

Educational Autobiography: The Role of Education in Identity Formation

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EDUC5314: Language Arts

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October 31, 2022

Just as a stone in a river is shaped by the waves around it, my identity was formed by my education. My identity was formed by the greater context within which my education took place, and specific impactful experiences within my years of schooling. As I move into my role as educator, I will use my prior experiences to form my teacher identity. I will form values that shape my teaching style and methods. My personal experiences and values are fundamental to my motive for becoming a teacher, and answer the question: *Why teaching?*

My formal education has been mostly localized to Windsor and Essex County. I attended elementary school in Tecumseh, at Victoria Public School (kindergarten to grade 3) and then A.V. Graham Public School (grades 4-8). During secondary school, I attended Belle River District High School in Belle River, Ontario. After that, I completed a 3-year diploma in Biomedical Engineering Technology at St. Clair College. I did one semester of Engineering Science at the University of Toronto. Then I completed a 4-year bachelor's degree in Human Kinetics at the University of Windsor. Now, I am at the University of Windsor for my Bachelor of Education. When the first two to three decades of one's life is spent in school, it would be difficult to argue that their identity is *not* formed primarily by their schooling.

The community within which the school is located, including typical socio-economic status and racial diversity is also relevant to forming identity. Furthermore, the educational values of parents, and their schooling histories would have an effect. The community in which I lived and attended school was a middle-class, well-educated town, on the outskirts of the city of Windsor, called Tecumseh. My community highly valued education and sports, and so do my parents. My mother was a cheerleader throughout high school. Then, she graduated with her undergraduate degree in Social Work from the University of Windsor. My father earned an undergraduate degree in Biology at the University of Windsor, a Bachelor of Education at

Western University, and went through trade school to become an electrician. He played football, rugby, and hockey throughout his high school and university years. When my parents grew up, and when I grew up, it was common for students to excel academically *and* to be members of multiple sports teams. Student-athletes were expected to be successful, on and off the field. Fortunately, being part of a middle-class town meant that most families could afford expensive extra-curricular activities, like travel hockey. The schools in my community were well-funded, and could afford field trips, instruments, sports, and clubs.

Despite attending school in the public system, the racial and religious diversity was limited. Most students were Caucasian and Christian, or atheist. All the teaching (and administration) staff were Caucasian, Christian, and middle-class. Male and female student representation was approximately equal. There was a greater percentage of female teachers in my elementary school than there were males. By high school, there was a more equal gender representation among the teaching staff. However, there was a slight gender pattern regarding subject matter taught in high school. Male teachers typically taught math and science courses, while female teachers typically taught language and arts classes.

The general racial, financial, and religious patterns within my community, certainly influenced my schooling and my perception of the world. I think who we are and how we perceive the world is greatly impacted by our surrounding environment, our experiences and how we interpret those experiences. My experiences within school shaped my social identity, my academic identity, my athletic identity, and my cultural identity. I distinctly remember developing my social skills in grade five. A mark received at the end of the same year set me on the path of academia, and for better or for worse established my identity as an intellectual. Then, in grade seven, I categorized myself as not “sporty”, and almost never played sports

again, until an experience in high school reinvented my athletic identity. Attending university in a major city made me cognizant of my limited cultural exposure throughout previous schooling and helped me develop my cultural identity.

In grade five, I had a teacher whose name was Mrs. Mooney (see Appendix). The most remarkable thing about Mrs. Mooney was her compassion and concern for our emotional well-being and social development. She quickly gained our trust by being vulnerable and sharing about her own personal life. I remember her showing us her wedding ring when she got engaged. I remember her crying one time and having to leave the classroom for a moment. With our trust, she encouraged social cohesion through group projects, like the *Christmas Carol* play and potluck we had. Most importantly, I remember always being out in the hallway with my friends and Mrs. Mooney. She acted as our group therapist many times, helping us talk through social drama. My social identity was developed through these hallway therapy sessions, where we learned coping skills and anger management, conflict resolution and taking ownership of our wrong actions, effective communication, and group collaboration skills. Through Mrs. Mooney's demonstration of caring, I learned how to develop my personal relationships. Retrospectively, I learned how demonstrating compassion and care as a teacher can be beneficial to student development. Her classroom became a community through her personality and actions. Mrs. Mooney focused on group projects to build social cohesion through experiential learning. I hope to emulate Mrs. Mooney as a teacher in my own classroom. Education for care has been formally discussed by philosopher Nel Noddings. She argues that "practice in caring should transform schools and, eventually, the society in which we live" (Noddings, 2005, p. 25).

In the same year as my social development (grade 5), my intellectual development was triggered when I got a “C” in math. This mark was the lowest mark I had ever received on a report card. I didn’t feel that it represented me as a person – I was smarter than that. I was so upset that as soon as I saw it, I crumpled up my report card and cried. I had always valued schooling and grades, even before that day, but something about that low grade lit a fire inside of me. Above everything else, I wanted to do well academically. I *needed* to perceive myself as “smart” and achieve exceptional grades. This C in math drove me to work harder. I would spend hours every night doing math problems and other homework. The work paid off because in grade eight I won an academic excellence award, and I was on honor roll all throughout high school, college, and university. But at what cost to my social and emotional development? Grades became so important to my sense of self that I isolated myself socially and avoided “distracting” social events. When my sense of self was threatened in the Engineering Science program at the University of Toronto, I had suicidal thoughts and had to drop-out of the program to save my life. Obviously grading had a huge impact on my self-perception. Some research has even suggested that grading may be detrimental to achievement. For example, Klapp (2015) found that there was a negative effect of grading on future achievement, especially for low-ability students. The use of formative assessments, instead of summative assessments has been suggested to increase feelings of autonomy, competence, and intrinsic motivation (Leenknecht et al., 2021). When summative assessments are given, Koenka (2022) found that grades should be accompanied by comments for the best effects on intrinsic motivation and mastery goal-orientation.

In grade seven, I tried out for the badminton team, but I did not make the cut. I internalized this and categorized myself as “artsy”, but not “sporty”. If I couldn’t make a grade

school team, playing my favourite sport, surely, I was never going to make any other team in the future. Then, in grade nine mandatory gym class, I had Mrs. Garton as a teacher. She was the cross-country coach and she loved running, so everyday we ran around the block. I was one of the fastest girls in my gym class and that was a huge confidence-booster. When Mrs. Garton encouraged me to come out for cross-country practices, I decided to try it. I was one of the slowest people on the cross-country team, but that did not matter to me. What mattered to me was my new sense of identity: I was athletic. Further confirming my passion for movement and identity as athletic, in grade twelve I joined the swim team. When I joined, I had never swum lengths in my life. I could barely “doggy-paddle” across my pool. Then, through training and hard work, I competed in SWOSSAA for backstroke. That felt amazing to do exceptionally well in something that I was new at. I learned to enjoy physical movement so much that I decided to study Human Kinetics in university. Being accepted onto sports teams, not only redefined my sense of self, but it also made me feel included. As a teacher, I hope to make my classroom inclusive. When coaching, I will allow all skill levels to participate. There can be sports teams of various abilities (e.g., A team and B team), but everyone should be allowed to play. Most youth are attaining less than the recommended amount of daily physical activity, which has major health implications (Bélanger et al., 2009). It is imperative that physical activity is promoted and sustained throughout adolescence. Yet, Bélanger et al. (2009) found that participation in all physical activities declined from grades 7 to 11, especially within team sports (compared to individual sports).

For one semester I was at the University of Toronto in Engineering Science. Toronto, being a major city in Canada, is very culturally diverse. Furthermore, Engineering Science is a competitive university program, and it had a huge population of international students. Given

these two factors, the program consisted mostly of Asian males. This was in stark contrast to my previous schooling experiences where I was part of the majority group of ethnically Caucasian peoples. Entering a program where I was part of a minority group based on my gender and race, was an interesting new experience that helped me gain perspective. Race, religion, culture, or gender identity has never been a concern for me in that I never noticed it one way or another: We are all people. However, attending a very culturally different school in which language, cuisine, and personal histories were unlike my own, was a neat opportunity. As a future teacher that will potentially have a classroom filled with students from many different backgrounds, I can draw upon my experiences in Toronto. I hope to recognize all different cultures within my classroom to make everyone feel included and represented within their learning. Markey et al. (2021) urges educators to value cultural diversity within classrooms and states that the commitment to cultural diversity must be clear throughout mission statements, policies, plans, and the curriculum. They provide strategies for nurturing a culturally inclusive educational institution such as designing student orientation programs, intercultural awareness training, providing culturally diverse extra-curricular activities and academic literacies, as well as having English language support programs (Markey et al., 2021). Student ethnocentric ideas, personal prejudices, assumptions, and stereotypes should be challenged within classroom activities (Markey et al., 2021).

In agreement with existentialist philosophers such as Jean-Paul Sartre, that existence precedes essence (Sartre et al., 2007), I think our sense of identity is shaped by our culture, our environment, our peers, and our schooling. Our identities are created through experiences, and our interpretation of those experiences. Personally, schooling had a large impact on my self-perception and values. Teachers should recognize their tremendous influence and power over

who students become. Teachers should help students develop decision making skills and implement autonomy within the classroom, to help students form their own identity.

The values that I have derived from my experiences will influence my future teaching. 1) I value autonomy within the classroom to help students form their own identity. For example, I will let students choose to work in a group or as an individual. I will let them choose to present their learning in different ways, recognizing Gardner's Multiple Intelligences (Gardner, 1999). 2) I value demonstrating care as a teacher to help students develop socially. I hope to model my grade five teacher Mrs. Mooney to create a classroom community. I will also develop caring relations within my classroom based on the ideas of Nel Noddings (Noddings, 2005). In alignment with Nel Noddings, I value 3) open-ended dialogue with my students, inside and outside of the classroom. Dialogue allows students to have autonomy in their learning (Noddings, 2005). Dialogue also helps develop caring relations (Noddings, 2005) as Mrs. Mooney demonstrated during our hallway conversations. Also based on Mrs. Mooney's class, I value 4) experiential learning and group projects to develop social cohesion within the classroom. I look back on my education and remember events and projects (such as my *Christmas Carol* presentation) more than I remember essays and small assignments. 5) I value intrinsic motivation and learning for the love of it, not for the external validation of grades. If I must assign grades, then I will explain to students that grades do not define them as people. Grades can be used as an educational tool for the self and for the teacher, and as motivational tool. Grades should not be used as a high-pressure filtering tool for universities or careers, nor should they be so integral to the self that a poor grade could ruin a person. Further to the point of assessment, I value the use of 6) formative assessment as suggested by Leenknecht et al. (2021), and I value providing feedback to students in the form

of comments, as suggested by Koenka (2022). 7) I value inclusivity in the classroom and in sport. I think every student deserves an opportunity to participate if they would like to. Based on my experiences being excluded from the badminton team, I think all students deserve a chance. Furthermore, 8) I value health and fitness and hope to incorporate movement into as many of my lessons as possible. Students should learn with their body and their mind (Leppo & Davis, 2005). Plus, aerobic exercise can increase the rate of learning through increased cerebral blood flow (Rhyu et al., 2010), as understood through my Human Kinetics degree. 9) From my racial and gender minority experience at the University of Toronto, I have an enhanced appreciation for cultural representation within the classroom. I value making all students feel represented within the books they read, the pictures they see, the songs they hear, and the activities we do. Lastly, 10) I value education for identity formation. Teaching is unlike any other profession because you have an opportunity to shape the future generation of children. I am driven to teach because I love learning and want to share that intrinsic love of learning with my students. So, why teaching? Because I value helping children understand themselves and the world in which they live. I recognize the huge responsibility of teaching and I honor the role of education in self-identity formation.

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Appendix

Non-Dominant Hand Letter

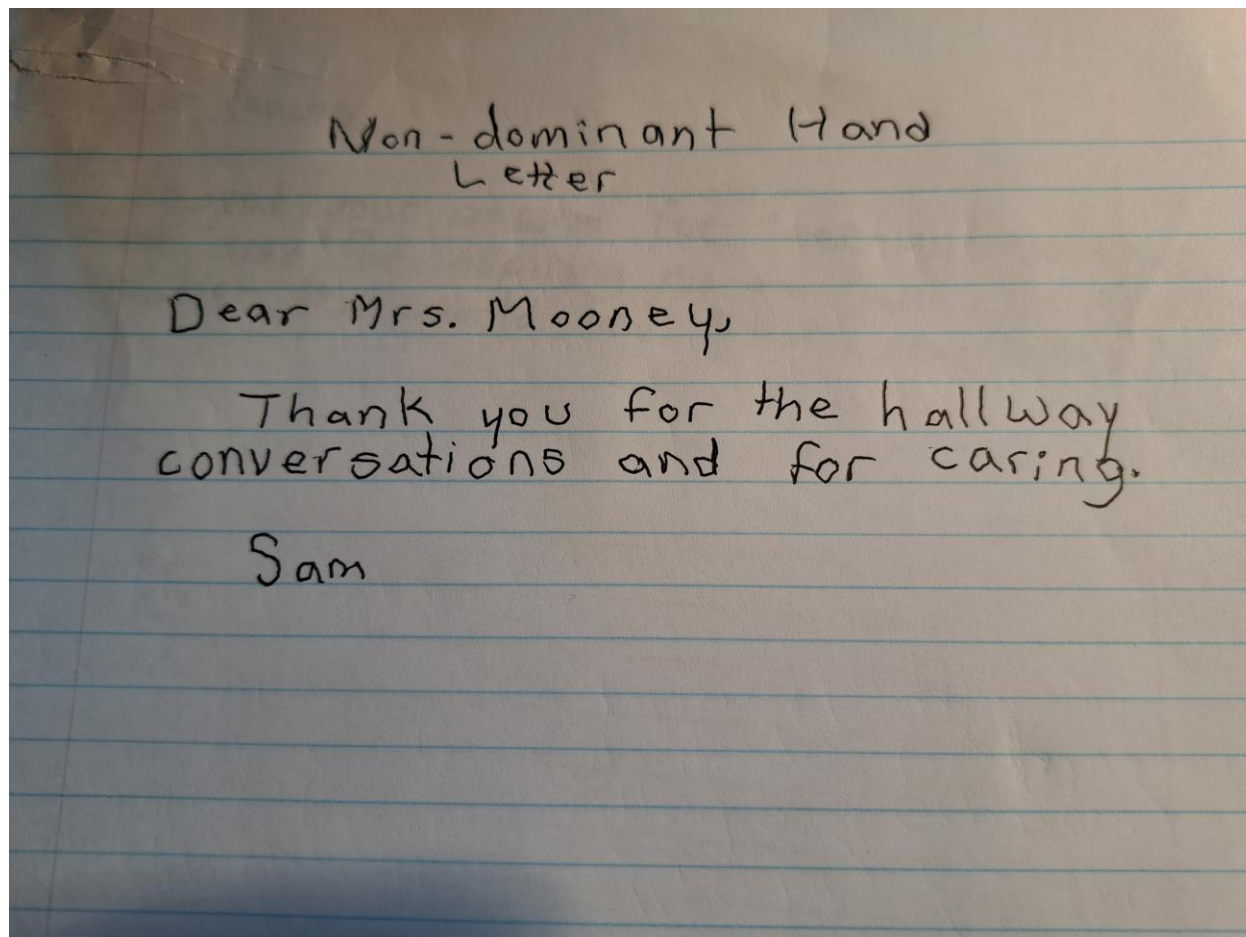


Figure 1. A letter to my grade 5 teacher