiences can and do read dances, although not necessarily in the same was that readers read text. My methodology, Embodied Epistolary Autoethnography, endeavours to enact my world as it was between September 2020 and June 2022 by layering the text of fictionalized letters with the text of thematically paired dances.

In this chapter, I have outlined the method that I plan to take as I research this period of my professional life and try to communicate my experiences and my emotions beyond my immediate circle. I have woven together threads from the languages of pedagogical documentation and autoethnography with my experience as a dancer to create a method, epistolary art-based autoethnography, that will push the boundaries of research by reaching across disciplines and speaking bilingually, in words and movement, about a particularly weighty moment in time. By using this method, I hope to

illustrate that “what we understand and refer to as "truth" changes as the genre of writing or representing experience changes” (Ellis et al., 2011, para. 32). In the next chapter, I will elucidate my learning in words and movement.

Chapter 5: Dear Alexis

"How can I tell you what I think until I've heard what I'm going to say" (Fry, 2021)?

Preface

I am beginning to write these letters in the fall of 2022, two years removed from the first few months of my experience creating and administering a pandemic-era virtual school. As I write, I am once again working as an administrator in a face-to-face school, negotiating recess squabbles, supervision schedules, and pizza days. The virtual school continues, albeit with far less enrolment than in the first two years (Harris, 2022). These letters are written in role, as a past version of myself, but there will inevitably be some fluidity in my relationship to time. While I'm writing-in-role as though it is 2020, I may be referencing something that was written in 2021 or 2022, if that work is relevant to the topic I'm discussing in my letter.

There will also be, by necessity, some reexplaining of content that I've covered in the introduction of this dissertation. Alexis (the recipient of these fictionalised letters) does not work in education and, while she was certainly aware of current events in Ontario, the minutiae of how virtual schools were organised was not in her professional scope. Because she is not a colleague, some of the professional subterfuge that I have to do in order to maintain confidentiality and ethics is natural for the context of these epistles.

There will also be some narrative flexibility as I cluster together events that may have happened several months apart but that have thematic commonalities and therefore share an epistle in this memoir. I have written one letter for each of the 8 primary themes that I see arising from this experience, primarily the things that still keep

me up at night, even two years later. Some of those themes may have been transposed in time in order to further distance them from actual events.

Finally, it is important to note that although these letters are based on real-life experiences, they have been heavily fictionalised so as to maintain the confidentiality and anonymity of all parties involved. There is no reference to real people beyond Alexis and myself. As part of the doctoral dissertation process, I was granted an ethics certificate from Athabasca University (see Appendix).

Each of these letters is paired with an improvised dance piece that was recorded following the writing of the letters, using themes and key phrases from the paired letter as inspiration for movement and musical choices. There is also a short description of the musical accompaniment and, in some cases, quotes from the lyrics, along with the letter.

A Note on Copyright

Each of the dances in this chapter, save one, is accompanied by music. While music is subject to copyright restrictions that require consent from the musician, composer or songwriter for their use, “for you to obtain permission yourself from every writer or music publisher to play music in your business is unrealistic” (SOCAN, 2023, Music Copyright & Licensing). As a registered teaching member of the Royal Academy of Dance I pay an annual licensing fee to the Society of Composers, Authors and Music Publishers of Canada (SOCAN) so that I can use music in my teaching and academic work. This license allows me to use music in my work without obtaining permission on a case-by-case basis. My licensing fee (along with the licensing fees of every other

SOCAN member) goes towards royalties that compensate the musicians, composers and songwriters for their work. The videos in this chapter are also posted on a private YouTube channel that cannot be searched and can only be accessed by users who already have the link to the videos, thereby further protecting the copyright of the musicians and composers.

Some Thoughts on Watching Dance

Metaphorically positioning dance as a language is a common trope in writing about dance (Wigman, 1974; Tovey, 2021) and in domains as diverse as intellectual property law (Shaw, 2021) and insect behaviour (Rosin, 1981; Wenner, 2002; Sen Sarma, Esch & Tautz, 2004). Mary Wigman, German pioneer of Modern Dance wrote in her seminal work *The Language of Dance* that

> dance is a living language which speaks of man [sic] – an artistic message soaring above the ground of reality in order to speak, on a higher level, in images and allegories of man's [sic] innermost emotions and need for communication. It might very well be that, above all, the dance asks for direct communication without any detours. Because its bearer and intermediary is man [sic] himself, and because his instrument of expression is the human body, whose natural movement forms the material for the dance, the only material which is his own and his own to use (1974, The Secret of Dance).

This metaphor is useful in that it emphasises the expressive potential of aesthetic and rhythmic movement but it is also limited because it tends to influence what an

audience expects from dance, namely that they should be able to understand it the way they understand spoken or written languages, with specificity, precision and clarity. Spoken or written languages are seen as the default and the efficacy or utility of other languages is gauged against that norm (Neulichedl, 2022). When an audience cannot understand dance in that way, their expectations are frustrated and they may say that they do not like it because they do not understand it.

It might be better to think of dance less as a communicative language and more as an expressive language. Unlike classical ballet which often follows a fairly clear narrative and sometimes includes standardized ballet mime, “if you're looking for a straightforward, signposted narrative in contemporary dance, you're not going to find it” (Ross, 2022). Rather, you might feel something or be prompted to think about something in a new way. You might have questions or feel provoked. Any emotional or narrative interpretation is possible and all are correct.

Scholars of the Preschools and Early Childhood Centres of Reggio Emilia, Italy, often refer to the sign systems employed by the children in the service of their artistic, narrative or cognitive expression as *languages*. This nomenclature grew out of Malaguzzi’s seminal poem *The 100 Languages of Children* (2010). Writing about their experiences as artists in residence within these schools, Neulichedl (2022) states that

> Every expressive form is required to dig down in search of its own *potential as a sign* in two perspectives:
>
> a) That of the expressive specificity of the channel (kinetic, sound, visual, verbal, etc.) conveying a given system of signs;

b) That of the possible transversality of the sign (i.e. osmosis, co-penetration, transposability, transferability, etc. of the signs and/or their systems).

This two-fold perspective allows any form of communication used as a *language* to develop its own autonomous expressive identity and, at the same time, a form of communicability also to the other, and through other, languages (p. 119).

A dancer, therefore, is required to consider how their movement can be expressive of ideas, feelings and concepts and also how it might be translated into sign systems outside of movement. How would you write about this movement? What is the relationship between the music (or the silence) and the movement? What lines are being created by the body that might relate to lines on a page? How is the body sculpted by movement? What is the dancer's relationship to negative space? All of these questions, and many more, are at play for the dancer and choreographer as they think about their own perception of the movement as well as how it looks to the outside eye, the audience. Viewers of dance bring their own schemas into play as they interpret movement: prior experiences watching dance, aesthetic preferences, biases, and curiosities. The dancer has to release the material into the hands of the audience; we cannot control how our work is interpreted.

However, as you watch these improvised dance vignettes, it might be helpful to keep some guiding questions in mind. Consider repeated movement motifs that you see in more than one dance. How are the dances similar and how are they different? Consider how the music influences the movement and how it changes the way you see the dance. Try watching with the sound off as an experiment. Think about some of the

elements of dance: body, space, energy, time and relationships (Green Gilbert, 2015). How are body parts used? How does the physical level (high, middle, low) influence how the dancer is able to move? Is the movement strong or soft? Does the movement stay in one place or move around (locomoter versus non-locomotor movement)? How does the costuming impact the movement? Does the movement change when the dancer is wearing a skirt versus wearing pants?

It is also important to consider that these dances are improvisations, not choreography, they have not been carefully structured with the intention of communicating a specific message or idea, although they are anchored in the themes from their corresponding letter. The way I improvise, however, grows out all the years of training I have, all of the movement styles I've learned, all of the teachers I've learned from and all of the performances I've given. It does not arrive fully formed from the clear blue sky. It is an amalgam of my experiences as a dancer and therefore likely tied to me, my aging body, my limitations, my movement vocabulary and my aesthetic preferences. It is an embodiment of me, as individual as a fingerprint.

All of the videos can be viewed at this YouTube Channel: https://youtube.com/playlist?list=PLO7gJpgRIyYyCQNPI6kbLO0itp0oZNwce

Letter 1

September 27, 2020

Dear Alexis;

Yesterday was my birthday (thanks for the ecard, my sweet friend) and I slept in for the first time since August. Then I got up, had the requisite cups of coffee and got to work (Shabbat observance be damned at this point). I have an embarrassing number of unread emails in my inbox and my triaging system is shot. At this point, if it is on the first page, I try to read it, but if it slips to the second or third page of emails before I get to it, the likelihood is I'll never find it, let alone reply to it. I'm averaging 100-200 new emails a day.

I read an article once (which I can no longer find) about Shirley Tilghman, the former president of Princeton, and in it she mentioned that she deals with each email only once; she only reads it if she has time to respond. I've been trying to live by that mantra but it has been really tough for the last six weeks. We have parents emailing and calling, trying to get help with platforms and logins. My cell phone is ringing while the office phone is ringing, often I'm hanging up one call just to answer another. Principals in other schools are calling me to advocate for their students when parents cannot get through to us, my administrative assistant logs every call she takes or makes in a notebook and her log is filling page after page every day.

In the Principal's Qualification Program, they make you go through this triage activity where they give you a long list of events that you are to imagine are all happening simultaneously (an allegation against a staff member, an angry parent in your office, a building maintenance issue, etc…) and then you have to sort them by importance and decide which you'll deal with first and why. It is funny the places where

drama creeps in as a teaching strategy; as an arts-educator, I begged people to use in-role learning and then ta-da (jazz hands) there it is in the principal's course! But I digress. The last month and a half have been like living *inside* that activity, relentlessly. The only thing missing is the angry parent in the office only because parents aren't currently allowed in school buildings; there are still plenty of angry parents on the phone and in my inbox.

And then there's me, the parent of one kid who began the pandemic as happy as she's ever been at school, with her mother right next to her classroom in the vice-principal's office. Now she hardly sees her mother except on the weekends and late evenings; she has a bone to pick with this virus. And the other kid who missed out on his Grade 6 graduation and has started Grade 7 in a new school, full of bigger kids and bigger pandemic problems. His class is already on their second homeroom teacher and there seems to be no stability in sight. His friends are all in a different homeroom and, for the first time in his life, he's struggling at school. His bar mitzvah prep is a disaster; it is a struggle to just get through one passuk (verse). I am frequently running into the brick wall of "how unexpectedly hard it [is] to do the kind of job I want[ ] to do [...] and be the kind of parent I want[ ] to be" (Slaughter, 2012).

My own experiences as a parent in this pandemic have at least helped me to empathise with the parents I talk to on a daily basis. So many are struggling and they're (mostly) trying so hard to help their kids but there is nothing easy about getting young children to enthusiastically engage in online learning. Some of the administrative choices I've made have been informed by my own parenting experiences during the past several months. I've tried to place myself, imaginatively, in role as a parent with

several children of different ages attending school at home and I've made choices in that role.

Secondary and elementary timetables are aligned (as much as possible) so that everyone has the same lunch break. When I thought about timetabling, I had visions of a parent serving lunch to kids who all had different breaks, operating like a restaurant and leaving them no time to themselves. I also made the decision that every teacher should have the same preparation time (at the end of the day, during asynchronous time) because I thought it would give families more time together to go outside or run errands, particularly in the winter when the sun sets so early. As much as I have drawn on all of my school experiences to make good-enough decisions over the past month, I've equally drawn on my parenting experience, particularly what it was like from March to June 2020 as I tried to do my job and educate my kids and keep up with my doctorate and run a synagogue, all at the same time.

I've tried to impart some of this empathy to my staff as they make unprecedented instructional choices. I want them to keep families in mind at all times. I have told my staff that they need to think of this kind of teaching more like a three-hour episode of Mr. Dressup that they produce every day and less like a conventional elementary school class. They need to think of themselves as being on television and set themselves up like they're in a studio, with everything close at hand and a backdrop that supports their instructional goals. I've also talked to them about using gesture and tone of voice intentionally to support their teaching; we rarely talk about non verbal communication in schools even though we all know from our own experiences that teachers with a good grasp of non-verbal communication are more effective (Ottoson, 2011; Altun, 2019;

Godhe & Wennås Brante, 2022). If you have a look at the accreditation review decisions of The Ontario College of Teachers (OCT), you'll see that there is no explicit teaching of body language in pre-service teacher education. The program I teach in, for instance, teaches "teacher candidates learn how to: create lesson plans, apply accommodations and modifications, differentiate instruction, employ a variety of teaching tools, and apply inclusive classroom management strategies" (Ontario College of Teachers, 2018, p. 9). While non-verbal communication might be one of those teaching tools or classroom management strategies, it is not explicitly mentioned in any course description. Do something about that, would you, please?

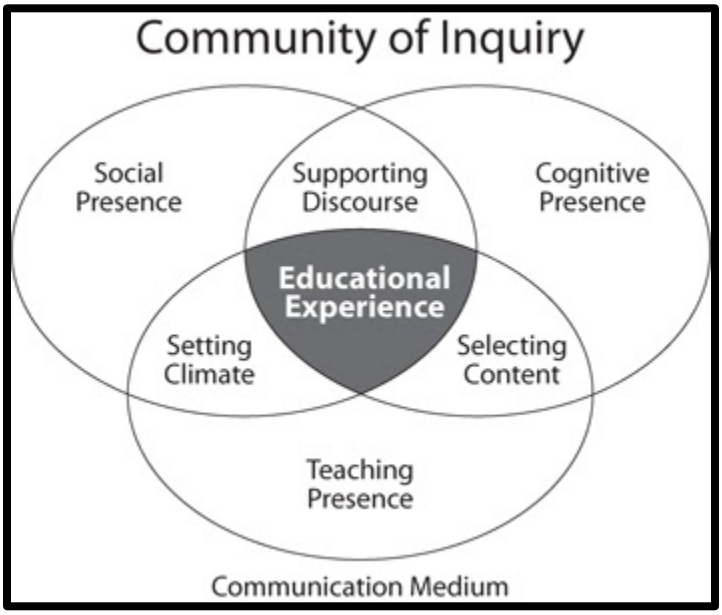
All joking aside, in this weird environment where teachers have to be live online with kids for 225 minutes a day, it is even more important that they are mindful of their non-verbal communication and they leverage it to maximum effect. That little talking teacher head has to be the most exciting thing available, which is tough when you're competing with an Xbox and a new puppy. The other side of the pedagogical dance partnership is also impacted in this brave new world. Almost all of the non-verbal communication we would normally be receiving from students has been cut off. Many of our older students don't want to turn their cameras on, so for those teachers it is a bit like teaching into a void (Mikiewicz & Jurczak-Morris, 2023). They have no idea if what they're sending out is landing on the target or not; we're throwing horseshoes into an abyss much of the time.

And, let's face it, the advice I'm giving to teachers is mostly based on my gut instinct, coming from years of experience… it is not like there's a manual for this stuff! Here I am in this doctoral program so they expect me to know how to teach online but

these are uncharted waters. No one has ever taught like this, let alone in Kindergarten! The only piece of distance education wisdom I'm passing on to them is a theoretical framework called the Community of Inquiry (Garrsion et al., 2000), which is the *sine qua non* of Distance Education theory.

Figure 4

The Garrison et al. (2000) model of the Community of Inquiry (COI)



This is what the original visual looks like. It is pretty complicated and academic but the basic premise is that social, cognitive, and teaching presence have to be balanced in order to support the creation of a community of inquiry in the online or distance learning context. Some definitions might help.

> Social presence is "the ability of participants to identify with the community (e.g., course of study), communicate purposefully in a trusting environment, and develop interpersonal relationships by way of projecting their individual personalities". Teaching Presence is the design, facilitation, and direction of

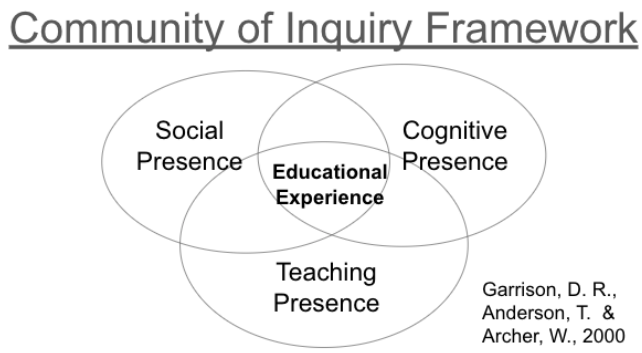
> cognitive and social processes for the purpose of realising personally meaningful and educationally worthwhile learning outcomes. Cognitive Presence is the extent to which learners are able to construct and confirm meaning through sustained reflection and discourse (Community of Inquiry Framework, n.d.).

In some ways, it's not that different from the elements of community building in a face-to-face classroom or studio but because everyone is physically separate, it has to be built much more thoughtfully and intentionally.

Given how taxed my teachers already are, I created a simplified, more approachable version to show them with one intention in mind: give them permission to play with kids.

Figure 5

Simplified Community of Inquiry Framework



I want them to feel empowered to have fun with their students, to not feel that all 225 synchronous instructional minutes have to be jam packed with content like some sort of stand-and-deliver marathon. There is so much wasted time in the average school day (announcements, lining up, transitions between teachers, assemblies) that we have a lot of extra time to play with because we aren't being interrupted by the logistics of a school building. I'm hoping they will all feel emboldened by the prominence of social

presence in this model to build play into their day. What that will look like remains to be seen. I'll keep you posted.

Lots of love and, as usual, wishing you were closer,

Emily

Music:

This is me Trying (Swift, 2020).

Like a lot of people, I listened to Taylor Swift's two pandemic albums, *Folklore* (2020) and *Evermore* (2020) on repeat during the months after their release. Already a fan, those two albums cemented her as my go-to therapy musician of choice. Whether I drove home weeping or chuckling, I usually had a Taylor Swift song on. The song that takes me back to those first few months is *This is me Trying* (2020), because that's all I could do, just keep trying and hope that it was going to be enough. I was hoping against hope that what we were offering students in the virtual school would be enough to keep them engaged and to support their learning, against heavy odds. The first line of the song: "I've been having a hard time adjusting, I had the shiniest wheels now they're rusting" (Swift, 2020) also poetically captures the feelings of so many teachers, students, and school administrators as they left their face-to-face classrooms behind at the onset of the pandemic.

Letter 2

November 27, 2020

Dearest Lex;

Winter is here with a fury and everyone is reaching a new level of hunkered down with the combination of miserable weather and pandemic restrictions. I am approaching the finish line that is the Christmas holidays chanting the motto that we used to tell the runners at the Running Room: upright and smiling. The smile might be a little forced but it is still good for morale. It has been a challenging couple of months as we've had students switching in and out of the virtual school (mostly out). Many of the students who left us in November had found the first few months of school incredibly challenging and many of their parents were shocked by how much support students required to remain on task. As much as it pained me to have to lay teachers off when their classes collapsed, I know it is in the best interest of those students to return to their face-to-face schools.

The colleague who has been helping me with some administrative tasks, a retired curriculum consultant, has spent many hours explaining elementary pedagogy to parents who, I can only guess, were expecting a more Socratic approach that would allow them to place their child in front of a laptop and then get their own work done. We are both very sympathetic to the situation they find themselves in but the reality is that elementary teaching involves very little sage-on-the-stage-ing and a lot more circulating to check on students, working one-on-one and in small groups and supporting students who may be working at very different levels. It has been eye opening to many parents that their child requires a lot of attention and additional support in order to be successful. They are struggling to support more than one child at a time or to work from

home and support online learning (or both!). It is an impossible task for many parents and grandparents who are, in fairness, not trained teachers.

These are not, in general, students with special education identifications. They're just regular kids, who get distracted by their Lego, their dog, and the birds flying outside their window. I remember vividly at Ari's Grade 2 parent-teacher interview, the teacher telling me that she had taken away his ruler, his pencil sharpener, and his collection of erasers in an attempt to get him to stop playing during the lesson only to find him playing with a loose thread on his shirt; it is mundanely normal behaviour. It is also true that even students who respond very well to teachers, may not respond as well to their parents. There's a lot of role confusion going on.

I'm also very conflicted about the fact that we're essentially employing these parents and grandparents who, let's face it, are mostly women. They're our volunteer teaching assistants which is a job many of them didn't sign up for. Their kids are at home because they're afraid of COVID-19, not because they had any particular ambition or intention to become partial homeschoolers. And yet here they are, sitting next to their 7-year old all day so that she remains focused on her math lesson instead of playing video games. Many of them are failing at that impossible task. While it does not surprise me, I also do not have a lot of alternatives to suggest.

It all reminds me of an interesting little study that Rineke van Daalen conducted while she was working as a dinner lady in the Dutch public school system. Van Daalen describes the Dutch school lunch program as an "informally organized enterprise functioning at the heart of a primary school" (2007, p. 623). She describes a work environment wherein dinner ladies who supervise the students who don't go home for

lunch, are both employees and volunteers simultaneously. They are paid, but only minimally, and their employment exists outside of the systems that govern other employees in the school. Van Daalen writes that “diffuse and simultaneous activities [ ] characterize the work of the school assistants. [...] Their role is an undefined mixture of care and supervision” (2007, p. 625). This lack of definition impacts how students see them and, as a result, how those students behave with them. Often, they behave badly.

> At school they lack the autonomy in behaviour that characterises working in the private domain of their own home. There, practical and repetitive tasks are embedded in the close and all-embracing relationship with their children. But in the more-or-less threatening setting of school they have to cope with increased and more complicated interdependencies. (van Daalen, 2007, p. 627).

I experienced those complicated interdependencies myself from March to June of this year as I tried to support my own kids’ online learning while doing my job from home. I remember vividly one day when Ari (in Grade 6 at the time) was learning about multiplying fractions. He was frustrated, trying to work asynchronously on material that he hadn’t been taught yet. So, I, his mother and a teacher certified to teach math, tried to explain it to him. I went through the procedure step by step and used manipulatives to show him how to do it. He became increasingly frustrated and teary, yelling that I didn’t know how to teach math and I was confusing him. We took a break since I was pretty close to tears myself.

That afternoon he had a 30 minute Google Meet with his teacher (this was during the time when teachers were only doing limited amounts of synchronous teaching).

Eavesdropping from the hallway, I could hear that Monsieur Albert was explaining the procedure almost exactly the way I had. Ari emerged from his bedroom smiling.

“Mommy, M Albert *knows* how to teach math. I understand *everything* now.”

Sometimes, the parents’ success or failure in helping their children learn online has nothing to do with their competence as teacher’s assistants. It is just hard to be a parent *and* a teacher and the reality of this situation is that we do not have much to offer beyond a Google Meet very similar to the one Monsieur Albert held that day. It is a helpless feeling and, as the person whose job it is to fix problems in this school, I do not like it. I want, very badly, to be able to fix the unfixable and I am trying to give myself grace because I just cannot.

Stay warm.

I love you,

Emily

Song

Take a Minute by K’naan

And any man who knows a thing knows, he knows not a damn, damn thing at all

And every time I felt the hurt and I felt the givin' gettin' me up off the wall

I'm just gonna take a minute and let it ride

I'm just gonna take a minute and let it breeze (K’naan, 2009).

Letter 3

December 17, 2020

Dearest Lexie;

I was driving home tonight in the rapidly falling darkness, listening to Taylor Swift's new album *Evermore* (2020), which I've been doing pretty much non-stop since it came out last week. There's this song on the album, *Marjorie*, which is about Taylor's grandmother who was herself a musician, an opera singer. It consistently makes me cry. I think I cry partly because I have such unfinished business about my own grandmother's death in April.

The way the song is crafted, with the aphorisms her grandmother passed on chanted like a mantra, reminds me of how little my own grandmother passed on to me. She was such an unknowable person, so captured by her own angst and unfulfillment and so emotionally unavailable. I feel like I'm grieving a character in a book, someone I knew only through her accomplishments but never knew as a person. Very few people get to have living grandparents in their 40s. I had both of my grandmothers until very recently but they were both mysteries to me. I feel like I cannot grieve for them properly because, in spite of trying, I didn't really know them. So I'm grieving an idea, an unrealized possibility, not a real, three-dimensional person.

When I was in my early 20s and living in Toronto, my grandmother used to take me to classical music concerts. It was the only time I ever felt like she was happy to be with me, just two girls hitting the town. I think she would have been much happier as a city-dwelling, concert-going, single professional woman than she ever was as a mother of four. Last year she said to my aunt, "you know, I never really liked children". "Yes," my aunt replied, "we figured that out."

I worry sometimes that I'm too much like her, that I'm happiest when I'm at work, that I want the praise of the world more than the easy silence of my house. I worry that, like her, I do not know how to be joyful. She desperately wanted to go to university as a young woman; she hated nursing school so much she made herself sick. She always wanted to be considered an intellectual. Even if it accomplishes nothing else, this doctorate will at least honour that piece of her legacy. At least I genuinely like kids, including, most of the time, my own.

So there I was, driving down the snowy highway, weeping, when all of a sudden this terrible banging noise started. It sounded like there was someone on the roof, hitting the metal as hard as they could. While I knew this didn't make any sense, I nonetheless went from sadness to fear in very short order. I pulled over quickly and checked the whole car but I couldn't find anything that was causing the noise. So I resumed driving and as soon as I got moving the noise started again, just as loud. On my second inspection, I found a torn rubber strap whose metal end had become embedded in the tire tread and, I gathered, was slapping the inside of the wheel well each time the tire turned. I pulled the strap out of the tire, threw it in the back seat and continued on my way. I was too much in shock at that point to cry any more.

The other reason I was weeping is that it has been a hard few weeks in the virtual school. There were lots of things we didn't think about when we started down this road in September, but one of the things that did occur to us was what it would be like to see into children's homes. In fact, I put a slide about child protection in my first presentation to the staff. We *knew* this would be a problem. Privacy and exposure to adverse events was one of the concerns about synchronous instruction that teachers'

unions identified in the early days of pandemic school closures (Elementary Teachers of Toronto, 2020; Rushowsky, 2020).

We know that in the early stages of the pandemic, calls reporting child abuse or neglect to Children's Aid Societies dropped significantly (Dodge, 2020) but that Kids Help Phone call volumes went way up (Naccarato, 2020). This mismatch indicates that children were experiencing significant distress but that child protective services were often not involved. With schools being the leading source of referrals to child protection agencies, it is not surprising that when schools closed, referrals declined. But now we can see right into student's houses, and while the little laptop camera doesn't allow us to see much, what we do see can be very disturbing. The families who have historically relied on schools for parenting support are particularly vulnerable and stressed. My colleagues in face-to-face schools have identified this yawning gap. For instance, a principal in Northern Ontario is quoted anonymously as observing that

> COVID has brought to a head all the systemic inequities in our small northern town. Poverty and lack of access to services has been hugely challenging for our school community. Many families count on us to feed and clothe their children, and to provide mental health support (People for Education, 2022, section 4).

The cracks that people fall through show up in different ways for different families. Since we started in September, I've processed a steady stream of referrals to Children's Aid and the Indigenous child welfare agencies and teachers have witnessed several very worrisome incidents in students' homes, some of which were abusive, and others that were tragic. When I was driving-while-weeping, I was on my way to deliver

donations to one of our families who recently experienced a tragic loss. Maybe the crying wasn't about my grandmother after all, or at least not entirely. While it would have been a difficult situation in any circumstance, being so close to it (seeing right into the house) while also being so far away (not able to physically comfort the child or provide any concrete assistance) is something that we're all struggling with. My staff is dealing remarkably well with these incidents but it is very hard for them to watch kids struggle and be a witness to abuse, neglect and tragedy without being able to protect children directly. I worry about the toll it will take over time. I also worry about the other children in the class who are indirectly experiencing these adverse events.

Teachers are often exposed to secondary trauma in their work with students (Schepers 2017; Walker, 2018; Rankin, 2020; Glass 2022; Ormiston, Nygaard, & Apgar, 2022) and it can be very hard to serve students who are traumatised. The National Child Traumatic Stress Network (NCTSN) reports that 50% of helping professionals, a group that includes teachers, experience Secondary Traumatic Stress (STS) which can lead to burnout (Secondary Traumatic Stress, undated). According to the NCTSN, STS is "the emotional duress that results when an individual hears about the firsthand trauma experiences of another" (NCTSN, Secondary Traumatic Stress, n.d.). One of the primary risk factors for developing STS is when professionals "are socially or organizationally isolated" (NCTSN, Understanding Who is at Risk, undated) which many of my staff are right now, working as the only online teacher in buildings scattered across the school board. But as hard as it is to be exposed indirectly to these adverse events, teachers, in their typical work environments, are very rarely witnesses to the traumatic events themselves; their STS usually comes from hearing about the events

because the child discloses them or because they read about them in a child's file. In the online synchronous classroom, however, teachers are witnessing adverse events happening in real time, without being able to stop them.

When you teach adults online, you can be reasonably certain that they have control over their environment and will only unmute their microphone or turn on their camera when the environment is stable. The same cannot be said for children. The technology simply is not set up to manage these situations quickly. When bad things happen, in order to put that one child in a breakout room, you have to first establish which child is at risk amongst the many squares in the grid and then click several times before you can get them into a virtual room by themselves. Meanwhile, the rest of the class is unsupervised after having themselves witnessed a traumatic event. It has the potential to get very messy and I don't think anyone: distance education scholars, the government, or the families themselves have really thought about the consequences of broadcasting children's home environments to an entire group of families as well as to a teacher. It is something that we all need to think long and hard about before we consider making virtual classrooms a permanent part of the public education system. In the meantime, snowy highways and sad songs will carry me through. And, of course, writing these letters to you; thanks for listening.

Lots of love,

Em

Song: *Marjorie* by Taylor Swift (2020)

The autumn chill that wakes me up

You loved the amber skies so much

Long limbs and frozen swims

You'd always go past where our feet could touch

And I complained the whole way there

The car ride back and up the stairs

I should've asked you questions

I should've asked you how to be

Asked you to write it down for me

Should've kept every grocery store receipt

'Cause every scrap of you would be taken from me

Watched as you signed your name Marjorie

All your closets of backlogged dreams

And how you left them all to me.

Letter 4

March 20, 2021

Dear Alexis;

We should be finishing up the March Break this weekend but instead we're pushing through until April because the Ministry of Education has postponed the March Break. This decision was made to try and stem the tide of COVID-19 cases that might result from families travelling over the break (Government of Ontario, February 11, 2021). Right on the heels of that decision, our local medical officer of Health decided to put the whole region into lockdown again and to close schools to in-person learning (Blaseg, 2021). Prior to *that* decision being announced, we had an influx of students into the virtual school, increasing our enrolment again after it had declined a little in November. We do not know how long the lockdown will continue but we may be looking at another March-June closure, just like last year. It is starting to feel as though T.S. Eliot was wrong and that it is March, not April, that is the "cruellest month" (Damrosch, 2003, p. 2430).

Most of my staff are now working from their homes, instead of in the building, and it is a bit eerie going into a near-empty building every day. It reminds me of that surrealist piece by Rene Magritte *The Treachery of Images* (1929), which is captioned "*Ceci n'est pas une pipe*" because it is the image of a pipe, not an actual pipe. In our case it is "*Ceci n'est pas une école*" because, like the pipe, it is the image of a school, not the actual thing. In spite of the oddness of our circumstances, we had created a

sense of community over the past several months and its absence feels like a gaping hole.

For example, we've been dancing together every Friday morning, with music projected over the crackly public address system and teachers dancing in the hallways, while I dance around the building, making a circuit. It fulfils all of my 1980s dance movie fantasies and it has been great for building a sense of common purpose and energy. Even the teachers who barely humour me as I jazz run down the hallways enjoy the camaraderie and the silliness. Because we're so limited in the ways we can gather, this weekly travelling flashmob substitutes for a lot of the experiences staff would usually be having together. Even though we cannot all gather in the same room, we can all dance to the same song, at the same time. It is something.

The whole experience has got me thinking about many of the things we take for granted as being mandatory features of schools, beyond the common physical space. Timetabling, for instance, has been one of the ways in which the virtual school is most different from face-to-face schools. In a typical elementary timetable, classroom teachers are relieved of their students at certain points in the day for preparation time. The physical education teacher might take them to the gym, the science teacher might come into the classroom or the music teacher might roll her cart of instruments down the hall, jangling tambourines from class to class. In Ontario, elementary teachers are entitled to 220 minutes of preparation time per week, which is bargained into their collective agreements. Those periods of prep time can create a fractured day. In my last years as a classroom teacher, I remember wishing that I could chunk it all together instead of interrupting students' inquiries mid-thought.

That may be why one of my first decisions in the virtual school was to have everyone take their prep time at the end of the day and to have classroom teachers be responsible for all subjects, except core French in Grades 4 to 8. Because we only have to offer 225 minutes of synchronous instruction in Grades 1-8, we have 75 minutes at the end of every day to use for meeting with students in small groups as well as for prep time. Teachers have 44 minutes of prep time at the end of each day (44 x 5 = 220), while students are engaged in asynchronous learning.

Having this common prep time has meant that teachers can meet with each other to plan, thereby reducing their workloads and building professional networks. It has also meant that families can end their school day earlier and get outside to play or run errands before it gets dark (which in the winter is 4:30pm). They can get their asynchronous work done on their own schedule. Many families have expressed a preference for this schedule because it provides them with flexibility. Many teachers like it because the flow of the day is not interrupted.

The other significant difference between our timetable and the timetables of most elementary schools is that we're not using a balanced school day (BSD). Another bargained-in feature of school timetables is that teachers are entitled to a "40-minute uninterrupted and continuous lunch period free from teaching and non-teaching duties" (ETFO & TDSB, 2021, p.73). When I started teaching in public schools, we had two 15-minute recess periods (am and pm) and an hour-long lunch break mid-way through the day.

About 15 years ago, our timetables changed. We now have two nutrition breaks that are both 40 minutes long. Students have 20 minutes to eat and then spend 20

minutes outside. These changes were made, in part, because they were perceived as offering longer blocks of instructional time and fewer transitions during the school day, although the data to support those assumptions is limited (Wu, et. al, 2015) and most of the research on the BSD is focused on how it has impacted physical activity levels and nutrition (Dorman et al., 2013; Dworatzek et al., 2013; Vanderloo & Tucker, 2017; Clark et al., 2019).

Our remote school timetable has two instructional blocks, separated by a 45-minute lunch break. Because the day finishes earlier than a traditional day, students are able to spend time outside at the end of the school day. Having just one lunch break reduces the number of transitions during the day and, given the challenges with technology, it reduces the opportunity for technological glitches. Every time we stop a Google Meet, there's a possibility that we will not be able to start it again. There have been days when half our Google Classrooms were inadvertently archived. There have been other days when Google Meet just has not worked. Anything we can do to reduce technological friction is worth doing.

Structuring the day this way also means that classroom teachers aren't trying to hand the baton off to specialist teachers during the day, with all of the complications that would entail (namely switching Meet ownership or having students switch to a different Meet). Are we giving short shrift to those subjects as a result? Maybe. But in the calculus of priorities during this pandemic, math and language are winning out over everything else, even when the principal is a dancer!

But, here's the thing, I made the decision to structure the timetable this way in about 30 seconds. I didn't have the research (or lack thereof) on BSD to support my

decision. I didn't have time to read the rationale for why school day schedules have changed over time. I didn't agonize over the impacts of my decision on arts education. I just had a quick think and made a choice. It turned out to be a good choice but it could just have easily been a wrong choice and, depending on your perspective, maybe that's exactly what it was. Author Lawrence Hill calls creativity "a speed sport" (2022). He says that he deals with writer's block

> by trying to go fast and not to let my inhibitions and my critical mind take over the explosive creative mind. By going fast, you don't allow that criticism to catch up, you just plow right over it and just keep on going, baby, and see where you get to. [...] Going fast helps a great deal in terms of gaining access to your subconscious and just to let things come bubbling up (Shea, 2015).

I do not know about you, but when I'm choreographing, I go really fast (it is why I do not work with younger students anymore). If I slow down and think too much, the flow dies and I get stuck. I'll sometimes go back and edit but mostly, after all of these years, the movement comes out fully formed. All creative pursuits are improvisations, at least in their first draft. It is the editing process that separates improvisation from composition. It is also the process of remounting work that distinguishes them. Improvisation is entirely ephemeral. Repertoire gets remounted and, in the process, rethought, reconsidered, and renewed. Maybe, if this virtual school experiment is allowed to exist outside of the pandemic period, there will be an opportunity to edit the improvised structures we've been using and to make something entirely new, less an

iteration of the face-to-face school and more a complete rethinking of what K-12 schools can look like when they're untethered from physical spaces.

Anyhow my dearest, it is always a comfort to get these thoughts out of my head and, well, into yours (wink). Hope all is well.

Lots of love,

Emily

Music

Take 5 performed by the String Cheese Incident (composed by Paul Desmond)

This piece of music was born when renowned Jazz musician, composer and arranger Dave Brubeck decided to create an album of music composed in unusual time signatures and delegated this piece to saxophonist Paul Desmond who based his composition on drummer Joe Morello's live solos. This piece is composed in quintuple time (5/4), hence the title, Take 5. Most popular music is composed in 4/4 time (also known as common time) while occasionally using 2/4, 3/4, or 6/8 metres. Working in an uneven time signature forces me to think differently about movement. It inserts another layer of complexity into the improvisation process and challenges me to not fall into familiar and comfortable movement patterns. This particular recording of Take 5 is one that I used many years ago to choreograph for a student who has gone on to pursue a career in dance; hearing it brings back fond memories of working in the studio with her.

Letter 5

October 15, 2021

Dearest Lexi;

Here's your latest missive from the land of online learning. What more could I possibly have to tell you at this point? We're well into year two of this virtual school dance and this year we're choreographing for students ages 4-18 for the first time. Last year, the high school students who were not going to school in-person attended most of their classes in a hybrid format, watching a teacher in their home school who was being streamed live. The only classes that they took through a completely online portal were technological and physical education classes.

This year, on the other hand, we have a fully operational virtual secondary school, offering the usual range of classes that students take in high school and teachers teaching live online classes every day to students in Grades 9-12 just like their elementary colleagues did last year. It has been a steep learning curve for me since the last time I worked in a high school full time was in 2002! We've had to timetable and re-timetable students while being careful to ensure that students are getting their required credits so that they can graduate on schedule. Merging students from different high schools together and making all of their timetables work has been an enormous challenge but, with an amazing group of coordinators and help from colleagues all over the board, we've made it work. One of the things that I hope we take away from this experience is how much we're capable of when we have no choice but to make things

work. As Lorne Michaels has quipped, “the show doesn’t go on because it’s ready; it goes on because it’s 11:30” (Fey, 2011, p.123).

One of the most challenging aspects of operating the online high school has been an amplification of what we have been struggling with in the elementary school for the past year: attendance. Based on my conversations with people in our social circle this summer, most middle class Canadians take mandatory school attendance entirely for granted; it has never occurred to them that children do not attend school. And, while there are some families for whom regular attendance was a pre-pandemic struggle, that assumption was, broadly speaking, true. The switch to remote learning in March 2020, however, has changed all of that.

> Public education was taken for granted in Canada before the pandemic and was one of our least talked about social institutions and public sector systems. For at least the past 50 years, we have enjoyed near-universal schooling for children from six to 16 years of age. (Bennett, 2021).

The fact that we took universal schooling for granted as a society has made it difficult for us to respond to the high rates of absenteeism during the pandemic (Bennett, 2021; Rogers, 2022). How do you convince someone that it is really important that their child is attending school when it is a truth we have held as self-evident? We do not have a lot of practice articulating that argument and, in fairness, during a global pandemic people’s choices and priorities have shifted towards survival; we’ve taken a few steps down Maslow’s hierarchy of needs. And, as data from around the world has shown, the burden of absenteeism has disproportionately fallen on families from lower

socioeconomic backgrounds (Elliot Major & Eyles, 2022) which are overrepresented in Ontario's virtual schools (Toronto District School Board, 2020b).

There's an increasing body of research to support the premise that more instructional time increases learning (Lavy, 2015; Rivkin & Schiman, 2015, Mandel et al., 2019) and that, therefore, "governments cannot reduce instruction time without the risk of adversely affecting student achievement" (Andersen et al., 2016, p. 7482). If an extra three hours of instructional time per week (a 15% increase) can significantly improve student achievement (Andersen et al., 2016), then what impact does months of non-attendance have on a student's long-term success in school and, more importantly, in life?

In addition to trying to come up with a sales pitch for school attendance, we are also trying to figure out how to track that attendance when students are not physically with us. In a face-to-face school, attendance is straightforward; the student is either in the building or they aren't. We are frequently faced with students who are technically attending school (by logging into the Google Meet) but who are non-responsive: they do not turn on their cameras, they do not speak when they're asked to, they do not write in the chat box and they do not complete any assignments. But they're there… sort of. I've taken to calling them Schrödinger's students because they are both present and absent simultaneously. It is very hard in these cases to know if it is actually the student who is logging in or someone else in the household. Is the student in the room with the computer or have they logged in and walked away? Can they hear the teacher or do they have their speakers turned off? It is like teaching shadows; the present/absent

students are occupying negative space, seen only as an outline, an image, or a sketch[11].

The parents of these students are frequently at a loss. In most cases, they are doing their best to ensure their child is online but they are not able to supervise them during the day because they are out of the house working or in the house caring for younger siblings or working from home (or both). Sometimes an older child is responsible for caring for younger siblings and supervising their online learning, while also learning online themselves.

There is a very classist assumption at the core of our synchronous model that there will be an adult in every household who is available to support the student and to essentially act as a teacher's assistant throughout the school day. If my own kids were in virtual school, I would not be able to provide them with this level of support, at least not while keeping my job. How are we expecting parents to do this? There are certainly students who have the self-regulation and self-motivation to be successful but the students who don't have those skills (who are the majority) need an adult to keep them on task. In the face-to-face classroom that adult is the teacher. In the virtual classroom, whose job is it? While a teacher might be successful at engaging students' social presence in the absence of a supportive parent, young childrens' cognitive presence in the online classroom depends largely on the adults in their lives.

[11] This problem of how to take attendance in online programs has now been addressed in the Enrollment Register Instructions for Elementary and Secondary Schools (Government of Ontario, 2023): "for purposes of remote learning, school boards have the flexibility to determine what constitutes as participation on a daily basis (i.e., phone call, email to a teacher, handing in assigned work, etc.) (p. 18). The flexibility of this guidance, in contrast with the directive tone of the rest of the document, reflects the challenges in confirming attendance in the online classroom.

The legislation that deals with attendance is also not set up for the grey areas of virtual presence versus absence. The education act outlines who must attend school and for how long.

> Every person who attains the age of six years on or before the first school day in September in any year shall attend an elementary or secondary school on every school day from the first school day in September in that year until the person attains the age of 18 years (Milne, C., p 47).

It goes on to specify what can be considered attendance under the act.

> A person shall be considered to be attending school when he or she is participating in equivalent learning if the equivalent learning program, course of study or other activity and the group, organization or entity providing it have been approved (Milne, C. p 47-48).

Virtual school could be described as one of the forms of equivalent learning that the legislation describes but we cannot argue that a student is participating in equivalent learning when they are not participating at all. We cannot directly observe what they are doing at home so we are not able to assess who is logging on when there is no participation. So we're left improvising, once again, to make decisions about attendance. There are enforcement measures that we can access but, at best, those are only temporarily successful.

While some of the improvisations we have engaged with since the advent of pandemic-era virtual learning have felt exciting and full of possibility, this one feels foreboding and fearful. I am so worried about these kids. We are doing everything we can to re-engage them in learning and, in many cases, we are failing. Whether we tick

the present box or the absent box is almost irrelevant. They aren't with us, learning, and I do not know what our next move is.

I have been especially worried about some of the Indigenous students. There has been incredible variability amongst these students in terms of their virtual school experience. We have had Indigenous students who have told us that virtual school was their best school experience because they were able to escape from pervasive racism and remain in their communities. We have also had communities that have successfully organized hub schools, based in their community centres, that allow students to log into their classes with some adult, non-parental support.

However, there have also been students who really struggled and I have worried that this distance education experience has failed them, that I have failed them, that this is yet another way that colonial systems of education have failed them. I have found myself thinking that maybe there shouldn't be this option available to them because it has the potential to lead to school failure. I was sharing these worries with an Indigenous colleague and she challenged me by asking me to compare the current experience to the history of Indigenous education in Canada. She said to me very much what Harvey Feit says to Sheyfali Saujani in Susan D. Dion's (2022) book, *Braided Learning*.

> "Don't we have an obligation to intervene?" I [Saujani] asked. Harvey, a gentle bear of a man, looked at me kindly and said no. No. We have to stand back and respect their right to govern themselves, he said, because (and I've never forgotten his words), "they couldn't possibly make it worse than we already have."

They couldn't possibly make it worse than we already have. (p. 57).

In that conversation I recognized the settler privilege with which I was approaching the situation. Who was I to say that what these families were choosing for their children was worse than attending school face-to-face? Whose value system did that judgement reflect? I had to take a step back and consider whether my distress was "based on lingering colonial stereotypes about 'primitive' people not suited to self-government" (Saujani in Dion, 2022, p. 57). It was a moment of reckoning that I will probably reflect on for the rest of my career.

Sorry to end this letter on a depressing note. This whole experience has such incredible highs and lows, such spins and changes of direction. The exhilaration of working incredibly hard within the bubble of a crisis, with a team of people who all share the same goal, as we improvise solutions to each new problem that comes along is a high point of not just my career, but of my life. But the lows are really low. The sadness is really sad and the worry is real. Thomas Paine once wrote "what we obtain too cheap, we esteem too lightly. 'Tis dearness only that gives everything its value" (1776, no page number). If that's true, then I esteem each victory very, very greatly since we fight for every single one.

Have a cup of tea for me.

Love,

Emily

Music:

This improvisation is performed in silence in observance of the silence that many students experienced during their time in the virtual school. For many reasons, they either chose not to engage with us or were not able to engage with us. Like negative space, their presence was noted by their absence. In this improvisation I am trying to sculpt that negative space so that it becomes visible, to make it real, to finally turn the camera on, even if only in retrospect.

Letter 6

May 1, 2022

Dear Alexis;

Have I ever told you about teacher's college? For some reason we still call it that when, really, it has not been called that at an institutional level for decades. It is a Bachelor of Education, a second undergraduate degree and the only pathway to becoming a certified teacher in Canada (other than the new Masters of Teaching programs that some universities are now offering). But, to deploy a Ken Robinson quote, it is a "rather curious" program, one that's "disembodied, in a kind of literal way" (2006) from the reality of teaching in a classroom. This detachment has become legendary amongst the whisper network of teachers. People roll their eyes about what they learned in their B.Ed programs and bond over horror stories about how ill prepared they were when they started their first classroom placement: "You think you were bad, I was the worst!"

As a sessional instructor teaching in one of these programs, I'm aware of the enormous challenge in preparing students for all of the practicalities they will need to understand in a classroom while also giving them a sense of the theoretical scope of the profession: training versus education, the tension is real. When teachers complain about their initial teacher education, they're often lamenting that there was too much focus on theory and too little emphasis on practical skills, like classroom management, that they need immediately upon entering a classroom. I can remember feeling as

though I'd been pushed into the deep end with only a copy of Pablo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (2007) to keep me afloat.

This tension between theory and practice in initial teacher education is longstanding. When teacher preparation programs were folded into Canadian universities, ending the existence of normal schools and teacher's colleges (Smyth & Hamel, 2018), there was concern amongst policy-makers and faculty that there was a potential risk attached to "placing teacher education within the university, as they viewed the university as a dangerous place, given its tendency to either overly theorize pedagogical practice or to ignore it" (Smyth & Hamel, 2018, p. 98). This tension is felt not just by the pre-service teachers but also by their professors.

> Faculty [...] confront pressures from without and within. They must prepare well educated teachers for schools while at the same time producing research and publications that will enable them to meet the criteria for tenure and promotion. Further, in-class instruction competes with field-based practica, often with challenging results (Smyth & Hamel, 2018, p. 104).

Because many of the teachers in the virtual school are very young, I've been supporting them through this learning process in real time and, while all of the usual theory versus practice complaints about their initial teacher education still apply, there's a new disconnect they're confronting, a political one. The pandemic has been fraught with politics, culminating in the Ottawa trucker's convoy this winter. So maybe it is not surprising that those ideological divisions have seeped into the classroom. Here's a

composite of conversations that I've had with parents numerous times since last September.

Parent: I am calling because I do not like this stuff the teacher is talking about. It is not allowed. The teacher should stick to teaching, they should not be pushing their own opinions on my kids. We do not believe in X (climate change, gender identity, residential school history, viruses, systemic racism) and I do not want that taught to my child. You need to tell the teacher to not talk about it any more.

Me: I hear that you are feeling frustrated and angry. There is an exemption process for the Human Development and Sexual Health strand of the Physical and Health Education curriculum (Government of Ontario, 2019b) and I can send you the information about that. Otherwise, there is no way to exempt a student from any part of the curriculum. Subject X is part of the curriculum in course/Grade Y.

Parent: That's not right. If I don't believe in it then I should be able to control what my child learns about. Why are they teaching this anyway, why can they not just stick with Math and English? They never taught this before!

Me: Well, I cannot speak for teachers from previous years but unit X is part of the curriculum in subject/Grade Y. The entire curriculum is available online if you'd like to read it. I can send you those links as well if you would like.

Parents are never happy after these conversations; teachers aren't happy either. Sometimes parents are interrupting instruction when they hear the teacher discussing a topic they disagree with, other times they're just removing their child abruptly from the online classroom. Online education has given parents an unprecedented level of

agency in deciding what ideas their children will or won't be exposed to and it has exposed teachers to the discrepancy between the politics of their teacher education programs (which tend to be very progressive) (Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, 2017) and the reality of the political spectrum as represented by the families of the children in their classroom.

In the United States, these divisions have become increasingly fraught as states pass legislation that allows parents to challenge parts of the curriculum (Austin, 2018) and school districts have to undergo extensive consultation before implementing curriculum in contentious subject areas (Wiley et al., 2020). Some scholars have also pushed back against what they see as the politicisation of the curriculum (Perrine, 2019) while other have rigorously defended the role of the liberal state in establishing mandatory curriculum that reflects and promotes liberal values.

Bialystok (2018) writes that

> the "conscience" of protesting parents, usually expressed in terms of religious belief, contains precisely the illiberal and harmful attitudes that the curriculum seeks to stem in the first place (p.19).

She goes on to state that

> views that contradict liberal equality should not translate into public policy and are not deserving of special accommodation. Nor are they within the normal sphere of "conscience," any more than white supremacists can claim that racial equality violates their conscience and thus they are entitled to be excused from multiracial institutions or to withdraw their children from antiracism education (p. 22).

However, this is precisely the type of opposition that has been expressed by a small but vocal minority of parents whose students are enrolled online.

While there is not anything new being taught online that wasn't taught face-to-face, parents may not have been aware of it before. There's a different dynamic at play when the classroom is being broadcast into your house. Parents no longer have to rely on their child's dinner-table summary of the day's events; they know what the child learned at school today, they heard every word. From the teacher's point of view, the line between backstage and frontstage has become blurred. The boundaries are unclear. Some parents feel empowered to interact with their child's teacher in a way that wasn't possible before and they sometimes behave in ways that are disruptive and aggressive. There weren't any courses on managing angry parents in teachers' college or on how to explain the provincial curriculum to someone who fundamentally disagrees with it.

We are also living through a well-documented polarization, whether real or perceived, of our political discourse (Jiang et al., 2020; McLay & Ramos, 2021; Crimston, et al., 2022); positions at the extremes have become entrenched and it is harder and harder to converse respectfully across divides. While many younger teachers are well-acquainted with the concept that the curriculum has a political stance (although they often assume it is a consensus stance), many older teachers may never have considered the ideological positioning of the curriculum and are taken aback both by the virulence of parental opposition and by the very idea that the curriculum presents a value stance that is not normative for everyone.

In both cases, it is something we're ill-prepared for, regardless of where we are in our career trajectory. We've deprivatized our practice entirely. As Hargreaves and Fullan write, we've "lifted the lid off teaching" (2020, p. 331). The question is: do we need to put the lid back on as quickly as possible or can we learn to teach well in this new uncovered context?

And if that's not enough alliteration for you my dearest Lex, I invite you to imagine you and I invading some illustrious island in the immediate future! Looking forward to putting our toes in the sand together.

Love,

Emily

Music: *Who By Fire* by Leonard Cohen (1987)

There is something very exposed about this song by Leonard Cohen, pared back and naked, that echoes the cadence of a song on Cohen's final album, *You Want it Darker*. Originally released in 1974 on Cohen's album New Skin for the Old Ceremony, the lyrics are adapted from the *Unetaneh Tokef* prayer that is part of the Yom Kippur service. This prayer enumerates the ways that we might die throughout the coming year and reflects on the unknowability of our fate. Within *Who By Fire*, "there are resonances with promises made and broken, as well as fate and destiny and the capacity to hold or to fail to hold oneself to one's word." It is, "for all its pain, its lists and denumerations, [...] not a song of death but of atonement and thus a song of life" (Babich, 2021, p.13).

These paradoxes are inherent to the experience of being Jewish but also to the experience of working with parents and families whose ideologies are very different

from mine or from the public education system broadly. Holding contrasting ideas, disagreeing with oneself, feeling pulled in opposite directions, caring about people and ideas that are in conflict was an integral part of working in public education during the COVID-19 pandemic. This piece of music evokes that feeling for me.

> I seem to believe things that I cannot reconcile with each other and I came to thinking maybe that's okay maybe that's what it means to have an intellectual body. There's parts that bend and there are parts that don't bend, there are parts that are vulnerable and parts that are armoured, there are parts that see and parts that move and maybe that's just the way it is. Maybe that's good (Bialik & Goldstein, 2023, 31:47).

Letter 7

May 22, 2022

Dear Lex;

We are now in the four-month period of the year when you and I are the same age so… how does it feel to be old? I hope you had a great birthday being well spoiled! Especially after defending your thesis, you deserve a break!

We're nearing the end of the school year here and I do not yet know what the future holds for me next year. It has been such a roller coaster over the last two years that it is hard to imagine what it will be like if things ever settle back into what was the normal routine. I've often been up in the middle of the night since the pandemic started, worrying about one thing or another, unable to quiet my mind. If I were more strategic, I'd probably get up and work on something but I mostly end up reading and, usually, falling back to sleep. I've found it comforting to read books written during or about the two world wars. If nothing else, it gives me some perspective on what does and doesn't qualify as a problem.

I know that more than one thing can be bad: rationing flour can be bad, concentration camps can be bad and kids who are completely disengaged from their online classes can be bad; I don't mean to diminish the reality of the problems people are experiencing right now. I do, however, find it comforting to remind myself that there are worse ones.

One of the books I've re-read at least twice is *Rilla of Ingleside*, the last book in the Anne of Green Gables series by L.M. Montgomery. I know it's probably been a long time since you read it; the book is all about the youngest Blythe child, Rilla, as her brothers and sisters all go off to fight or serve overseas and one of them, Walter, doesn't come home. While Rilla is stuck at home, she takes over caring for an orphaned baby and has many misadventures all while living the tumultuous years of her adolescence as news of the war swirls around her. Remembering that people lived through food shortages and sending their children off to the trenches puts the ups and downs of the pandemic into perspective. But it also reminds me that growth can come from trauma both, as psychologists refer to them, the big "T" and little "t" kinds (Barbash, 2017). As Rilla says "The body grows slowly and steadily but the soul grows by leaps and bounds. It may come to its full stature in an hour. (Montgomery, Chapter 14, 2009). I feel like my soul has grown over the past two years and I'm not sure how to bring that enlarged soul back with me to the face-to-face world, should that be where I'm headed. Frankly, I'm not sure that anyone wants it.

In meetings, I often feel like Michelle Flaherty from the movie American Pie (Herz & Weitz, 1999) except instead of starting every sentence with "this one time at band camp", I start every sentence with "this one time, at virtual school" and my colleagues roll their eyes internally (and sometimes externally). Everyone is so eager for virtual school to no longer be an option for students, because they believe that face-to-face school is always the best choice for every student, that they're not able to imagine that there are any lessons to be learned from this experience, beyond that we should avoid ever doing it again.

I persist in believing that there are important lessons to take away from the last two years: lessons about what students are a good fit for learning online, lessons about how to teach young children well (or as well as possible) online, and lessons about how to build a school community online that is meaningful to students and families. One practice that has been very effective came from a book that one of our retired principals gave to me: School Management by Wandering Around (MBWA) by Frase and Hertzel (1990) (there are more recent editions). In this book, the authors identify four factors that contribute to higher student achievement:

1. Provide resources to accomplish the schools' mission;
2. Provide instructional leadership;
3. Articulate the school's vision and establish high student and teacher expectations; and
4. Practice MBWA by maintaining visible presence in classrooms and interacting freely with staff and students (Frase and Hetzel, 1990, p. xi).

In a bricks and mortar school, it is fairly straightforward to be a visible presence but how do you wander around a virtual school? How, as a principal, do you make yourself part of the culture of each classroom without being obtrusive?

Other authors have also addressed presence as important not just for the success of the school community (Smith & Andrews, 1989), and for teacher morale (Lambersky, 2016) but also for the success and satisfaction of the principal. It is also more complicated than just being seen. Cherkowski, Kutsyuruba and Walker (2020) write that "presence meant more than just being visible in school throughout the day: it meant being approachable, available, able to feel the pulse of the school and ready to

address any issues that may arise" (p. 409). Stephens (2004) identified that a principal's visible presence and their perceived effectiveness as a communicator are intertwined. Our situation is complicated even further because not all of my teachers are in the same building so, for many of them, we never meet face-to-face at all.

There are also limitations to the medium of instruction, in our case Google Meet, that make it hard to wander subtly, creating that ubiquitous presence. I also have to visit each class individually to be with students and teachers; I cannot wander common areas like hallways, cafeterias, gymnasiums and playgrounds. Every time I visit a class, my presence is announced by the software. I cannot just slide quietly into the back; the technology positions me as a featured guest performer. I feel like I come with a followspot[12]. Inevitably, the students stop what they are doing and want to acknowledge me; I cannot help but be disruptive, it seems.

My tentative solution to this problem has been to compliment my unavoidably obtrusive classroom visits with a weekly principal's message that I record each weekend and post on Monday mornings. These messages have almost all been recorded outside which is my not-so-subtle way of suggesting that students (and teachers) should be making a point of going outside when they're not in class. In my message I refer to any special events that are happening that week, talk about the weather, and sometimes try to impart a message or teach something, in both official languages. I've posted a couple of them to YouTube to give you an idea of what I'm talking about.

[12] Alexis would know this but non-performers may not know what a followspot is. A followspot is a spotlight that follows the performer as they move across the stage. The followspot directs the audience's attention to the main performer by "controlling the contrast ratio on stage" (Stage Lighting Store).

Some teachers leave the freeze frame up and get students to guess where I filmed the message before they play it. Some of the older students evaluate my outfits. Others just play the message and proceed with their day. In any case, it gives me a presence in the class that is not illuminated by a followspot, or at least the lighting is intentional.

We're also running a number of online extra-curricular clubs and activities such as an environmental leaders club, an art club, a Dungeons and Dragons club, a birdwatching club and a business club. One of the teachers and I are sponsoring a running club that has us leading students in a synchronous warm up, then we all go and run for 20-30 minutes (some run outside, others on treadmills) and come back together for a cooldown and stretching. Monthly challenges have also been part of our routine since the beginning, with students submitting entries for outdoor photography, book recommendations and dress-like-your-teacher day and winners receiving a gift card in the mail. What I hope is that all of these little initiatives help not only to build my presence in the school but also to create a school culture that nurtures a sense of community, belonging and hope.

The other way that I'm trying to build presence is by hosting a daily Google Recess with a different age group each day of the week. The students have 45 minutes for lunch and recess with me lasts about 30 minutes. Sometimes they eat their lunch while we chat and play and other times they eat afterwards. With the younger ones, I play I-spy, charades, guessing games, online puzzles and we do a variety of physical workouts that I find on YouTube. With the older students, we chat and play online games like *Among Us* (Bromander, 2018) which, if you've never played before, is very

amusing. I'm very bad at it, which the kids find even more entertaining. It is also introduced me to a whole new lexicon of terms, most notably the word "sus" which is short for suspicious. Google Recess gives me another opportunity to interact with kids, analogous to being outside at recess, and, hopefully, helps students to feel comfortable coming to me with any concerns they may have. I often get to meet parents and guardians during Google Recess which has helped to build those relationships as well.

Finally, the Google Classroom itself is a great place to poke around and get a sense of how a class is going. Even though this type of presence is not very visible, it allows me to develop my understanding of the work being done in a class so that I'm informed when I talk to the teacher, visit the class or meet students from that class in Google Recess. Making regular asynchronous visits to a classroom gives me an entré into that class that helps me to make my synchronous visits more meaningful and productive.

But all of these things I've been doing for two years are really just shots in the dark, tentative reaching, experiments, responses to an improvisational prompt. I think they've worked well. Kids, families, and staff tend to agree but where does it go from here? Does it all just vanish into the ether, as ephemeral as any on-stage improvisation? Or is there some greater value to it, something we can learn and take with us as we contemplate a future where some parents may choose online schooling for their children more permanently?

There are students who have done very well in their virtual classrooms and a small number that prefer learning online to learning in person. What have we learned from the last two years about which students are successful in this learning context and

how to predict that success? If there were to be a permanent online learning option, could we control admission to ensure no harm was done?

Anyhow, that's what's keeping me awake these days. I hope you are sleeping well.

Love you,

Emily

Music

Buildings and Bridges - Ani Difranco

This is a song I've been listening to since my first year as an undergraduate, when I shaved my head and wore hemp combat boots by day and became the Snow Queen in the Nutcracker at night. The opening line, "buildings and bridges are made to bend in the wind, to withstand the world that's what it takes" speaks to the flexibility that was required of all of us in the virtual school. The second line of the song, "all that steel and stone is no match for the air, my friend, what doesn't bend, breaks" (DiFranco, 1994) speaks to my how difficult it was for many people, students, parents, and teachers alike to make that transition and how much brokenness became obvious as the months of COVID stretched on and on. The reckoning between those two polarities weighs on my mind.

Letter 8

June 26, 2022

Dear Alexis;

It is a warm, muggy day here today and I'm sitting out on the deck enjoying the warmth and following the shade of my patio umbrella as the sun shifts across the sky. Are we ever happy with the weather in this country? It seems that we're not but if I have to choose between being too hot or too cold, I think for now I'm choosing hot. These old dancer bones are soothed by the heat; it keeps the aches at bay.

The waiting is over. I know where I'm going next year and it is not back to the virtual school. I'll be once again in a face-to-face school where I'll be interacting with students, teachers, and parents up close and personal. Do I even remember how to do that? It feels like a muscle that's atrophied. I'm worried that I'm going to be like one of those feral children, raised by wolves, who doesn't know how to interact with people. A bit like the character in Paul Simon's *You Can Call Me Al* (1986) who "doesn't speak the language, he holds no currency, he is a foreign man, he is surrounded by the sound," I think I will feel like I've been plunked into a foreign land, surrounded by the sound of children and buses and bells after 2 years of monk-like silence. It is not likely to be my most graceful entrance!

But besides worrying about my predictable awkwardness upon re-entry, I've been sitting here wondering if anything we've learned in the virtual school will be of any use to anyone? All of the stuff I've been writing about in these letters for the last two years… will it just vanish into the ether or will it matter? From where I sit on this sticky afternoon, I cannot tell. What I know is that there is a tension between a system that

wants, very badly, to see an end to virtual schools and a core group of parents and kids who prefer this instructional method (for a variety of reasons).

These families fall into four broad categories, in my experience. There are families with significant health concerns who are nervous about their children getting sick or bringing viruses home with them from school. There are families whose values differ significantly from the curriculum either because of religion, politics or a combination of the two. And there are families who want a more flexible school experience for lifestyle reasons like the family who spent the second year of virtual school travelling on a boat while their children attended school online (Ulrichsen, 2021). Finally, there are students, particularly older students, who have never felt at ease in large group environments and whose social and learning preferences favour learning online. Families from all four of these groups may want online learning to continue as an option for K-12 students, well after the pandemic has ended.

Home instruction is a long-standing offering in school boards across Ontario for students with significant medical issues like a broken bone that prevents them from walking or being in the midst of chemotherapy treatments (York Region District School Board, 2017). Home instruction entitles a student to several hours per week of one-on-one instructional time with a teacher who comes to their house. During the pandemic, home instruction has been replaced by virtual school enrolment, since it offers far more instructional time for students. While there would not be enough students on home instruction to justify the existence of a virtual school just for them, if enrolment were pooled across several boards or even provincially, it would be a viable option.

There are also families in this group who have chosen virtual school because of social, emotional, and mental health concerns. While many educators choose to work in schools because they liked the experience of going to school, there are students who just do not like school, in spite of our best efforts at inclusivity. Some students will never again choose to be in a busy room full of people after they leave high school. Introversion is not a pathology but sometimes it feels that way in a school.

While I'm convinced that for students without heroic parent support, the K-6 virtual school experience is not educationally equivalent to an in-person class, I'm not sure that we can say the same for Grades 7-12. There are students in that demographic who have done extremely well online and who have preferred it to face-to-face school. Is it really reasonable to say that post-secondary students should have the option to attend online classes but that high school students shouldn't be entitled to the same options? I'm not sure it is and I think there may be students and families who advocate strongly for those options to continue post-pandemic. How the system responds to that advocacy is anyone's guess.

Families who pull their children out of school to travel also aren't new. Ari's best friend spent his Grade 3 year travelling the world with his family. They rented their house, took leaves from their jobs, and off they went, all over Asia and Europe, including taking the Siberian Express from Vladivostok to Moscow. It was an incredible adventure and we were lucky to live it vicariously through their blog posts and postcards. They, like every other parent who has made a similar decision, had to pull their children out of school for a year and commit to homeschooling them during that period. But what if they could have remained connected to a local classroom and still

travelled? What if their travels had enriched the whole class and had given all of the children a broader experience of the world? Technology offers us the opportunity to step away from the traditional binary of in-person school versus homeschooling and to offer a new road forward. Again, the enrolment from these parents alone would not be enough to justify keeping a virtual school open in smaller boards but pooled enrolment across boards would allow us to keep offering it to families who want to take advantage of the opportunity.

I've left the last group to the end, dearest Lex, because it's probably the hardest one to reconcile. We all know, statistically at least, that there are people who disagree with us but the nature of our social interactions is that we aren't often rubbing up against them. Mostly we spend time with people who are like us, in my case (and yours) university-educated, left-leaning liberals. This silo-ing leaves us very ill-equipped to have conversations with people who reject many of the principles we consider fundamental.

There's a phenomenon I've been observing over the past two years, one that I've never experienced in the preceding dozen years of my career in public education. Lambert Zuidervaart (2022) describes it really well so I'm going to borrow their words.

> What we have is a fly-wheel effect. There's a continual push to specialize and define expertise ever more narrowly, and that affects all disciplines. At the same time, of course, the authority, if I may use that word, or the credentialing of these people with expertise becomes more and more questionable, because their expertise becomes more and more unintelligible to ordinary, plain folks, people who are not scientists or professionals. The more specialization you have inside

> the academy, the more the academy becomes distant from the rest of society. At the same time, so many of the problems that we're dealing with as a society, as a global society, cannot be dealt with except through the expertise of folks who have academic training or are in the academy full-time. This is a big issue. (p. 194).

The misalignment that Zuidervaart describes leads to a situation where parents know that their children require a higher level of education in order to be economically successful but when that education inevitably presents them with ideas that are fundamentally at odds with their beliefs, they react with anger. Feeling beholden to a system that they also feel is betraying them creates an unavoidable tension. For instance, there's a climate change unit in the mandatory Ontario Grade 10 science course. What happens if you don't believe in climate change?

While the virtual school doesn't solve the problem of climate change denial and other areas of disagreement with the curriculum, namely around sexuality and gender identity, it does allow those families to temper their child's exposure to ideas they disagree with and to contextualize them in real time because they're more aware of what their children are learning. The ongoing existence of a virtual school also prevents families from being forced into an all-or-nothing binary by giving them an option for greater control besides total withdrawal to homeschooling. In a bigger community, private schools might be an option for some of these families but in our area, that's not a possibility and, for many families, finances preclude them from enrolling in private schools, virtual or otherwise.

While we may not agree with their ideology or their choice of online schooling, removing that choice will only lead to them becoming more ideologically entrenched. If one of the goals of public education is to expose students to ideas and people who are different from themselves, forcing parents into homeschooling their children is counterproductive to that goal. It also doesn't serve the best interests of the children, who will eventually have to face the broader social sphere but will do so without the preparation they would have otherwise had if they'd been able to interact with qualified teachers, guidance counsellors, and administrators. Virtual schooling is certainly far from "perfect or all-wise" (2008, p.547) but, analogous to Winston Churchill's famous quip about democracy, it offers a more robust opportunity for conversation than "others that have been tried" (2008, p.547) for families at the periphery of the ideological bell curve. As Henry and Heyes (2022) suggest,

> conversation offers distinctive possibilities for productively working through antagonisms across religion, sexuality, gender and sexuality education as there is a generative, unpredictable quality to conversation that affords opportunities for teachers, parents, students, and wider school communities to navigate difference in ways that are less about preserving *what* I am and *what* I say, think, or believe and more about being receptive to who the other is (p. 730).

Cutting off that conversation by forcing those families to homeschool doesn't serve anyone in the long run. I hope we can keep the conversation going. As imperfect as it is, it is better than silence.

But, and this is a big but, keeping the virtual school option available opens the door to the ongoing existence of what Studin calls "third-bucket kids" – that is, kids who

are neither in physical school (“Bucket 1”) nor in virtual school (“Bucket 2”)” (2021). As I talked about in an earlier letter, it is so easy for students to drop off the map in virtual school and, by attending only minimally, or by logging in but not participating, avoiding the attendance enforcement methods that exist.

We cannot get caught in the trap of pretending that everyone has the same tools available to them to make this kind of choice. Many parents may not realize the lifelong consequences of placing a struggling student in the virtual school without adequate support at home and we may end up with, as Studin suggests, a “gap in life prospects and outcomes between the educated and the suddenly uneducated [that] must be understood as the least forgiving” (2021). We have a duty to do no harm. I worry that the potential harm of keeping this option available might outweigh the potential benefits for a small number of students.

There have been instances in my career when I’ve disagreed with a parent’s choices regarding their child’s education. Parents have wanted to keep their children in French Immersion when I thought it best to transition them to the English program. Parents have resisted having their children go through the process of identification for a learning disability, believing that it carries a stigma, when I believed it would give them access to services and tools that they needed for success in school.

There are plenty of times when educators and parents, both with the best of intentions, might disagree on what is in a child’s best interests. However, opening up the permanent option of a public virtual school, one that has the potential to isolate a child and prevent them from having access to a meaningful education, may be a bridge too far. A “student for whom virtual learning, after a few months of ‘Zoom schooling’

without classmates, extracurricular life or community, loses all purpose can simply click a button to end his or her schooling definitively" (Studin, 2021). Because public schools are obligated to allow anyone to enrol, restricting enrolment in a public virtual classroom to only students who are well-equipped for success in an online learning environment is likely to be impossible, therefore leaving the door open to irreparable harm being done to students who are ill-equipped and ill-suited to attending school online.

So, as I pack up my makeshift office and look towards a future of face-to-face school once again, I'm really torn. I think we've done some good in the past two years. Some of our students have loved their online school experience and have preferred it to face-to-face school, others have found it a successful way of attending school during a difficult time, perhaps not one they would choose outside of a pandemic, but an experience they look back on with fondness, pride and a new, valuable set of skills. But that third bucket group really keeps me up at night.

> There is an issue of potential lack of pupils' intrinsic motivation, necessary to succeed in the new educational environment. […] The democratising function of formal education, which in its current form at least gives all citizens a chance to participate in the race for social merits on relatively similar terms, may be undermined (Mikiewicz & Jurczak-Morris, 2023, p. 87).

If we allow a public virtual option to continue post-pandemic, we allow for the ongoing existence of third bucket kids, an option that is untenable for those children and for society at large. Unfortunately, unless we can enforce some specific admissions

criteria as a prerequisite to enrolment, I do not think it is ethical for us to continue offering a virtual school option within the public education system.

Scheduling a summer visit is looking pretty complicated but I'm hoping that in the fall, when I've re-emerged into the bright light of face-to-face school, we can get you up here, at last! I cannot wait.

Lots of love,

Em

Music selection:

Jeux d'eau by Maurice Ravel performed by Louis Lortie (2003)

This improvisation was originally recorded in silence, in July of 2022, during my first week of holidays. My body struggled through movements that I've taken for granted over decades; two years of mostly working at a desk had taken their toll. I went into the studio that day with an intense drive to move, to get thoughts out of my head and into my body. But I struggled to articulate my thoughts into movement as my body fought against inertia. It is interesting to me how much time I spent inverted in this improvisation. Was I afraid of being seen? Did I feel upside down? Was I avoiding looking at myself in the mirror? It is not part of my typical movement pattern so why did it come into play at this moment?

It is hard for me to watch this improvisation because I cannot help but see the dancer that used to be and that, thankfully, has come back again since. But it is a representation of where I was, in body and mind, at that moment. I notice that much of my movement is folded forward, I seem to be drawn down, head down, pulled towards

the floor to rest. I'm also struck by the number of times during the improvisation that there is a contrast between my gaze as a dancer and the gaze of the camera. What I am seeing while lying on my back during those first few movements is very different from what my digital audience is seeing. Who is the dance for? The dancer or the audience?

I wanted music that would still allow my breath and the sound of my feet to be heard. Ravel's Jeux d'eau is a piece I used for choreography years ago and is one of my favourites. Ravel's music has just the right mix of chaos, pathos and beauty for this struggling improvisation. It also reminds me of the students I have impacted for good and that this teaching life is rewarding even when it is hard.

Chapter 6: Reflection, Remembrance and Recommendations

In this final chapter I will digest the themes that arise from the letters and dance vignettes in chapter 5. The letters are already organised thematically as I wrote one letter for each of the major themes that I saw arising from my experience. However, the writing and recording process itself has introduced new themes to the work and it is those themes I will explore in chapter 6. I will also reflect on the process of creating those letters and dances and consider what lessons I might draw from these reflections to inform my own practice. Finally, I will propose some broader questions for decision-makers and distance education researchers to consider. Each section in this chapter will be introduced with a quote that reflects the theme of that section.

My Third Child

"*The closest thing to a human being is a book*" (Lebowitz, 2012).

I have written this dissertation in many strange places: sitting on my teenage son's bed while trying to keep him on-task with his homework, at the cottage without internet access and now, as I start chapter six, in the lobby at a dance competition with my daughter in spite of my many objections to the enterprise (Russel et. al., 2018, Schupp, 2019). I watch the other mothers stroll by, seemingly content to watch one tap dance after another and I wonder what exactly is wrong with me. Why am I like this? Is it just that I've already seen one too many tap dances and therefore cannot muster the enthusiasm to watch another? Is it that my academic dance training makes it nigh impossible for me to watch dance without analysing it on levels deeper by fathoms than

it was often intended to be? Or is it something more central to my being that makes me "a woman who has never been satisfied" (Miranda, Satisfied, 2016).

The doctoral journey has not been an easy one as a mother, although it is the identity that informed some of my most important choices while I was the principal of the virtual school, as described in Letter 1. Sameshima (2007) writes about her protagonist's daughter, Jade, complaining during the writing of her dissertation.

> How much can I sacrifice for learning? Will I put my own children on the stone slab, baby lambs for my learning? Jade came into the office today. She says I never do anything for her. She says I don't love her. What can I do that will redeem my sacrifice? (p.63).

I've had similar conversations with my daughter over the course of the past four years. My son has been less vocal; is it because he's older and needs me less? Or is it because she's a girl that she's more aware of the lack of congruence between the mother she has and the mother she wishes for, a mother more like the other mothers?

Maclean et. al (2021), write that elevated levels of guilt in mothers who are students may be because "studying does not have the immediate financial reward associated with work and is more likely to be driven by an individual's desire for intellectual growth. Hence there may be scope for women to view the decision to study as "selfish" (p.178). The great Rabbi Nachman of Breslov (in Mizrahi, 2012, p. 5) said that "whoever is able to write a book and does not, is as if he has lost a child" and my own rabbi, Elyse Goldstein, mused that her book *Revisions: Seeing Torah Through a Feminist Lens* was the daughter she was never going to have after giving birth to three

sons (1998). So perhaps, although this dissertation has at times been an irritant in my relationship with my children, it represents the third child I have gestated in my brain instead of in my womb.

It has also not been an easy process as an educator in the K-12 system. A doctorate, in particular, feels like the height of selfishness. Not only might there be no financial payoff at the end of this process, it might actually be to the detriment of my career to have Dr. appear before my name; not everyone views the title kindly. And, unlike my mother peers who have documented their girls' weekends and spa days while I have been reading and typing, there is no social validation for this type of self-care; it doesn't make for appealing social media posts.

In line with Hodgson and Simoni's (1995) findings that female graduate students experience both more stress and less support than their male counterparts, being a female graduate student in a female-dominated profession has sometimes been an isolating experience. On the other side of the mirror from scholars like Mahani (2021) and Hill et al. (2021) who have struggled to reconcile motherhood with their identity as academics, it is equally challenging to fit into the culture of motherhood and teacher-hood when your work isn't just a means to an economic end but a primary driver of your interests and your identity. As I approach the end of this process, I am feeling both proud and afraid. What comes next? Will it have been worth the sacrifices? How will I know? What is the worth of this work?

Those feelings of uncertainty are compounded by the complicated status of the doctoral degree within K-12 education. While it may be true that doctoral degrees represent "the pinnacle of education" (Jairam & Kahl, 2012, p. 311), there are very few

educators who pursue this degree. Of the 231,053 members in the Ontario College of Teachers in 2020, only 1797 of them had completed the Supervisory Officers Qualification for which a Masters or a Doctorate is required (Ontario College of Teachers, 2021, Statistics). That's less than one percent (0.77% to be exact) and many of those members have a Masters, not a Doctorate. We can therefore infer that the number of teachers with a doctorate is very small indeed.

One respondent in Jairam and Kahl's (2012) research "indicated a level of jealousy from her family, saying, "As the only person in my immediate family (parents and two siblings) to attend college, they don't understand what I do and believe I think I'm 'above' them." (p.321). While I would not characterise the reactions of some colleagues as jealousy, exactly, there has definitely been a certain amount of suspicion or hostility which I'm not sure how to interpret. I do wonder if they feel that I am trying to put myself, as the research participant cited above suggests, above them or whether this is a manifestation of Queen Bee Syndrome in a female-dominated workplace (Crawford et al., 2023). In my workplace, there have only been two previous administrators with doctoral degrees and the first was when I was a child, beyond the reaches of institutional memory. Both were superintendents. A principal doctor is an unknown quantity and like other unusual things, it may be a little unsettling.

Writing the Bones[13]

> "Writing is a way of freezing time. Writing is a form of time travel" (Hua Hsu, 2023).

Writing the letters of chapter five took me back, in a visceral way, to those chaotic days in 2020 and 2021 when I was making hundreds of decisions every day and hoping that they were the right ones. I used to wake up in the morning still jittery from the previous day's adrenaline rush and only heavy weight lifting could reset my nervous system; I remain thankful that years of dancing had given me the physical awareness to process that stress. As I wrote, I reviewed old emails and files, remembering the incredible pace of the days, the length of them and the relentless novelty of every problem that arose. Now that I'm back in a face-to-face school, I'm able to more clearly see how both types of administration are creative acts, iterative improvisations that build on themselves over the years of a principal's practice.

However, there is something undeniably extraordinary about the context of Ontario's pandemic-era public virtual schools in that they were created so quickly, they were so large, and the breadth of the demographic they served was unprecedented in the history of both distance and online education. They were more obviously improvised than their face-to-face counterparts, more clearly an invention; it was no secret that I was making it up as I went along. But improvisations are not, as they sometimes appear, completely unprecedented.

[13] This subtitle references the title of Natalie Goldberg's book *Writing Down the Bones* (originally published in 1986), which I read as an aspiring teen writer as well as to an experiential anatomy class I took at Bennington College titled *Moving from the Bones*.

> Improvisation as a free, spontaneous invention, removed from all references, does not exist: it belongs to no cultural system and is not practised by any individual. There is no system in which improvisation does not consist of a careful juxtaposition and variation of preformed materials, which these extemporaneous "creators" assemble cleverly, adapting them in relation to the occasion of their execution (Staiti, 2022, p. 126).

As an improvising administrator I had many reference points: my experience as a classroom teacher, my years of working with teachers as an itinerant teacher and curriculum consultant, my experience transitioning the face-to-face school where I was vice-principal to distance learning in the first four months of the pandemic, my parenting experience and my years of experience working with children and families as a nanny, a camp counsellor and a dance teacher. I also had my own experience as a distance learner and my initial learning in the first two courses of my doctoral program in distance education to guide me. However, my close reading of the letters in chapter 5 and the accompanying videos tells me that none of those experiences were the determining factor in shaping how I navigated those very intense two years.

What made the biggest difference was my training in improvisation. The years I spent playing what seemed at the time to be mere games, fun challenges that sometimes made us giggle self-consciously as we rolled across the studio floor, making up the movement in response to the prompts our teachers gave us, provided me with the psychological tools to lead in highly uncertain times. These exercises, which seemed at the time to be only about increasing our creativity by helping us to break out

of established and well-trained movement patterns, had an inadvertent consequence that is only recently being explored by researchers; it increased my *uncertainty tolerance* (UT) (Felsman et. al, 2020, Felsman et. al., 2023).

Hillen et. al. (2017) define uncertainty tolerance as “the set of negative and positive psychological responses—cognitive, emotional, and behavioural—provoked by the conscious awareness of ignorance about particular aspects of the world (p. 70)”. Key to this definition is the metacognitive aspect of UT, the person has to be aware that they do not know what to expect. For many people it is that very awareness of uncertainty that causes distress. In contrast, I have become, through consistent exposure to uncertainty through improvisation, a person who is not afraid of uncertainty and who feels confident in situations that change rapidly and unpredictably. I even enjoy them.

> From a behaviourist perspective, improv may promote uncertainty tolerance via exposure, a key ingredient in traditional therapies. Each successive moment in improvisation is one of many (perhaps infinite) possibilities; as such, an improv encounter provides direct and repeated experience with social uncertainty. The underlying mechanism for exposure as an effective treatment may be learned habituation, initial fear activation followed by fear reduction, or inhibitory learning in emphasising the development of new, non-threatening associations that become more accessible across time and context. Since improvisation involves encountering uncertainty in a non-judgmental, trusting and mutually supportive environment, new associations developed through improv are likely non-threatening or even pleasant (Felsman et. al, 2020, p. 3).

As Felsman et. al. (2020) suggest, my repeated exposure to improvisational situations has made me not only confident in uncertainty, it has made me someone who takes pleasure in riding the waves and doing it well. I am aware that I learned how to improvise by practising skills and I know that I can continue to get better at it. I have a growth mindset (Dweck, 2015) about my own uncertainty tolerance. As Felsman et. al. (2020) suggests, I do not just tolerate uncertainty, I welcome it like an old friend. More research into the impact of improvisation training on UT in a variety of contexts, including amongst educators, is called for, given the promise of these initial findings.

Felsman et al's (2020) findings suggest that it is even more urgent that improvisation start to be taught in pre-service teacher education programs and preparatory courses for principals. The teaching and administrative contexts in public schools are likely to become more uncertain over time as we confront challenges like climate change, income inequality, migration, and the real possibility of another global pandemic. Teachers and the principals who lead them need to be able to face uncertainty with confidence and poise and even a small amount of improvisation training can help them to do that (Felsman et. al., 2020). The teachers' shortages we are currently facing in Ontario suggest that this most recent period of uncertainty was very stressful for teachers, causing an unusual number of them to leave the profession prior to their official retirement date (Heck, May 1, 2023). Building the capacity of teachers to withstand that uncertainty is critical to retaining them in the profession.

The Dancing Identity

> "Get into the habit of dancing. It will displace depression and dispel hardship" (Rabbi Nachman of Breslov in Mykoff, 2014, p. 104).

As much as my dance training has shaped and supported the educator I have become, it is rare, as a 45-year-old mother of two, that I have the opportunity to dance in any kind of public context. It was therefore both a pleasure and a challenge to record the improvisations that accompany the letters in chapter five. I made the decision to record them in settings that I had access to during the period that I was writing about, September 2020 to June 2022, which significantly limited the possibilities given the number of locations that were closed during that period. I made use of my own home, my neighbour's house, the street, the synagogue parking lot, the cottage road, and the dance studio. The interior locations invoke a sense of claustrophobia, which is evocative of the feelings that accompanied months of lockdown. The outdoor locations remind me of both the loneliness I felt and of the delights of guilt-free solitude that we had permission to experience during those months. These are "short visceral responses" (Snowber, 2022, p. 85) to the emotions, issues and questions I was grappling with during those two intense years. Some of them I recorded with a fixed camera and others were recorded by my children who barely overcame their embarrassment at having such a strange mother.

The process of recording these vignettes forced me to consider how I have been taught to devalue my own training. As I discuss in chapter 2, dance sits at the bottom of the academic hierarchy and, as such, those of us who chose to pursue degrees in

dance often face criticism and dismissal from family, friends and advisors. An uncle once told me that I would “never go anywhere with dance” causing me to create a collection of photos logging each time dance has taken me somewhere interesting (Taiwan, Seattle, North Carolina, Whistler, to name a few). While he probably has no recollection of that comment, it has haunted me and, along with many similar experiences, has made me defensive about the role dance plays in my career path. For many people, there is a “perception of dancing as unserious, as something frivolous people do, like eating a bowl of whipped cream or sleeping until noon… something you do when you’re young and then you stop” (Kirsch, 2023, para 6 & 7). While I am fiercely proud of my accomplishments in dance, I also tend to compartmentalise them, wanting so badly to be taken seriously that I downplay my dance life in favour of areas that seem more in line with society’s expectations of someone with a serious job.

Recording the vignettes in chapter 5 reconnected me with the reasons I dance. I was reminded that my repertoire of movement, while somewhat reduced in virtuosity by age, is still substantial, and that the skills I have developed to conceptualise movement and organise it in thoughtful and creative ways are valuable in themselves, not just in what they can offer me in other spheres. I was reminded that dance has taught me, most of all, to forge my own path. As Dooling (2014) writes: “as a dance major, you are constantly making your own way. You are learning how technique works for you, you are figuring out your own creative voice, and you are learning what makes you unique as an artist, performer, and person” (para. 11).

When I watch my own movement, I see clearly the many references that have shaped my development as a dancer. I see the wide, spiralling arms and upper body of

Graham technique, the curves, falls, and suspensions of Limon technique and the precise darting footwork and smooth upper body carriage that decades of ballet training have developed. In the same way that the written part of this dissertation references a range of literature, the danced part also includes references to a canon of repertoire that I have been lucky to learn and perform over the years. I see echoes of Anthony Tudor's *Lilac Garden*, David Earl's *Fire Dance*, Jose Limon's *A Choreographic Offering* and my Snow Queen variation from Leica Hardy's Halifax production of the *Nutcracker*, along with the many pieces of choreography I have learned and created over the nearly four decades since I put on my first pair of ballet slippers. While these references aren't cited in an alphabetical list, they are nonetheless very present as I watch my characteristic movement signature and reflect on everything that has contributed to its development.

This repertoire is what permits me to improvise; it gives me a lexicon of the possible. If I hadn't had all of the experiences that brought me to this middle-aged movement identity, I would not have options for each movement choice. But it is not just my technical training and the resulting vocabulary that give me those choices. If I had only learned repertoire and taken technique classes, I might be very uncomfortable improvising; many highly skilled dancers are.

If I hadn't had explicit training in improvisation, I might be paralyzed by the very breadth of choice that my training provides. Because I've been taught to be comfortable with uncertainty, I can make improvised choices without weighing any one possibility too heavily, at ease in the reality that no choice will be perfect and that each choice will inform the next. As Steve Paxton suggests, one primary function of learning to improvise is "in order to know what to avoid" (2001, p. 425).

Weighing each choice lightly is not the same as not taking a process seriously. It is focusing on the process itself as a work of art and seeing each choice as a tile in that creative mosaic, both one of many and one that will inform the next. The goal of improvisation training is to “maintain the calmness of [Paxton’s] Small Dance even when in extreme, adrenalised states of dancing - to trust and develop one’s instincts which [...] work faster than the conscious mind in a situation of duress as in the case of falling” (Goldman, 2004, p. 49).

The creation and administration of a virtual school during a global pandemic is, unequivocally, a situation of duress, and resembles falling in a number of ways. Like falling, it is impacted by forces (like gravity or the provincial government) outside of the control of the person or object that is falling. Like a dancer who is falling, the leadership process can be shaped by choice making in “those places where the dancer negotiates the tension between passivity and decision” (Goldman, 2004, p. 51), during the fall time, between vertical and horizontal. Finally, like contact improvisation, which was the first dance style to be recorded on video throughout its development, the creation of pandemic-era virtual schools can be viewed in slow motion, played back for analysis, and used as an opportunity to retrain our reflexes for the next time we find ourselves free falling.

The letters I’ve written in chapter five are an attempt to view my own experiences in slow motion so that I can use it as an opportunity to improve my practice and, I hope, provide a window into my experience that may be useful to others. They offer, in what I hope is an evocative format, a sense of the improvisational administrative process, the

highs and lows of choice making under stress, and the lessons that established systems may be able to learn from unusual circumstances.

The Future of Public Distance Education

> "Compared to our expectations, the surfaces on which the drawings are made seem to play a more significant role in generating the creative process" (Vecchi & Ruozzi, 2015, p. 138).

The high tide of writing about education during the COVID-19 pandemic has yet to crest but it is rising daily. Amongst academics working in distance learning/distance education/online learning there has been a concerted effort to create space between established practice in the field and what was created in the K-12 sector to cope with school closures and the subsequent creation of K-12 virtual schools (Barbour & LaBonte, 2022).

> Ultimately, effective online education requires an investment in an ecosystem of learner supports, which take time to identify and build. Relative to other options, simple online content delivery can be quick and inexpensive, but confusing that with robust online education is akin to confusing lectures with the totality of face-to-face teaching (Barbour et. al., 2020, pp. 5-6).

There is a defensiveness to much of this writing. The authors are concerned that the experience of students and teachers during the pandemic will colour how they view online and distance education more broadly and will negatively impact public perception. Therefore, the authors try to illustrate how virtual schools and emergency

remote learning are different from established online pedagogy and to attribute the failures of the model to those differences.

One of the significant areas of failure they identify is that of equity. They point to the importance of establishing relationships, of leveraging community support, and of providing access to technology in order to level the playing field for virtual school students but they never drill down into what is the bigger issue; equity of understanding and equity of choice. An adult learner who is enrolling in distance education understands themselves as a learner and is making a choice to pursue a course of study because it interests them or it is moving them along a career pathway. They are also paying for the opportunity to engage in the learning which incentivises their attendance, participation and course completion.

A Grade two student who is enrolled in a public virtual school is there because they're legally obligated to attend school and their parents have made the decision for them to fulfil that obligation by attending online. The Grade two student can have excellent internet access, a laptop and a quiet space to study (three barriers identified by Barbour et. al, 2020) and still not succeed because there is not an adult available to sit beside them and coach them through their learning.

In postsecondary online learning, the student *is* the adult. In K-12 (and in particular K-6), the student *needs* an adult. The transactional distance between student and teacher is simply too far for many K-12 students to be successful. As Barbour et. al. (2020) state: "many marginalized students could disappear from the system without considerable effort to provide them with extra support" (p. 14). What they fail to state,

however, is that the ongoing availability of an online learning option in public education may be a factor in their disappearance.

Virtual schools offer an all too convenient off-ramp for students and families who have not been well-served by traditional schools, for reasons ranging from racism to poverty to learning challenges. However, expanding distance learning from its original adult population of postsecondary students and privileged private school students to a population that is trying to escape the failures of the system by escaping the system altogether, has potential consequences for those students that may be unpredictable and irreversible. Like other public policies whose original, successful, application was in a privileged, more educated and less diverse population, we cannot assume that the expansion of that same policy will have an analogous positive impact in a population who have been historically marginalised in the education system.

In the case of distance education, its successful application in a population of adults (and later adolescents) who have chosen to learn online for reasons of improved access, should not be misconstrued as evidence that it can be expanded to other populations without significant consideration of the unique learning, social, developmental, and safety needs of those populations along with a healthy dose of caution. In the same way that many physicians are concerned about the expansion of Medical Assistance in Dying (MAiD) to non-dying patients, I am concerned that the expansion of distance learning to students of all ages and all learning needs may lead to students who miss out entirely on being educated.

As Dr. Sonu Gaid said in his testimony to the Special Joint Committee on MAiD, while MAiD was “introduced to help avoid painful deaths, MAiD expansion provides

these marginalised non-dying people death to escape painful lives" (2022). Analogously, distance education has, to this point, existed to help students access education, while online learning expansion provides marginalised students a potential escape from education, creating a barrier to the very service that the program was designed to facilitate. Online education should not be a way to let ourselves, as educators working in public education, off the hook.

The surface on which we draw makes a huge difference to the marks we make and when that surface varies so considerably, we should be open to the possibility that the marks will vary just as much. Distance education researchers need to temper their enthusiasm with some pragmatic understanding of what it looks like to teach young children well and should consider whether it is possible to mirror those effective practices online without relying on parents who may or may not be capable or available as teachers' aides. I would suggest that any researcher writing about the expansion of online education into the K-6 sector spends a few days in a face-to-face Kindergarten or Grade 2 class before suggesting that K-6 virtual schools should be a permanent fixture in the public education system.

The re-searcher

> "I have the mind of a researcher, not an inventor. To study in order to know? No. To study in order to know more? No. I think it is to study in order to ask more and more questions" (Korczak, J., p. 69).

Writing about this period of my career has felt both imperative and impossible. After all, there is so much I cannot say. There are stories I cannot tell for ethical and professional reasons and there are details I cannot share because they would identify people who have not consented to be identified. Even seeking that consent would present ethical hurdles that are insurmountable as obtaining consent from staff that I have supervised before and may supervise again would present several ethical challenges. I have had to be very careful in writing about the places where my experiences touch on the experiences of other people, be they students, staff or parents, so as not to step off the path of maintaining confidentiality. The fences are so high that it was hard to see the potential creative space carved out by those boundaries. And yet, it felt equally impossible for me not to write about this experience as it was so transformative, so exceptional and such an opportunity to expand our understanding of distance education in the K-12 sector.

Writing about it by using arts-based evocative autoethnography and partially fictionalizing my experiences offered me an opportunity to share the truths of the experience without the need for those truths to be empirical or generalizable. It also allowed me to write about the experience richly and realistically without needing to identify anyone involved; the fictional sleight of hand permitted me to get closer to the emotional bones than more established research methods could have. This research method also allowed me to focus on my own learning; if the reader can draw from my lessons to inform their own context then that is a wonderful bonus.

I have also spent time thinking about the place where I live, where I was born and where I feel most rooted, which is Robinson-Huron Treaty territory, specifically the

traditional territory of the Atikameksheng Anishnaabeg people. Some of the stories that I tell in this dissertation are rooted in the history of this place, a history of dis-*place*-ment, and dis-connection as well as a place of meeting and sharing. So it is important to me, in a small way, that I am aligning my research practice with the knowledge keeping practices of this land, which are grounded in storytelling and art. “The storyteller imparts their own life and experience into the telling of stories and the listeners filter the story being told through their own experience and reflective thinking and make it relevant to their own life” (Peltier, 2021, p. 3). Writing this research in a narrative form, as a series of personal letters, instead of in a more established qualitative research style is a small act of reconciliation. As Rabbi Tarfon cautions us in *Pirkei Avot* (ethics of the fathers): “You are not obligated to complete the work, but neither are you free to abandon it” (as cited in Harrison, 2023, para. 5).

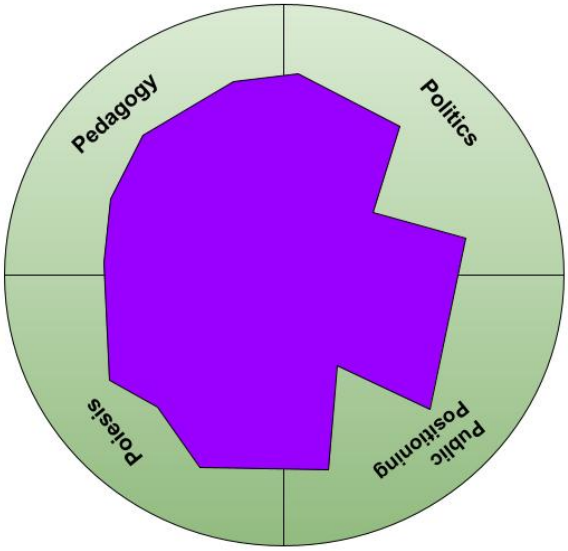
In the same spirit of place, I propose using a four-quadrant circular structure (based on the four quadrants of the medicine wheel) to assess the authenticity and relevance of my research, originally conceptualized by Norris (2011). In place of cardinal directions or colours, the quadrants are labelled poeisis, pedagogy, politics and public positioning. An arts-based project can be graphed onto the wheel, with some quadrants being more emphasized than others, depending on the project. “Each arts-based project can then be defined and assessed based upon how well it achieves its intended purposes” (Norris, 2011, p. 3). Because of the improvisational nature of this work, I am using Norris’ wheel to look at it retrograde.

Because of my extensive professional training in dance, it is more challenging to situate both the public positioning and the poesis of this work as my own standard for

these elements is 22-year old Emily whose leg extensions reached her shoulders and who could execute pirouette after pirouette without ever stumbling. It is hard not to judge myself on that standard. However, I have tried to treat myself kindly while graphing my research onto Norris' wheel.

Figure 6

Norris' wheel of arts quadrants for Improvising a Virtual School



The dominant quadrant in this work is pedagogical, primarily a pedagogy that has taught me, the researcher, about myself as a professional and an artist. As Norris (2011) states, pedagogical "growth can take place with the artist as s/he comes to understand the world differently as a result of blending the content to the unique artistic form" (p. 3). Going through the process of writing and dancing this dissertation has helped me to understand my practice as a principal differently, primarily as being axiomatically creative, and intimately bound to my practice as an artist. I've also come to see myself as a dancer once again, someone who has something to offer audiences, even though it's quite different from what I used to bring to the stage. In response to my

letters, Alexis (the addressee of letters 1-8) created several danced replies. She and I are in the early stages of planning a short dance film based on our individual and partnered improvisations, an extension of the work of this dissertation.

To a lesser extent, but still important to the work, is poiesis. Norris (2011) is reluctant to foreground this quadrant, because many arts-based researchers and participants are novices in the craft and technique of their art and therefore their capacity for poiesis through the language of the art form is limited. Morejón (2021) defines poiesis as “the activity in which a person brings something into being that did not exist before” (p. 183). He states that “poiesis requires liberation from subjective fixation and self-consciousness” (p.183). Liberating myself from the self-consciousness that became my cloak as I aged and danced less and less for myself has been an important piece of this process. Bringing into being a new way of structuring a dissertation has also given me confidence in my own creative capacities and has given me hope that the work I’ve done will not only serve me as a researcher and an educator but may also serve others who strive to walk a road less traveled.

Politics and public positioning are less emphasized quadrants in this work as I am deliberately focusing on my own experience and my own learning and leaning away from positioning the work publicly and making political statements. This reluctance is, partly, related to my professional role, but it is also in keeping with the autoethnographic, reflexive nature of the research.

I am left with more questions than answers at the end of this process, but that seems to be the point. My research is not going to be able to guide teachers who want to teach young children online. It is not going to help to plan a lesson or even organise a

timetable. It will not guide curriculum development. What it might do is help teachers and administrators think about decision making and how we can do a better job of navigating crisis situations by providing pre-service teachers with training that will allow them to be comfortable with uncertain situations. It might prompt some rethinking about what matters both in schools and in teacher/administrator preparatory programs.

What I also hope is that distance education scholars might be prompted to think about the profound implications of expanding pervasive online learning in K-12 and whether it is advisable to promote that expansion when there is so much at stake. What would equitable public online learning look like? Are the factors required to make it successful within the control of students, parents, teachers and administrators? Is it ethical to promote an educational platform that requires heroic parental effort to be successful? If students cannot participate in a Community of Inquiry without support from parents, is that too much to ask?

In Judaism, there is a rabbinic idea that we build fences around the law so as to ensure we do not violate a commandment. For instance, we have separate meat and dairy dishes in order to never “boil a kid in the milk of its mother” (The Schocken Bible: Volume 1, Ex 23:19, p. 386). In order to avoid violating a commandment, we create an additional barrier so that it is impossible to inadvertently do harm. As educators, “we need to actually build fences at the top of the cliff rather than be the ambulances at the bottom” (Winn, 2023, 6:46). What responsibility do distance education scholars and practitioners have to build fences around their practice so as to ensure it is never used to harm communities for whom it was not designed? What is the responsibility of policy makers to consider the repercussions of their decisions on the most vulnerable, to travel

down the road of a thought experiment and to put themselves in the place of a child who has limited agency and is relying on adults to make good choices on their behalf? I hope these are questions they ask themselves as they look back at the pandemic.

A question that I have asked myself throughout my dissertation-writing journey is the same question that Howard Gardner and Elliot Eisner were asking each other nearly 30 years ago: is this research? In the 1996 transcript of their conversation, Garner states “If I wanted to know how a novice teacher learned to teach, a study say, of one young teacher's journey, I think a novel could tell me” (Saks, 1996, p. 408). He goes on to say that he thinks

> the issue has to do with what is going to help us understand schools better, what is going to help us understand the situations that people work and live in daily, and whether or not it fits into the category of sociology or psychology [...] is beside the point. [...] The whole point of using a novel - or a film - is to provide the reader with access to a content that would otherwise be inaccessible. (Saks, 1996, p. 413)

If we follow Eisner’s thinking, the experience of leading a virtual school during a pandemic is content that would, in many facets of what was a highly charged and emotional experience, be inaccessible except through an arts-based dissertation that allowed the emotional content to be foregrounded. I hope this dissertation provides support to the next doctoral student whose first language is movement and who wants to bring their full selves to the process of scholarship.

Dancing Through the Storm

> The audience has to come last in service to the audience. If you're making it for the audience, you will undershoot the target. If you're making it for yourself you'll do the best work (Rubin, March 29, 2023).

In chapter 2, I identified a gap in the literature related to using dance as a tool for metaphorical positioning in academic writing. I attributed this gap to a combination of factors: the lack of knowledge about dance in the general population, the subordination of dance as a discipline within the academic canon, and the privileging of disciplines that leave behind a paper trail (music notation, theatre scripts, and paintings, for example). It is my hope that future dancer-scholars will read this dissertation and take heart that it is possible to use the "word of your body" (Sater et. al, 2007, p. 99) in an academic context. There is space for us to bring our whole selves to the dissertation writing process and to stretch the parameters of a traditional dissertation, in the same way that we have stretched our muscles, instead of folding ourselves like contortionists into a prescribed shape. Scholarship will benefit from our physicality but we may have to take some bold and fearless steps to carve the space in our image.

What I hope the reader takes away from this work, above all else, is the messy reality of the creative process and the futility of trying to prepare teachers and school administrators for every possible scenario. More training in the areas of knowledge that authorities think will be required during the next crisis is not what is required to be able to tolerate the uncertainty of a fluid emergency. Rather, habituating education workers

to uncertainty and providing them with the tools to respond flexibly, is what will give them the capacity to dance gracefully through change. Artists have this flexibility because we train for it; we rehearse, we invest a lot of time. It is not because we are built differently from birth that we can respond to uncertainty with easy creativity; it is because we have been trained, usually through Spolin's (1999) improvisation games, to shift and bend and make choices while falling.

More people need that training. It is becoming increasingly essential that we all become better at thinking our way through uncertainty without collapsing from the stress. When the next "long disaster" (Solnit, 2009, p. 69) comes, we need to be ready. Improvisation, be it through dance or theatre work, can help us to achieve that readiness so that we can respond with "yes, and" instead of blocking and denial. As Oscar-winning film director Sarah Polley, in conversation with fellow director Ruben Östlund, observes, the creative process always involves stepping into the unknown.

> Polley: I felt like it was a constant process of discovery and I think what I had to let go of was this sense that people will think I don't know what I'm doing. Because of course I didn't know what I was doing. I'd never made that movie before. And then I realized, this is actually how you are on every movie. And usually as the filmmaker, you're the least experienced person at your job. So it doesn't actually make sense to pretend you know what you're doing; it's much better to just fumble through it.
>
> Östlund: Be open about it that you don't know.
>
> Polley: And be confident about not knowing what you're doing too as opposed to having it diminish you (Polley & Östlund, 2023, 7:01).

Like many educators, I keep a smile file of encouraging cards, emails and notes I've received from students, parents and colleagues over the years. When I'm feeling discouraged I pull it out and remind myself of the positive impact I've had during my career which gives me the energy to keep working through those frustrating moments. When I look back over the cards and notes from the virtual school years, the words that reoccur are support, leadership, challenge, patience, humour, commitment and chill. Helping people to see themselves as being tasked with a unique and exciting challenge instead of a being saddled with managing an unprecedented disaster is at least half the battle in building a hopeful and supportive school culture during a crisis. There is a difference between being positive and being Pollyanna; pretending everything is wonderful when it's actually really hard isn't helpful to anyone and it tends to breed cynicism. As Polley (2023) suggests, embracing your own frailties, your own lack of knowing as a leader, also helps.

As a leader, giving people the permission to fumble and to be open about that "constant process of discovery" is a powerful message of trust. Even teachers who had never taught online, who were not comfortable with technology, and whose students had special needs or barriers to learning online were, in many cases, successful at reaching their students, building durable classroom communities, and achieving key learning goals. "Even people who don't think of themselves as capable of solving this kind of challenge can do it with the right mindset, strategies, and motivation". It is the leader's role "to inspire and enable each of those three conditions for success" (Morgan & Barden, 2015, p. 227).

It will not be enough to provide new teachers with this training, current teachers and teacher leaders will need to build their tolerance for uncertainty through improvisation. As Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel writes, a teacher is “is either a witness or a stranger. To guide a pupil into the promised land, he must have been there himself” (2022, p. 88). A teacher-leader who has been trained in improvisation can teach others how to improve (pun intended) their own skills and can give them the freedom to dance with confidence not just in the eye of the storm but right through the worst of the howling wind.

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Appendix A

Ethics Certificate

Athabasca University
RESEARCH CENTRE

CERTIFICATION OF ETHICAL APPROVAL

The Athabasca University Research Ethics Board (REB) has reviewed and approved the research project noted below. The REB is constituted and operates in accordance with the current version of the Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans (TCPS2) and Athabasca University Policy and Procedures.

Ethics File No.: 25064

Principal Investigator:
Ms. Emily Caruso Parnell, Graduate Student
Faculty of Humanities & Social Sciences\Doctor of Education (EdD) in Distance Education

Supervisor/Project Team:
Dr. Connie Blomgren (Supervisor)

Project Title:
Dancing in the Eye of the Storm: Improvisation in the Development of a COVID-19 Era Virtual School

Effective Date: January 16, 2023 **Expiry Date**: January 15, 2024

Restrictions:

Any modification/amendment to the approved research must be submitted to the AUREB for approval prior to proceeding.

Any adverse event or incidental findings must be reported to the AUREB as soon as possible, for review.

Ethical approval is valid *for a period of one year.* An annual request for renewal must be submitted and approved by the above expiry date if a project is ongoing beyond one year.

An Ethics Final Report must be submitted when the research is complete *(i.e. all participant contact and data collection is concluded, no follow-up with participants is anticipated and findings have been made available/provided to participants (if applicable))* or the research is terminated.

Approved by: **Date: January 16, 2023**

Tobias Wiggins, Chair
Faculty of Humanities & Social Sciences, Departmental Ethics Review Committee

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Athabasca University Research Ethics Board
University Research Services Office
1 University Drive, Athabasca AB Canada T9S 3A3
E-mail: rebsec@athabascau.ca
Telephone: 780.213.2033

Appendix B

Ethics Certificate Renewal

Athabasca University

CERTIFICATION OF ETHICAL APPROVAL - RENEWAL

The Athabasca University Research Ethics Board (REB) has reviewed and approved the research project noted below. The REB is constituted and operates in accordance with the current version of the Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans (TCPS2) and Athabasca University Policy and Procedures.

Ethics File No.: **25064**

Principal Investigator:
Ms. Emily Caruso Parnell, Graduate Student
Faculty of Humanities & Social Sciences\Doctor of Education (EdD) in Distance Education

Supervisor/Project Team:
Dr. Connie Blomgren (Supervisor)

Project Title:
Dancing in the Eye of the Storm: Improvisation in the Development of a COVID-19 Era Virtual School

Effective Date: January 15, 2024 **Expiry Date**: January 14, 2025

Restrictions:

Any modification/amendment to the approved research must be submitted to the AUREB for approval prior to proceeding.

Any adverse event or incidental findings must be reported to the AUREB as soon as possible, for review.

Ethical approval is valid *for a period of one year.* An annual request for renewal must be submitted and approved by the above expiry date if a project is ongoing beyond one year.

An Ethics Final Report must be submitted when the research is complete *(i.e. all participant contact and data collection is concluded, no follow-up with participants is anticipated and findings have been made available/provided to participants (if applicable))* or the research is terminated.

Approved by: **Date: December 21, 2023**

Paul Jerry, Chair
Athabasca University Research Ethics Board

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